Sorbonne Keynote Address: Shadows of a Rock: Translating Willa Cather

Marc Chénetier

Dear colleagues, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

A warm welcome, first, to a city that Mrs Wheeler, in *One of Ours*, describes as "the wickedest", "the capital of a frivolous, wine-drinking, Catholic people", "responsible for the massacre of St Bartholomew and for the grinning atheist, Voltaire." I hope you enjoy every component of this infernal scene, steps away from the greystone bordering rues St Jacques and Soufflot in Godfrey St. Peter's memory, a stonethrow from a Sorbonne sitting for lectures on the hard benches of which I never could quite muster the same passion for Puvis de Chavannes's scenes as the great lady to whom we owe this occasion consistently entertained. Today, forty years later, I see her point, but I still feel the bench, still hear the drones, and feel for you...

I thank the organizers of this conference who were imprudent enough to invite me, and particularly Robert Thacker, whose plot to that effect is old, having been hatched in Berlin several years ago, and to Françoise Palleau who prevailed upon me to address you today, a token, I take it, of her desire to salute Willa Cather's cooking skills since real gastronomical know-how lies with what is known as "l'art d'accommoder les restes": this being the last lecture I shall deliver

during the course of my official professional life, her gesture testifies to a belief in the possibility to make acceptable use of leftovers that hold little gustatory promises in themselves…

We meet today in a place founded, in Auclairian times, as a school for draughtsmanship, an activity relevant to Cather's literary art, a place where 30 years ago I remember introducing to the French public young aspiring writers I was to specialize in all my life, named Robert Coover, John Hawkes, Ishmael Reed, Grace Paley or John Barth. I do not say this out of nostalgia but to make clear that, not a Cather scholar myself, I face all of you specialists as an outsider, a daisy, perhaps, among orchids: naïve, unsophisticated and ephemeral; by no means "one of yours". I am honored to address you this evening merely as an avid reader and translator of Willa Cather's work. This avowedly subjective and dangerous position offers the advantage of allowing me to rely upon your expertise and memory, to be allusive instead of having to quote extensively.

Further to specify wherefrom I speak, let me confess that my original encounter with Willa Cather was entirely adventitious, having taken place while I was a school kid in the Midwest with ample time on my hands, a fascination for the strangeness of the environment, an enthusiastic attraction to the moral comfort provided by a native critic of small-town life, and an adolescent, oppositional craving for reading a writer that absolutely nobody around me ever read. I came to her work, then, for accidental reasons, read her for imaginary and sociological ones, remained with her for purely literary. Need I add that I am now somewhat impervious to extraneous debates, that her sexual orientation is to me a matter of profound indifference and that I have never thought that she, Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty ever needed pious ideological assistance to tower above their respective contemporaries. Having by chance discovered Cather had died on St. Mark's Eve the year I turned one-year old, I understood the stars had shed their fateful dust in my path. Much like Godfrey St. Peter, I realize the man I am now "had begun to grow strong during adolescence, during the years when he was always consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb 'to love'—in society and solitude, with people, with books, with the sky and open country, in the lonesomeness of crowded city streets…" (Library of America 259). What I "had not known was that, at a given time, that first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits

and passions and experiences of his life; untouched even by his strong tastes and intellectual activities" (261). Because, strangely, Willa Cather's work, while always near me, has always lain parallel to the bulk of my professional activity. She is one of the very few American authors I <u>never</u> taught, never lectured on to this day, as if there was in my personal apprehension of her work something so intimate there could be no question of making it the object of any kind of public, institutional, discursive activity. Over the years, I realized that what attracted me so forcefully was precisely what I had to explore by means <u>other</u> than academic or scholarly, because its subjective dimension would have made little sense in these terms; that it had to do, somehow, with the hidden secret soul, if you will, of what work I was doing elsewhere, very much in the same way as I kept re-reading, all these decades, Montaigne, Proust, Mallarmé or Valéry, because I felt they dealt with the essence of what our work profoundly meant, in times that still allowed for hopes that it might mean anything or make the slightest difference. As my concern for the documentary dimension of literature—never powerful to begin with—kept ebbing away, as my original, confused and misplaced hope to reach a direct, practical knowledge about the world through the literary waned, and as my delight in exploring the next potentially interesting literary forms and experiments slowly gave way to the relish of permanent, inexhaustible and growingly puzzled re-readings, I understood that only through writing, and particularly through translation—this blessed particular kind of writing that gives itself entirely over to form— could I hope to achieve a degree of the intimacy I craved with Willa Cather's texts; that only translation, this simultaneous analysis, comment and displaced performance of texts, could bring me close to the heart of what had early attracted me ; that only the physical struggle of translation could make me grasp what she meant when she said she felt that Chopin's sentences, in a letter, "seem to shudder" (827), what makes up, on the page, " a mental complexion" (966), a "verbal mood" (837), or the "blond voice" of Louis near the end of *One of Ours* (1243), what the equivalent in prose could be of the prodigious impression conveyed by John Singer Sargent's portrait of "Mrs Frederick Barnard" that you can actually <u>hear</u> her accent on the canvas. In other words, and in pictorial terms, why can you hear cicadas sing in Sorolla's "Mending the Sails"? in tennis terms, where is the "sweet spot" in a sentence?

So, there you have it, the gist of my rêverie: Willa Cather's prose as guide to the investigation of the powers and mystery of language itself, Willa Cather, some will think, *for all the wrong reasons.* I am not always directly or first interested in what her novels are *about*, but always in how she goes about it, in the birth process of "the thing not named". I don't even go along with what she says, some of the time, her ideas I occasionally find irritating. The debates on her private life bore me to tears and the mythical-ideological substratum of her narratives I have no central concern for, dealing with such things elsewhere. But I have now spent twenty years listening to Cather's voice for long periods at a stretch, trying to channel or reconfigurate it in a different set of signifiers while endeavoring not to lose too much of its power profoundly to affect. And failing, of course. There is no such thing as success in translation, this "almost the same thing" U. Eco just wrote about. At least trying, minimally, to give the lie to Kenneth Koch when he talks of the effect of a translated text as that of embracing a woman through a shower curtain. The shapes are there, but the feel? You will remember that while she lived, Cather expressly forbade that her work be adapted to another medium, be it radio, a budding TV, the cinema or any other invention to come. I read her wish as based on the radical conviction that referentiality cannot be abstracted from its language base, that even feelings are of language born, that the literary bears discussion only in its own terms and that its opinionated instrumentalization spells its death. Apples, on Cézanne's canvasses have no nutritional or botanical interest. The wind, on Cather's pages, moves no mill. It strokes your skin and fills your lungs, moves through you as might an elusive soul. The grinding is left to others. Such is "the beautiful lightening of the novel form" mentioned in the Brown/Edel biography. (258)

Translating, then. Into French. And first for the obvious, necessary reasons. Because in spite of the November 1921 announcement in the *Omaha World Herald* that all of Willa Cather's books were being translated in France ("and Miss Cather goes to Paris next summer to aid in this work of translation"), and in spite of another (in the October 13, 1923 issue of the same paper) that "Miss Cather's book, *One of Ours*, is to be published in French soon", her visibility to the French readership was a long time coming, brief in its effect. If Victor Llona had published his translation of "Coming, Aphrodite!" in 1925 (*Prochainement Aphrodite*, Skra-Sagittaire), a text republished in 1996 by

Rivages, it wasn't until 1933 that *Shadows on the Rock* was published in French and won the Prix Femina Etranger (and not "Américain" as the Brown/Edel biography has it). Seven years then elapsed before *Death Comes for the Archbishop* came out in this country (Stock, 1940, tr. M.C. Carel), with a preface by André Artonne, a specialist of religious diocesian history. In 1944, *A Lost Lady*, translated by Hélène Malvan, inaugurated the "Bibliothèque Américaine" explicitly launched by La Nouvelle Edition to acquaint its readers with the least known aspects of a country that had been a decisive force in the liberation of France from Nazi rule. A note on page 4 of its preface by Lucienne Escoube (best known for her translations of hard-boiled crime novels and Western literature) made sure, however, that national feeling was gratified at the same time, as it referred to Stephen Vincent Benèt's article praising "the order, the lucidity and the grace of French prose" that was to be found in this novel. Presented as "profoundly, typically American", she was there and then described as the author of four other novels translated into French—*My Antonia* and *My Mortal Enemy* being added to *Shadows on the Rock* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* I have to this day been unable to find any trace of the original editions of the former two. But, if *My Mortal Enemy* was a long time resurfacing, it should be noted that *My Antonia* was brought out (again?) by Pierre Seghers as early as 1967 in the translation of Swiss writer Blaise Allan (whose real name was Alfred Rosset), a translation that may well have been the original one as Allan was born in 1902. A new one by Robert Ruard was eventually to come out in 2005 from Deux Temps Tierce, a house that had also published *Obscure Destinies* in 1992 (tr. Michelle Causse).

Be that as it may, when the then head of Editions Ramsay, and now President of the Oulipo, Paul Fournel, and I began discussing the possibility of publishing the complete works of Willa Cather, only *My Antonia* was in print here and Cather's name was practically unknown to the French readers outside of a few specialists; much, I must add, as she was neglected in the United States where the time of her revival had not yet come. Sharon O'Brien, whose hospitality I had enjoyed in 1983, Susan Rosowski, Jim Woodress and Judith Fryer had not yet published their important work. In the early 1980s, Cather's reputation in France, compared to that of other writers of the same period, was non-existent. Availability of the texts is an obvious requisite for the possibility of fame; because her books were not to be found, she

could not possibly be championed in this country the way Dos Passos or Faulkner were in the 40s and 50s by the likes of Sartre, Valery Larbaud, Claude-Edmonde Magny or André Malraux, even had the subject matter and tone of her novels not fallen upon ears deadened by the militant stands of such other famous American authors in France, Steinbeck or Hemingway, the attention of the public not been diverted by the antics of Fitzgerald and the post-war rising popularity of harder-boiled or jazzier popular fiction.

Paul Fournel, at Ramsay, had just published my translation of Jonathan Baumbach's *Reruns*, a manuscript that had been chucked out of the windows of the 18 publishers approached over the previous four years. Paul and I shared an immense admiration for Willa Cather, deplored her invisibility and were both convinced that translations, whatever their merits, share with humans the pitiful degradations of age. Even had the few books previously published still been available—where again they weren't—the time would have had arrived for new translations anyway. Much as William Gaddis, in *The Recognitions*, has his forger, Wyatt Gwyon, argue that fakes can always be detected, in time, because they bear the characteristics of the period in which the forging took place, translations constantly have to be overhauled to keep abreast of the original's eternal freshness, a marvelously puzzling theoretical question I wish I had the time to explore. We therefore decided, Paul Fournel, his assistant Sabine Delattre and I, to launch into what was to be a comprehensive edition. The plan worked out wonderfully well, at first. My first translation, that of the *Archbishop*, in 1986, exceptionally prefaced to renew attention, was enthusiastically reviewed and received, and followed by the publication of *My Mortal Enemy* the same year. I had time steadily to work my way through *O Pioneers* (1987) and (1988) when a suit brought against Ramsay author Régine Desforges by the heirs of Margaret Mitchell for alleged plagiarism of *Gone with the Wind* generated lethal financial damage, causing the collateral death of our project. The ups and downs of publishing life being what they are, Françoise Pasquier convinced Editions Rivages, a few years later, to gather this work in their hospitable lap, republishing all of it in popular editions. A very short-lived house (Alpha Bleue) then commissioned my translation of *Shadows on the Rock*, published in 1993 and eventually reprinted by Rivages, the house that allowed me to continue the work I had begun, at a somewhat slower pace. *The Professor's House* came out

the same year (1994), as the republication of *Shadows, One of Ours* followed in 1998 and we have just this year piped *The Song of the Lark* into French ears. Should my prayers be listened to and my wishes fulfilled, *Alexander's Bridge, Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira* may, before my complete dotage, round up the list of available novels, leaving the destinies of shorter fictions, well… obscure. [*Lucy Gayheart* indeed came out in 2010 (Paris : Rivages)]

"Until she [Lucy Gayheart] began to play for Sebastian, she had never known that words had any value aside from their direct meaning." Perhaps because I take this remark with the utmost seriousness, I could not, as I explained, fall in step with the topical, polemical derivative use some recent criticism has sometimes made of the celebrated "thing not named", since its "inexplicable presence", "emotional aura", "overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it" (827) need be at the heart of the preoccupations of the translator in more crucial ways. Cather's art is not a matter of dissimulation; it is one of revelation. The "direct meaning" is rarely difficult to cope with; the problems it poses are technical, a matter of experience, require, in Valéry's words, more perspiration than inspiration. What happens, what is related, the opinions expressed, the translator has no control over, cannot alter. The tricks of the trade more often than not suffice to convey data and large structures. Except that nothing much of artistic interest, in this case, would be there. As Eudora Welty did not, of course, fail to notice, "texture, that informs us of so much in her prose, owes more than a little to its function." Translating Willa Cather—in keeping, I believe, with the spirit that informed her prose—, I am ceaselessly reminded of the wonderful remark once made by Belgian novelist Conrad Detrez: "I want a novelist to give me painting, music or the cinema. As for the rest, I have my own phone."

The myth of Cather's simplicity is one Eudora Welty rapidly discards: "Such simplicity is not what the writer starts with; it is what the writer is able to end with, or hopes to be able". If there is an effect of "plainness" in Cather's work, it is probably only that born of the staggering craftmanship that allows her to convey the feeling of the plains. All due proportions respectfully kept, the translator's work must endeavor to be no less and he has to adopt Welty's insistance on the fact that " a work of art is a work". The "aboutness" of each novel actually turns out to be a function of its craft and the translator's

reflex, quick in the acquisition, must be, much like that of the learned amateur of oriental carpets, to turn the tapestry over and pay attention to the elaborate disposition of the knots, to figure out the logics of exposition, the secret of evocative sounds, the rhythmical economy of the text, the reasons why "art", as Cather declared in 1921, "is a matter of enjoyment through the five senses" and why, in particular—a remark the interviewer of the *Lincoln Daily Star* surprisingly found "surprising" on October 24, 1915—, "no one without a good ear can write good fiction." I have no doubt Willa Cather, in this declaration, did not only have in mind the precision and veracity of dialogue or the exactness of vernacular expression. For, indeed, the most fascinating conviction I developed as I began translating her novels, is that what I should listen to was something else altogether, mysterious and elusive, that the nature of what Welty admirably calls her "impellment" had everything to do with the nature of my difficulties.

Françoise Palleau, in the opening lines of the carefully documented article she published in *Cather Studies* 4 (1999) on "The Hidden French in Willa Cather's English" writes that I "once remarked playfully that [I] found translating Cather's work relatively easy because her language was almost like French to begin with" (45). I do beg to ascribe this imprudent "relatively easy" to a moment of unwonted optimism, while I reproach the English language for its allowing any visible agent to be absent from such an impersonal expression as "Cather's text translates well into French"… But I will stand by the final notion I then expressed, trying briefly to account for it. I am grateful to Françoise both for analyzing the syntactic and lexical "presence" of French in the *Archbishop* and in *Shadows*; but this presence I will choose to call *ad hoc* and *functional* since I do not believe these useful and fairly explicit examples reach the heart of the question that moves me.

A major difference appears—and not only from the translator's practical viewpoint—between what I would like to call a functional, thematic or quasi referential presence of French is such novels as *Shadows* and the *Archbishop* (one might even want tho throw in *One of Ours* for good measure), a presence that generates translation problems of one kind, and the, so to speak, "unofficial", latent presence of the same language in works that do not referentially need it. In effect, the deliberate use of classical French syntactical periods and structures, the recourse to 17th century- aesthetics that reflect Father Latour's

tastes, modes of thought and personality, acts, *In Death Comes for the Archbishop*, as a modality of enunciative distance that cannot fail to strike the habitual reader of English as a kind, if you will, of *rhetorical exoticism* that would be the symmetrical reverse of the exotic thematic appeal of American desert scenes for the French reader. Dealing with the simultaneous reduction of enunciative distance and increase of referential strangeness becomes a translation problem that cannot be entirely solved. By the same token —and even if, in this case, the spatial and temporal referential distance can arguably be described as equal for the French and American readership—the complexity of the enunciative stance taken by Cather in *Shadows* is a challenge the translator has difficulty meeting. The "stiffness" of dialogue described in the Brown/Edel biography as an effect of the choice made by Willa Cather to "translate every conversation in her mind back into French, to give to the reader the effect of characters talking the Quebec French of 1697" (248) has in fact even more complex causes and effects. When Cather states that *Shadows* was "mainly anacoluthon" (Library of America, 968), she may have in mind the structural breaks necessarily faced by whomever wishes to convey the effects of another language in his or her own. Giving a sense, in modern French, of more ancient French translated into English by the mind of an author who retranslates every conversation she creates back into what French she knows, makes for interesting quandaries I had only met once before with equal acuteness when translating Russell Banks's *Continental Drift* and its awesome all-English fictional medley of French-speaking Haïtians trying to address English-speaking Jamaicans supposed, in English, to be trying out their best Creole French in return for the botched English of their interlocutors, in varieties of Creole they wouldn't share in the same terms in the original and in the translation I was supposed to come up with… A "continental drift" indeed… Even leaving aside the professional debate that keeps pitting translators who favor keeping a modicum of the strangeness of the original text in the target-language to such as prefer "naturalizing" the result of their labor, the nagging question of the familiar and the unfamiliar becomes permanent. To put things in a nutshell, and not too fine a point on the issue, I am delighted I didn't have to translate *My Antonia* and have to deal with the phonetic havoc and harmonic collateral damage caused by the name of the Shimerda family in the French text. I would much rather deal with

Blinker or Ivy Peters, with relatively little difficulty, giving the first the regular French squint of Bigle that doesn't betray the context, or substituting for the deprecatory qualification of the second as Poison Ivy, the convenient spoonerism linking Pierre Loison to Lierre Poison. An equivalent strategy often consists in using literal translations of the names of plants that do not exist on French soil in order to keep intact the mystery of "witch-grass" or the rigidities of "ironweed" rather than substituting erudite botanical references that would carry no imaginative weight. The fact remains, however, that the supposed exoticism of the Quai des Célestins can be lost in the eyes of the likes of yours truly who have been, for the last ten years, getting off at the Sully-Morland Métro station, on that very thoroughfare to get to work in the morning. The "Frenchified" English of *Shadows* necessitates, in French, a mode of stylization that brings out the vague sulpicianism of the original, cautiously navigating at an equal distance from the maudlin, the quaint and the dated, favoring the unusual and the obsolescent while avoiding the corny, the obsolete and the cute. Leaving alone the fact that *this* French reader, who was after all born there, may find it odd to see Frontenac's estate on the banks of the Indre described as being near Blois, making sure the odd charm of "*l'exquis français de Touraine*" (*Ombres*, 99) or the particular taste of Joan of Arc's French underlined in *One of Ours* (68) remain in a similar relation to the linguistic background that sets them off in the originals, this is indeed no mean question to try and solve. How *does* one, in the end, in the French translation of the books that "officially" foreground the French language, reconstitute the secret taste that French may have in the mind or mouth of someone whose native language it is not and who wishes to discuss it in another language, while making sure some sense is kept of the distance that lies at the heart of the original attraction? What Françoise Palleau sees as part of the solution actually turns out to be an additional turn of the screw in the scale of translating difficulties. The problem is, in these cases, not essentially different—if technically more acute—from the over-exoticization often undergone by material that the author uses as familiar ground and elementary base. Not betraying the *made*, wilfully *artificial* character of the original construction, letting the craft shine through in the ritual formalization of sentence-by-sentence elocution appears as the only hope fo the rendition of objects that were essentially devised as visibly artefactual —even when referential—

creations. Stylization must answer geometricization in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, as mental complexion and mood in *Shadows on the Rock* must be rendered in terms of folk chromos, ancient prints and fantasmatized childhood dream pictures. The oneiric must be prevented from being brought too close to reality. Bringing it home, one mustn't make it unduly familiar.

These snags are real, born of Cather's explicit use of French language and references; but, if they stimulate the translator's creativity and force him to address such important questions of writing as the modulation of enunciative distances and the minute relative declensions of tone and valence, if they force him radically to face the questions of source-oriented and target-oriented strategies that have agitated the community of translators for years, they still do not, for all that, constitute the heart of the fascinated interest Willa Cather's attitude towards the French language keeps generating in me for exclusively literary reasons, even if the desire to pay equal homage to her language and to mine is not absent from it.

And this is where I will, if she can be kind enough to allow me, veer away from Françoise's reliance on novels where French is "official". Since it aims at buttressing her point of view by other means, I know she will forgive me.

In effect, the above considerations on what, to coin a phrase or two, is "host in translation" must be complemented and amended by a personal speculation on what to me, when it comes to Cather's work, is always "ghost in translation". It is not so much, in my eyes, a matter of "deterritorialization" of her native language, as the unpronounceable and by now truncheonesque Deleuzian buzzword must apparently name it today, but much rather the result of a more profound, nearly obsessive concern, or dream, that as brilliantly shines through or, to use another natural image, springs artesian up through texts that do *not* have French as part of their subject matter as in those that do. The point, in other words, is that French needs not be part of the referential scene or make any locatable appearance to keep its deep, subterranean, haunting presence.

In the first chapter of *The Professor's House* is an unobtrusive scene during which St. Peter banters with Augusta about the "forms" she uses for making dresses, then about her patterns, "the cut-out things [she] keep[s] in the couch with [his] old note-books." 110).

"In the middle of the [upholstered] box," the text says, "patterns and manuscripts interpenetrated" (id.). And St. Peter declares: "I see we shall have some difficulty in separating our life work, Augusta. We've kept our papers together a long while now" (id.). My intention here is not to make the text say more than it says, but I would like to use this set of mixed images to illustrate the sentiment I have harbored that the French language, in Cather's work, is much like these patterns, mixed as they are with written creations, that it plays the role of a guiding underpinning, a sort of aesthetic matrix that may account for the highly unusual conviction I entertain when translating her that, looked at right, and long enough, "*dévisagée*", so to speak, in its triple sense of "stared at", "dis-countenanced" and eventually "dis-figured" towards its re-figuration, the English sentence will eventually deliver the French sentence I was looking for under it and that, in a fascinatingly literal manner, it will "*come up with*", that the French sentence in question will neatly follow the pleats and folds of the original, fall in place *naturally*, "hang well", in Augustan terms, regardless of the coloring and decoration of the material that happened to clothe it.

Accounting for this quasi epiphanic feeling is no picnic.

Let me try.

I do not remember exactly where Willa Cather points out that the best American literature in her eyes was "French-oriented rather than English-oriented." But I do remember that her contemporary Wallace Stevens remarked in *Adagia* that "French and English constitute a single language" (Library of America, 914), having previously insisted in two successive letters to Bernard Heringman of 1950 and 1953 that they indeed "are a single language" (*The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 699 & 792). And in this last letter Stevens refined what he meant: "I still think that English and French are the same language, not etymologically *nor at sea level* (my italics). But at sea level it is not possible to communicate with many people who speak English in English." (ibid., 792) And he added: "What a great many people fail to see is that one uses French for the pleasure that it gives." Stevens had a more direct French lineage than Willa Cather did, in spite of her maternal Louisiana connection; but without giving in to the disputable speculations of 19th-century anthropologist and linguist Honoré Chavée, author of the "*Telle tête, telle langue*" aphorism ("Like head, like language") I will suggest that French, in the context of Cather's writing, is less a direct matter of language than a mind frame, a mode

of exchange, something that acts as the possibility of distance from the native environment while conferring upon it some of the qualities, real or fantasmatic, attributed to a different set of cultural views for which the other language stands. Cather describes herself as "a poor linguist" in the passage of her "Chance Meeting" with Flaubert's niece, a story where, incidentally, she also describes some words as "safe". But even though her early interest in French—graces be rendered unto the Weiner household—found a resonance in her interest in Latin and probably generated, in time, the craving for the binary and ternary rhythms that she could use as bridge to the alexandrine qualities of her aesthetic dream, one may not even need gauge her real competence to try and assess the other types of importance, aside from direct expression, French may have had for her.

I remember evenings in the Midwest when, my youth being trapped somewhere between the Charybdis of the Eisenhower Era and the Scylla of the Age of Aquarius, trying to smile away a dull moment, I would tune in to what was then called "The Laugh-In Show". And I distinctly recall, to this day, a one-minute piece by comedian Red Skelton in which he spewed forth, with great efficiency and power of conviction, mouthfuls of phonemes that would easily have passed for perfectly accentuated French had they meant anything, so masterful was his control of their sounds, lilt, flow and modes of linkage. His irresistible punchline, at the end of this minute was: "I speak French, but I don't understand it!". The "pleasure it gives" Stevens alluded to seems to me to be a part of the almost amniotic and respiratory bliss Cather appears to feel in using French cadences and periodical arrangements. Everything happens, as I read her to translate, as if she made felt the pleasure she takes in fantasizing a return to a language from which she felt English had taken her in a strange sort of exile, as if French was Heimsprache or, in a more complex fashion, an imaginary linguistic womb to which to return, a place to compensate exile; as if it were not only that, as Henry Seidel Canby once wrote, "she had what I would call a Gallic mind" or that "the tradition of her craftsmanhip was certainly French" but, more deeply, in ways that matter more, being less superficial, that she dreamt of a reversible language, enjoyed exploring the other side of English to find the potential French in it, finding a genuinely *mother* tongue under an *other* tongue; everything happening, therefore, as I translate her work, as if I were bringing her home from exile, chased her from

under some kind of provisional shelter, de-exiled, re-patriated her to a language that she certainly did not write in "at sea level", to use Stevens's wonderfully oceanic suggestion, but wrote in submerged fashion, at a level where she found herself in communication with aesthetic principles for which the French language stood, bearing in mind the important caveat according to which this vision of French is one of a language very few French people communicate in at other levels than "the sea level". The genuine joy triggered in her at being in France and that she tries to express in interviews as well as in her texts is one that usually finds awkward expression, too often confirming that "sentimentality", one thing she usually does not indulge in, is "a failure of feeling", demonstrating *a contrario* that one cannot talk "at sea level" of this kind of overwhelming, oceanic desire for submersion in the Other, confirming the possibility that she may have entirely transferred her passionate relation with the French language into the very fabric of her prose, not as mere thematic recurrence, not explicitly to demonstrate attachment but, in the indirect manner of handling "the thing not named" that is so typically hers, as perpetual presence of and aspiration to a set of aesthetic and intellectual ideals that French, in a sort of ideal stenography of forms, had come to stand for. Its vital existential power shines through in a remark by Claude, in *One of Ours* (1215), when he thinks that "Merely speaking that exacting tongue would help to rally a broken spirit."

If "the tongue is an eye" (*Adagia* 907), if "no eye sees less than the tongue says" (908), as Wallace Stevens puts it, everything happens as if Cather's love affair with the French language had provided her with new modes of apprehension and aesthetic perception, dictated forms that moulded her prose and brought it close to the translator's own, allowing him not merely to "translate" in the ordinary sense, but geometrically to translate, transfer, slide over that quest for a certain gamut of stylistic forms on to equivalent versions of them, able to give the French reader the same kind of linguistic and emotional elation, to convey it, as two lines from her poem "Paradox" put it, "by power / of melody, in which all longings yearned." (Library of America, 781).

French, in Cather's prose as I see it, is the ultimate place of desire. Beyond Cather's quest in it for "economy, elegance and exactness" (832), there is, I think, an abstract sensuous quest for the feel of an ideal French language for which there is no native speaker, or to which none is native, a sensuous quest for the "light elastic mesh of

the French tongue" (*Death*, 444), something that entertains links with Cather's love of music and an orality variously illustrated by her love for cooking, food and delight in conversation. It is that ultimately lyrical yearning that should be translated, defeated as it is, sometimes, in Cather's text, by the incongruous use of lame exclamation marks, with which her lyricism usually manages to dispense, relying on profounder, less artificial signals.

Her most convincing lyricism is not so much that expressed by typographically emphasized concluding paragraphs (usually having to do, in an interesting way for my argument, with youth and learning) but that which manifests itself in the resurgence of cadences, banks on the conviction that hard-earned simplicity harbors an ultimate elegance that French fantasmatically stands for. There is, if I dare, something Chanel or St. Laurent in Cather's prose. Far from the "ungirt dithyramb" Carl van Doren described Whitman's type of lyricism as being, Cather opts for an elaborate, disciplined simplicity of line and texture which, in keeping with her frequentation of, and admiration for Virgilian verse, keeps leaning toward the classical, the timeless, unassuming, unageable elegance that thrives on the use of the elementary, the geometrical, the flat tint, the appliqué, the stylized, rhythmical cuts, loose stiffnesses and any other manner of oxymoric forms ranging from sophisticated "dépouillement" or austerity to undulating rigidities, the contained overflow of sentiment, opaque transparencies and controlled lushness. They include the modulated precision of lashing colors, the raw dappled violence of lights, the combined transgressive powers of the silky, the mottled, the watered and the crystalline, the neatness of profiles, piercing glances and luminous faces emerging from a froth of textile stuff that seems borrowed from Sargent, Manet or Sorolla, the flash of white dresses dappled with blue and green light, the transparency distilled of a maximally opaque medium. By "Chanel", I mean richly textured and hieratic, a supple crispness, the timelessness of immediately pertinent forms, apparent rigidities that turn out to have the flowing resilience of algae in pools of sea water, a type of ideal and simple elegance I believe French stood for somewhere in Cather's imagination.

So, what does it mean, what can it mean, in the end, to bring such a writer's work home, to devise, or rather to rediscover the very wished-for medium, tool and channel of its secret exile? Beyond

local difficulties, the work, in my eyes, consists in a new kind of draughtsman's contract, one that gives their share to lines, stylization, washes, hues and nuances, the softness and abruptness of slopes, pays attention to the shifts in the cadence of paragraphs, to the slowness, intensity, rhythm, and speed of sentences, to the way in which they hold, swerve, pause and radiate, the way they perform, rather than express, the beauty they praise or the ugliness they denounce, to consider the ridge of a sentence as one muses over the ridge of a nose, to make it glide and slide, imperial and unassuming as a bird. The raw elegance of Alexandra Bergson is on one side of the divide, the grossness of character of her brothers on the other. The sentences fail or triumph according to the same delicate balance. The paragraph describing Mrs Ogden must perform her vulgarity but some light touch must redeem her unprepossessing sight since, as Welty acutely remarked, Cather never indulges in "diminishment". All I know is that under the translator's disconcerted prolonged glare, the sentence disarticulates, dissolves, floats free of its signifiers and little by little, then all of a sudden begins to find its grips again, to get a hold of a new structure, locates the props that seem always to have been destined for it and secures its footing, finds its new shapes, the rhythm and sounds that seem to be the fateful verity of its destination. The French that had been lying dormant under the original sentence seems to float up, appears, blooms and imposes itself. Little tugs and jolts may be required, here and there, to see to last-minute fittings, but its necessity seems irrefragable. A carefully chosen and vaguely obsolescent past subjunctive will propose itself to accompany a meditation on Indian pottery, lend it its unassailable dignity, solemn grace and fragile eternity. The occasional stiffening formality of almost archaic vocables will act as plumb-bob for the sentence, make sure it is safely tucked in place in the space of the page, not disturbing it, not disturbed by it. Practical homage must be paid, sentence after sentence, to Cather's desire for a "sympathetic musical setting" (966). The rhythm of French must carry with it the same feel of repressed desire for an ideal elsewhere of language. Annabelle Chapin, in *One of Ours*, is "one of those people who can make the finest things seem tame and flat merely by alluding to them" (968). The simple allusion to an elsewhere of language by the translator's deliberate recourse to a little used or practically vanished French word can have the exactly opposite effect. Like Jacinto in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, his

"customary [grammatical] omission[s]" will have to appear as "a matter of taste, not ignorance" (332). The insistance legible in the description of a "face smiling at them between her stiff black collar and her stiff black hat" (156) gains a stylistically performative bonus liable to make up for losses unavoidable elsewhere once it is rendered as "*col raide de fourrure noire et chapeau noir et raide aussi*" (91). Striving to give flesh to Cather's longing for such classical "alexandritude" of language, translation must thus become a metarime for the unnameable feeling of exile.

And loss. Because, again, one fails, of course; entrusted with such an ambitious agenda, the translation is doomed to resemble the shadows projected by the pure Idea on the wall of the cave, the way all writing fails compared with the dazzling, burning desire of it. And when one stops and considers the solid, sturdy, unageable mass of Cather's work, this enduring solitary and granitic Grand Manan of an opus, the work of this stocky, sturdy, unshakeably wilful towering hill of an artist, one feels at the end of the day that, just as Willa Cather could only write under the desired law of the French of her dreams, all one can ever hope to produce for the enjoyment of French readers are mere shadows of that rock.

Sad, to be sure, but perhaps translation, to adapt the remark on schools Bishop Laval makes to little Cécile, is "not meant to make [translators] happy, but to teach them to do without happiness." (*Shadows,* 611)

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