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# Divining the Southwest: Liminality, Pragmatism, and Regionalism in "Death Comes for the Archbishop"

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Divining the Southwest: Liminality, Pragmatism, and Regionalism in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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University of Texas  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2014

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This work aims to explore the themes of pragmatism and liminality, particularly as they pertain to spirituality, in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. By taking an interdisciplinary critical approach to the novel, I will synthesize its spiritual affect into a sensibility called "pragmatic liminality." Finally, I will connect this sensibility to other works in the Southwestern literary canon and elucidate the foundational importance that pragmatic liminality has to the Southwestern "sense of place" and its role in the larger narratives of regionalism in American literature.

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my parents, for all of the guidance and support that made my education possible.

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## **Introduction**

### **Metaphysics and Regionalism in Southwestern Literature**

The landscape of America's canonical literature is inescapably bound to our obsession with regionalism. Geographical divisions of the landscape include aesthetic and ideological borders. These borders are crucial to identity politics, separating the "us" from the "other." In *Our South*, Jennifer Rae Greeson points out that all ideas about the United States are "defined against many antitheses" from the "Old World" to ethnic outsiders (3). For years, one of these antitheses has manifested as a cultural civil war, fought along the lines between the North and the South, the former representing ravenous capitalist progress, and the latter representing a conservative, neo-feudalist attitude that was "simultaneously inside and outside the national Imaginary constructed in U.S. literature" (3). This dual status made the South a unique antithesis in that opened to door for real self-criticism, bridging "the gap between national ideal and national reality" (4). Thus, imagining regional borders, ironically, became a way to achieve a national sense of self-critical awareness that transcended the preset ideological and regional boundaries, with literature acting as the bridge.

Eventually, the West became the battleground for this cultural schizophrenia. The West evoked a crisis between the desire to break with the past and the fear of doing so. Southern writers tended to imagine the West as a place of unspoiled nature, appropriating the idea of the "noble savage" and his resistance of westward expansion in order to validate their own political feelings. Northerners, on the other hand, conceived of the West as a "geography of hope" where the dream of the city on a hill could be rebooted once again (Brinkemeyer 2). When the frontier finally closed, both of these conceptions of the West were deflated. The North was finally forced to recognize the arrogance of chasing the "New World" concept; the South was left to daydream

about the agrarian ideal while simultaneously trying to come to terms with the fact that it had never really existed. The method of understanding through regional difference has seemingly diminished over time, as American culture is left to melt into the media-driven monoculture of the rapidly globalizing postmodern world. From a literary standpoint, the closing of the frontier was the definitive roadblock to the linear, ego-driven narrative of Western progress, leaving everyone to wonder what it had all really meant.

Admittedly, this brief history of regionalism in American literature glosses over the intricacies of many great works and authors. Defining works of art via geography is in itself a bit of a fallacy. Despite this fact, two general conclusions drawn from this history remain valid: first, that American literature is profoundly interested in defining “sense of place” and its implications in forming identity, and secondly, that this “sense of place” has become increasingly difficult to define as time passes into the modern era.

The legacy of regionalism lives on in Southwestern literature. As with any regionalist designation, “Southwestern literature” is more of an idea than an organized reality. The only concrete criterion separating Southwestern literature from the all-encompassing “Western” category is the requirement that the story must involve the desert lands of the Southwestern United States. The sense of place evoked by Southwestern literature invariably starts with the aesthetics of these deserts. In a world saturated with the movement of life, the still desert is a geographic “other” for most of us. Above all, the desert is a land of striking contrasts, presenting the earth’s most extreme contradictions in sharp relief. Stark geographic features echo each other in an endless visual reverberation, simultaneously concrete and uncontainable by the human eye. The colors of the landscape separate like water and oil, dividing the image amongst themselves. The complete visual effect of these contrasts is a kind of natural kaleidoscope. People have



recreated this visual phenomenon in their art for centuries, from the geometric labyrinths of Navajo pottery to the colorful swirls of Aboriginal painting. These fragmented styles of art foreshadowed Picasso's cubism, expressing in two dimensions what could barely be comprehended in three. The viewer can never quite fix their gaze on the subject.

The fragmentation of perspective has curious implications. Visual contradictions do not create individual subjects, but an overall attitude that defies naming. In the desert, the eye can see clearly for miles; yet, the image remains ungraspable. Plainly marked paradox pushes the objective, rational viewing position to its limits, shattering it into ever-smaller pieces until it becomes a kind of fluid experience. This is often an uncomfortable or unintelligible position to be in, especially for one who is not predisposed for this kind of sensibility. With its stony silence and aversion to life, the desert can seem like a completely alien terrain. Stanley Kubrick, for example, used digitally enhanced video of the Arizona desert to great effect in order to represent alien landscapes in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

On the other hand, some interpret this alienating affect as profound mystical experience. Interestingly, the Southwest has become the new-age spiritual capital of the United States. Southwestern literature predicted this turn of events with its constant probing into the world of mysticism. The aesthetic contrasts that prompt the exploration of this motif are mirrored by the politics of the Southwest, in that both deal with sharp borders. The political history of the Southwest has always and continues to revolve around borders that define insiders and outsiders, particularly along racial and ethnic lines. In the midst of the violent colonial interaction of cultures, the subjugated peoples of the Southwest have been forced to negotiate these borders and the confusing space in between them. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (a seminal work of Chicana theory and perhaps the most important theoretical work to ever come

out of the region), Gloria Anzaldúa named this negotiation “the mestiza consciousness,” a constant shattering and rebirth of the self into a new perspective. This consciousness brought metaphysics into the conversation of intersectionality in the borderlands of the Southwest; Western culture did not only dominate the “rules” of race, gender, and religion, but the entire metaphysical epistemology.

The theses that Anzaldúa stated explicitly in 1987 have been explored throughout years of Southwestern literature. Like Anzaldúa, these writers recovered ancient forms of mysticism largely ignored by the Western world, and bound to the Southwestern sense of place. That being said, these explorations were exclusively presented by white members of the literary canon, who could barely touch the edge of a mystical sensibility that had been embodied by the indigenous people of the Southwest for centuries. In the consciousness of white American literature, the spiritual currents of the Southwest began to represent a new regional “other,” made distinct from the larger myth of “the West” by its landscape and the sharp borders between its people. The aesthetics and history of the Southwest became the foundation for a new “geography of hope.” This time, however, the geography was not able to be physically accessed or politically realized. For the pioneers of Southwestern literature, this “new” sense of fulfillment could only be accessed by questioning not only the failed ideas of westward colonialism, but the very metaphysical beliefs that allowed for the existence of those values in the first place.

In the body of scholarship regarding Southwestern literature, Willa Cather’s foundational contribution has been severely underreported. In the 1920s, Cather aimed to provide the first fictional depiction of “the real Southwest” and the various cultures that interacted there, finally treating it as a real subject rather than appropriating it as a sentimental allegory (“Selected Letters” 530). Of her two Southwestern novels, the resounding success that was *Death Comes*

*for the Archbishop* (1927) carries the most historical significance. Until this novel was released, the literature of the Southwest consisted more of travel logs, histories, and nature writing- Cather put the Southwest on the map of fiction, and her reputation as an outstanding writer did a great deal to achieve this end. She wrote the novel as an inward spiritual odyssey with profound connections to the landscape and its cultural history, and in doing so created the very palate that other writers of the Southwest paint from.

Willa Cather recognized the importance of her achievement. On October 7, 1946, the year before her death, she wrote the following in a letter to E.K. Brown, her first biographer: “Of course, I know that ‘Death Comes for the Archbishop’ is my best book... Strange: how long and pleasantly one can reach after a design, and how quietly and simply it comes to one at last” (“Selected Letters” 664). According to her lifelong partner Edith Lewis, Cather always said that the idea for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* came to her in a single evening (371). Cather drew inspiration for the novel from two sources: The first was a book by William Howlett on the lives of Reverend Joseph P. Machbeuf and Archbishop Jean-Baptist Lamy of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The second was her memory. Cather spent years extensively touring the Southwest, collecting the impressions of the landscape and its people that appear in the novel. Though Cather spent much of her career celebrating the landscape of her native Midwest, she expressed on several different occasions that the Southwest was her favorite part of the country. The miraculous nature of the novel’s inception permeated the affect of the novel itself, both in the eyes of the general public and the critics. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* catapulted Cather to the peak of her lifetime’s literary renown.

Though its robust title seems to suggest a dramatic tale, the novel is actually a serene desert meditation that celebrates the life of its hero, Archbishop Jean-Marie Latour. Latour’s life

mission of restoring the Catholic church in the American Southwest seems at first to be an epic pursuit, but the novel makes it clear early on that any visions of grandeur regarding this mission are sorely mistaken. Latour's journey is one of scarcity and tedious struggle. When death finally *does* arrive for the Archbishop, he dies peacefully, surrounded by his beloved friends. Though he is an uncommonly benevolent figure, his deeds are by no means larger than life, and the events of his life are presented with very little drama or accent. In fact, the order of these episodes almost seems not to matter in the grand scheme of the novel. Cather's self-acclaimed "best book," then, is also perhaps her most experimental. Ironically, as the literary world was in the throes of high modernism, Cather achieved revolutionary prose not by using radically new techniques, but by embracing an ethos of ascetic simplicity as old as the monks of the Eastern Desert.

The peculiar simplicity of this novel has not gone unnoticed by literary scholars in the years since Cather's death. Likewise, religious history, colonialism, and metaphysics have always been a primary focus for the novel's critics. The interdependent relationship between these two fields of inquiry is the focus of this particular study of the novel. The foundation for my reading of the novel is the notion that Cather designed *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a religious text for a modern age. The novel seeks to redeem the spiritually fulfilling power of religion in a way that accounts for modern scientific thought, cultural relativism, and the limitations of doctrine as an ordering principle. This text is accompanied by both tacit thematic hints and explicit instructions from the author on how to perform an exegesis of the text that is based on a specific *attitude* rather than a specific set of historical or theoretical connections (Cather's letters, which were famously unavailable for quotation or publication until 2013, are a vital component of this evidence). Nevertheless, for the sake of illustration, I will follow an

interpretive trail that runs through early and medieval Christian mysticism, Pragmatism, Deconstruction, and Chaos theory. Collectively, these theoretical and philosophical sources form holistic critical attitude that I will refer to as “pragmatic liminality.” By interpreting the novel through this multi-focal interpretive lens, I will synthesize some of the most prominent literary criticism on the novel’s religious and structural aspects into a more comprehensive study that sheds light on some of the unheralded strengths of the novel and its crucial importance to the Southwestern sense of place. Cather’s structural and linguistic devices are tuned to Latour’s inward spiritual odyssey, which is guided by his simple, self-affirming spiritual philosophy, rooted in the ancient traditions of Christian mysticism. It is a philosophy that challenges its practitioner to face the cloud of unknowing head on, and to occupy the liminal space between the signal and the signified- the space where truth, meaning, and identity are created rather than dogmatically assigned. The novel tackles the most complicated questions surrounding Christian spirituality in the modern world, from scientific advances and moral relativism to multiculturalism and religious colonialism. Yet, it does so in the simplest way possible.

Such a lofty reading of the novel is bound to raise some eyebrows- and rightfully so. While the general public may agree that the novel is aesthetically beautiful, few would deem it a sacred document, and it has received its fair share of criticism over the years. To the critical reader, the novel’s guiding philosophy comes off as too good to be true- the frustrating path of the Archbishop’s life reflects that fact. Any power that the novel has is a product of the reader’s willingness to loosen their grip on their own static, ego-driven subject position. By placing the idea of choice in the center of the novel’s hermeneutic path, Cather engineers a subtle break up this subject position. This assertion of choice empowers the individual to take an active role in shaping their spiritual identity- the catch is that one has to engage in self-abnegating humility in

order to do so. The paradox of choice is the novel's animating principle that brings Latour's spiritual philosophy to life outside of the page. As such, examining this paradox is the last goal of this study.

As mentioned above, the novel has ties to ancient Christian mysticism. Historically, Christian mystics have structured the contemplative path through life in 3 parts: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. Put simply, these stages symbolize humiliation, enlightenment, and unity with God. These designations offer a pragmatically convenient structure for my reading of the novel. In the first chapter, I will describe the metaphysical problems that are presented by the novel (both in content and structure) and the way in which they are informed by the cultural history and aesthetics of the Southwest. The second chapter will outline an interpretive lens that accounts for these problems, synthesizing literary criticism, metaphysical philosophy, and various forms of mysticism under the label of pragmatic liminality. The third chapter will return to the text and apply this lens to its metaphysical problems in an attempt to solve them. This exercise is essentially a pragmatic attempt to maximize and elucidate the positive spiritual affect of the novel, asserting its importance to the world of Southwestern literature and, more broadly, to the way American culture thinks about spirituality.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Doubt in the Desert: The Interpretive Dilemma of *Death Comes for the Archbishop***

Willa Cather's high-spirited travels through the deserts of the American Southwest formed the memories that would eventually become *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In many ways, it is the quintessential Cather novel. She was outspoken and unambiguous when it came to her views on the art of fiction. Cather believed that "the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification," which accounts for both her stylistic and formal approach ("The Novel D meubl " 40). She decried the demystifying nature of overly practical scientific thought. In fact, she often departed into almost mystical language when she wrote on the merit of art. To her, art expressed "the unaccountable thing in man" ("Escapism" 19). Cather warned that the power of the story must always outweigh the agenda, advocating for intellectual humility in the world of storytelling ("Adobe Walls" 125). As a practicing Christian, Cather drew intimate ties between her art and her religion ("Escapism" 27). These views defined her literary and spiritual identity. In a letter to one of her close friends, Cather wrote, "There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that's my creed and I'll follow it to the end..." ("Selected Letters" 39).

She believed that the artist should avoid unnecessary adornment, since the affect of the text is not seen on the page, asserting that "whatever is felt on the page without being specifically named there- that, one might say, is created" ("D meubl " 41). This "inexplicable presence of the thing not named" matches the aesthetic sensibility of the so-called iceberg theory of literature championed by Hemingway and others (41). While she recognized the problem that relative subjectivity presents to textual interpretation, she still believed that stories could tap into "the eternal material of art" (40). Even as she struggled with the economic realities of the publishing world, Willa Cather had a belief in her work that seemed to border on mysticism.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is, in many ways, the full realization of Cather's literary beliefs. In addition to her more general beliefs on literature, Cather was kind enough to leave literary critics some precise instructions on how to interpret the novel in her letter to *The Commonweal* in 1927. In this letter, she names the hagiographies in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* as a direct influence. She specifically praises the impression that "all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance" ("On *DCA*" 9). She also states that she prefers the term "narrative" rather than "novel" to describe the structure of the work (12). Events in Latour's life are presented episodically and at a deliberate pace, with no dramatic crescendos or flourishes to explicitly connect them. Though the novel is not completely plotless, it challenges our unconscious impulse to search for a linear sequence of cause and effect to understand every story. By interrupting the default linear sense of temporality, it charges each event with the full weight of the entire narrative. There are no true thematic punchlines in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Any epiphanies that the reader may reach do not converge at a climax or settle on one cohesive worldview. In order to mirror the affect of the hagiographies in prose, Cather decided to write her novel "without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition... the essence of such writing is not to hold the note" (9). Cather once praised the novels of Tolstoy for creating a seamless connection between their characters and the material world around them ("Démouillé" 40). Like the deserts of New Mexico that inspire it, Cather's prose is both beautiful and sparse, creating an intimate connection between Latour's spiritual journey and the Southwestern sense of place.

Unsurprisingly, literary critics have used Cather's professed literary views as the primary foundation for widely varied readings of the novel, most of which center around the novel's



peculiar style and structure. Alexander Hollenberg, for example, views the novel's "structural parataxis" implicitly encourages the reader to view the work as something that "ought to be handled and felt but never wholly possessed," resisting the very touch of critical interpretation (365). Manuel Broncano likens the book's structure to the geographic aesthetics of the Southwest, and connects this structure to the metaphysical attitudes of magical realism (131). Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood see the collection of sparse episodes as Cather's attempt to draw attention to the need for ordinary discipline (even in a world of hybridity), and they read the novel as an attempt to unite art and faith (81). Klaus Stich sees *DCA* as a non-linear, inward grail quest that occurs in the subtext of the novel (58).

Despite the variety of these readings, the general consensus seems to be that Cather's literary hagiography revolves around its aesthetic and formal simplicity, which also informs the novel's sense of metaphysics and, more subjectively, accounts for the satisfying affect of the novel. In this respect, Cather was quite successful in executing her artistic vision for *DCA*. As mentioned earlier, the novel was wonderfully received at the time of its publication. Even modern audiences love the book. The novel currently has an average rating of 3.85 stars on Goodreads.com (based on 19,828 ratings, and counting). For comparison, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* weigh in at 3.86 and 3.79, respectively. A quick glance at the first few pages of reviews on the website reveals, unsurprisingly, that opinions on the novel's quality hinge on its aesthetic and formal simplicity. It seems that the critics and the masses are aligned on this point- even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The hero of the book is marked by the same hagiographic simplicity. Cather introduces Latour in the novel's famous prologue, where a gathering of highbrow, artistic cardinals mock Latour's humble background and express disdain for the idea of an ascetic mission on the

frontier. From the beginning, Latour is positioned in contrast to the moral decay of the church establishment by way of simple humility and virtue. As the Cardinal García María de Allande asks of Latour's commissioner Father Ferrand, "Are you wishing to unmake your new bishop already?" (14). In the first chapter, the reader is plainly informed that "everything showed [Latour] to be a man of gentle birth- brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners, even when he was alone in the desert, were distinguished" (19). From cover to cover, none of Latour's actions suggest anything otherwise. The Bishop's habitual kindness and understanding does not waver. As he faces endless hurdles in his mission to reestablish the Catholic Church in the Southwest, he consistently values virtue over doctrine in his dealings with the people of his parish, enabling him to ease colonial tensions. Later in the novel, in a rare glimpse into the mind of a secondary character, Jacinto (Latour's Indian guide) offers this candid assessment of the Bishop's character: "In his experience, white people, when they addressed Indians, always put on a false face... The Bishop put on none at all" (94). There is nothing facetious, ironic, or fragmented about Cather's portrayal of the Bishop's genuine good will towards others. Latour's simple virtue is comforting for us as readers. The anxiety over moral relativism that characterized much of the fiction in Cather's time does not seem to phase Latour- he makes everything look too easy.

The novel's all-encompassing simplicity hangs like a magical spell over the book; basic events and descriptions seem to induce a kind of affective trance. The magic lies not in the realm of the supernatural, but in the realm of altered perception, and the equalization of the natural and the supernatural. Latour's famous definition of miracles makes the perfect mantra for this sensibility: "The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always"

(50). As mentioned above, Manuel Broncano has pointed out that Latour's bit of philosophy on the perception of miracles closely resembles the rationale behind magical realism. One of the critical elements of magical realism is "the harmonious integration of the two levels of reality [real and magical]" (Broncano 125). Latour's ability to see the divine within the mundane is what fuels his remarkable humility (both spiritual and intellectual). It enables him to value to spiritual practices and insights of the native culture that he is immersed in- at least more than the average colonialist. Cather made Latour a Jesuit priest, known for their legacy of tolerance compared to other missionaries in the Americas.

As a result of Latour's impeccable character and Cather's stripped down narrative structure, everything in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, from the landscape to the fictionalized lives of the characters themselves, is imbued with a feel-good vibe. In effect, the book is like a trip to a desert spa. It is a return to simple yet mindful kind of perceptual awareness that facilitates internal peace. The novel itself is a tool for sharpening this form of perception. In a modern maze of moral and spiritual confusion, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* reminds the reader that there is still a place for unadorned and selfless virtue, still a possibility for some kind of cohesive spiritual identity, even in a modern age. Even as traditional Catholic doctrine and practice are continually assaulted by demystifying scientific thought and growing cultural heterogeneity, Cather's work shines as an admirably idealistic defense of faith. As a work of art, *DCA* seems to capture that ineffable "eternal material" that Cather sought. By most accounts, the entire hagiography concept worked beautifully. There is a reason that the novel continues to receive glowing praise almost 90 years after its publication.

Early in the novel, there is a poignant scene in which the sound of gunshots interrupts Latour's peaceful meditations at Christmas dinner (41). Similarly, there are certain questions that

the critical reader must ask that can shatter the cozy affect of the novel. Does the novel's simplicity allow it to avoid the tough questions? For instance, does Latour's honest piety somehow excuse his colonialist mission? How can he be both tolerant of native spirituality and committed to the doctrine, history, and icons of the European Catholic church- is nothing sacred? If everything is a miracle, doesn't that also mean that *nothing* is a miracle? Does the novel offer a template for modern spirituality, or is it just a temporary aesthetic high? In short: what is the difference between "simple" and "vapid"?

For all of the praise it receives, it is still tempting to read the novel as a doomed religious protest against the wave of modernity, conducted from the ivory tower of "high art," especially given Cather's explicit literary views. Certainly, this is a valid way to read not only *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but the entirety of Cather's Southwestern fiction. Kim Savelson points out that in the years before writing the novel, Cather was engaged in a sectarian defense of high intellectualism and a reaction against the pragmatic capitalist sensibility that was on the rise in the 1920s and beyond (Savelson 62). *The Professor's House* (1925), her first Southwestern novel, acts as Cather's lament for losing the principles of abstract idealism to the new philosophical school of results-driven pragmatism. In other words, Cather demonstrates a kind of hopeless classicism when it comes to art, favoring lofty aesthetics to demystifying advances in rational thought. In a certain sense, the novel's aesthetic beauty gives the entire experience a dreamlike quality that distances it from the reader's immediate concerns (Broncano 127). Following the hagiographic model, Cather's prose lightly touches each event of Latour's life and moves on, seldom stopping for moments of in-depth intellectual or political reflection. Cather does not stray from her overall vision. This structure glosses over some of the intricacies of the region's history. Perhaps, in her pursuit of "high" art, Cather gets too caught up in the beauty of

the desert and looks past its harsher aspects. She is not unlike her novel's hero in this respect, setting out on a simplistic mission to impose her own personal experiences on top of a land whose constantly-shifting nature eludes her intellectual grasp. This, of course, is the pessimistic view. Over the course of the novel, Latour learns that revitalizing "the Faith planted by the Spanish friars and watered with their blood" is much more complicated than building churches (32). Cather runs into the same wall in her attempt to connect aesthetics and spirituality.

Jean Marie Latour, as a character, is subject to the same criticisms as Cather. Reading the novel in the modern context of the Catholic Church's declining role in a secularizing Western world, it is easy to dismiss the book as a pipe dream rife with that longing for "the good old days"- in this case, however, the nostalgia is directed towards the history of the Catholic Church in Europe. The story, after all, revolves around the priests' attempt to reestablish the glory of the Catholic Church in a "New" World, a land "waiting to be made into a landscape" (95). The naivety of this notion goes without saying. Latour's mission to reestablish the traditions of the church in a land of drastically varying cultures, histories and identities is quite the lofty ambition. Latour's grand vision is physically manifested in his lifelong desire to build a Midi-Romanesque cathedral in Santa Fe in order to symbolically "reclaim" New Mexico in the name of Christianity. As Latour begins to fantasize about the Cathedral's appearance, Father Joseph Vaillant, his right hand man, silently notes Latour's visual vanity: "[Joseph] himself was eager to have the Cathedral begun; but whether it was Midi Romanesque or Ohio German in style, seemed to him of little consequence" (243).

One cannot help but wonder if Cather, through the voice of Father Joseph, is taking a small jab at her *own* love of western historical narratives and aesthetics. Father Joseph's sentiment echoes Mary Austin's famous critique of the novel, in which she specifically pointed

to Latour's cathedral as a symbol of the novel's thinly veiled colonialist attitudes. This also happens to be the most common gripe that contemporary critics have with the novel (Porter 258). Cather's letters reveal that she was very sensitive to this criticism from one of her literary friends, defending herself in a 1932 letter addressed to another friend: "how the devil could I help it that the first archbishops of New Mexico were French?" ("Selected Letters" 476). In the same letter, she gets back at Austin with a sarcastic jab at Austin's autobiography, claiming that "it's amazing how everybody mis-understood her and nobody ever 'got the point'" (476). Though her letters seem brash and confident, evidence in the novel suggests that Cather "doth protest too much" when it comes to her defense of Latour's cathedral. In addition to Father Joseph's criticisms, Cather spends many pages on the parable of Fray Baltazar, which is essentially a lengthy warning against aesthetic materialism. The aforementioned pompous cardinals of the novel's prologue present yet another damning portrait of the aesthete. Cather's simultaneously defensive and self-critical posture regarding aestheticism reflects the central paradox of her literary beliefs. Even as she asserted that art is the sacred vessel of God, Cather maintained that art is nothing but escapism.

"Escapism" is almost a dirty word in the critic's vocabulary, but according to Cather, it might be the best term to describe her novel. This label has curious implications when it comes to interpreting the text. Does self-indulgent escapism account for the novel's sterling reputation with readers? Does its value consist not of practical or political weight, but rather purely aesthetic enjoyment? In this view, instead of a spiritual journey with an enlightening conclusion, art is like a drug-induced high- a temporary affective euphoria followed by an unsatisfying return to earth. Latour's spiritual mission in the New World proves to be a failure, and the anti-dramatic structure of the hagiography makes no *obvious* attempt to resolve this failure. Cather offers a

pretty picture of sustaining spirituality, but perhaps the novel is too simple to satisfy the complex metaphysical questions that it raises. It operates only on the plane of the supernatural, ephemeral as a dream. The novel leaves you with the same questions you had going in.

Austin's accusations are not openly addressed. Cather's inscription in Austin's copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* offers a cryptic clue: "For Mary Austin, in whose lovely study I wrote the last chapters of this book. She will be my sternest critic and she has the right to be" (383). That being said, Latour's aesthetic and doctrinal dependencies are consistently tested throughout the novel. Of these challenges, Father Martínez, the rogue priest of Taos, is one of the most direct. Father Martínez enters the picture as Father Latour's evil twin, and offers a direct challenge to many of Latour's cherished beliefs. Upon learning that Father Martínez abused to indigenous people of Taos in order to gain power over them, Latour goes to meet with the wayward priest. Martinez is described as a passionate man with hedonistic tendencies. He openly defies the doctrine of chastity for Catholic priests. Furthermore, Latour's fondness for Christian aesthetics is a full-blown obsession for Martinez. The priest's gaudy church and expensive tastes offer a satire of the church's obsession with these aesthetics. Through the character of Trinidad, the understudy of Martinez, Cather pushes the knife a bit deeper into the body of church doctrine- though he is an unrepentant slob, Martínez assures Latour that Trinidad is fit for the cloth because he scourges himself harder than anyone else during holy week.

Curiously, Latour finds himself drawn to Martinez despite the man's obvious shortcomings. Latour notices that Martinez has a "disturbing, mysterious, magnetic power" over his parishioners (150). Martinez makes some eye-opening points about religion in the Southwest that Latour does not fully grasp. He points out to Latour that "the dark things forbidden by [the] church are part of Indian religion," and calls his own parish a living religion that "grew out of the

soil” (146). Its symbols and doctrine reflect the fluid combination of Christian and indigenous spirituality. Martínez also shares with Latour an embodied history of the land, unavailable in any written source. Despite his basic moral shortcomings, Martínez brings a religious perspective to the table that is totally alien to Latour. Upon leaving Taos, the Bishop is faced with the decision of either cracking down on the adulterated Catholicism of Martínez’s parish or leaving it as it is. For the sake of peace and good-will towards his new diocese, he chooses the latter. Yet, at this point, the idea of hybrid religious doctrine (and the larger metaphysical implications of this idea) is clearly out of Pandora’s Box, and continues to lurk in the subtext of the novel like the body of an iceberg.

Though Latour’s sterling character is not without its flaws, he does not necessarily lack self-awareness. Latour recognizes some of his initial naivety during the journey to Ácoma that he undertakes with Jacinto: “There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him” (92). When the pair finally arrives at Ácoma, Latour is filled with wonder at the sight of the isolated desert city, built on the mesa of a massive rock. He compares the history of the Ácoma people to that of the Old-Testament Hebrews. However, once he starts preaching to the crowd, he realizes that the history and doctrine he is invested in carry no weight: “He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; for types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far...When he blessed them and sent them away, it was with a sense of inadequacy and spiritual defeat” (101). Interestingly, the word “Ácoma” translates to “a place that always was” (Minge



1). The idea that anything could predate the Christian timeline forces Latour to question the legitimacy of his doctrine as *the* definitive ontology.

By making him question his sense of linear time, this experience also prompts Latour to question the Western progress narrative that grows out of that very sense. As he gazes at the city's old Spanish church, he finally recognizes that "every stone in that structure, every handful of earth in those many thousand pounds of adobe, was carried up the trail on the backs of men and boys and women" (101). Latour leaves Ácoma with his tail between his legs, "a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams" (103). Granted, this passage does not mark the beginning of an all-out identity crisis or transformation for Latour. Rather, it is a visible manifestation of the questions that Latour will spend the rest of his life answering.

Though the aesthetics of Catholic iconography and ritual provide Latour with his greatest spiritual moments, they seem to hold limited power in the deserts of the Southwest. The failure of Latour's religious colonial mission coincides with a shakeup of his entire sense of religious metaphysics, causing him to question both his own identity and the nature of God himself. Before he leaves Europe, Latour is so confident in his mission and his spiritual identity that he is willing to leave everything he knows and loves to serve God in a harsh and unsettled foreign land. Yet, his life is plagued with moments of fragmentation and doubt. Latour's diocese is likewise divided along cultural borderlines and, staying true to history, remains that way even to the end of the novel, leaving the reader to figure out what the priest's life and mission *really* meant.

This sense of confusion is present from the novel's first chapter. Latour is introduced as a solitary horseman, lost in the "geometrical nightmare" of the desert (20). The landscape is painted as a fractal image, in which all of the components are so repeated to the extent that they cannot be distinguished from one another. In the midst of this aesthetic confusion, the reader also learns that Latour's mission has gotten off to a very bad start: "He was thrust out; his flock would have none of him (20). This is one of several moments of doubt that are sprinkled throughout the narrative. As mentioned before, Latour is forced to face the diminished weight of his spiritual doctrine in a multicultural environment. His religious doctrine also comes under attack from inside Western culture. The rise of the scientific ethos (which Savelson refers to as "pragmatism") threatens to demystify and neuter the entire concept of religion. In an early scene, Father Joseph relates his pride regarding his church bell's Catholic origins, but Latour bursts his bubble, commenting that the bell is actually of a hybrid origin and influenced by Moorish technology. Joseph replies, "I noticed that scholars always manage to dig out something belittling" (45).

Occasionally, Latour's doubt reaches a fever pitch, and he is faced with existential crisis. These pseudo-climaxes present themselves periodically throughout the book. In one of these instances, Latour is described as "going through one of those periods of coldness and doubt which, from his boyhood, had occasionally settled down upon his spirit and made him feel an alien, wherever he was...His prayers were empty words and brought him no refreshment. His soul had become a barren field." (210). Latour's doubt snowballs into melancholy. In other instances, his despair takes the form of a nihilistic terror, fueled by his fear of the unknown.

The most striking example of this is the cave scene, which critics of the novel have long obsessed over. During yet another one of their journeys, Jacinto and Latour take shelter in an old

Indian cave used for religious rituals. Latour immediately becomes uncomfortable after learning that the cave is normally off-limits for people outside of the tribe. Latour notices a strange vibration in the cave, at which point Jacinto leads him to a crack in the wall and has him listen into it:

Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth... The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power. "It's terrible," he said at last, as he rose. "Si Padre." (130)

The subterranean flood sticks in Latour's memory, filling him with irrational horror. The adjective "antediluvian" marks the subterranean flood as a disruption of the Biblical timeline, just as *Ácoma* was. The flood has a strong effect on Latour, prompting him to break decorum and drink in front of his guide. We learn that the memory of the cave sticks in his mind long after he leaves. At the same time, it ignites a frightened curiosity in Latour. He even goes as far as to try to catch Jacinto sleeping so that he can listen to the flood again. Latour may be terrified by this non-Western and non-Christian way of knowing, but he is not totally unreceptive to it.

Latour's fear is supplemented by a legend that he hears just before entering the cave. He is told that the Indians are snake worshipers who make human sacrifices to a giant serpent hidden in the mountains. This rumor turns out to be more than just a campfire story. Underground snakes are an almost ubiquitous symbol in the native religions of the Southwest. The symbol is particularly important to the Pueblo Indians, to whom the figure of the underground serpent represents the water cycle, and by extension, the cyclical nature of life itself, perceived outside of the bounds linear time. The serpent is both a frightening and life-giving figure for the Pueblo people (Vanpool 18).

Interestingly, the underground water serpent is a surprisingly widespread symbol that is not confined to a specific culture or geographic area. It makes appearances in the Eastern hemisphere in Norse mythology, Hinduism, and Alchemy, among other places. The common thread between the cultural manifestations of this serpent, known primarily as “Ouroboros,” is that it represents cyclical consciousness (it is often pictured devouring its own tail) and the embodiment of paradox, existing in the “primeval waters” of the world (van der Sluijs and Peratt 7). Carl Jung defines the Ouroboros as it is conceived in alchemy: “In the age-old image of the ouroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process, for it was clear to the more astute alchemists that the *prima materia* of the art was man himself. The ouroboros is a symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., the shadow” (Jung 365). In other words, the alchemists considered the ouroboros to be both a creation of human consciousness and the quintessence of the universe. Fittingly, anthropological research about this symbol has run into a roadblock. In Southwestern Indian religions, researchers cannot tell definitively if the spread from a single source or if it was an organic coincidence between cultures (Vanpool 22). Likewise, researchers have struggled to explain the ubiquity of ouroboros in the cultures of the Eastern hemisphere- one study has even hypothesized that an auroral phenomenon in the Neolithic era might have been a common source of inspiration (van der Sluijs and Peratt 3). In short, the ouroboros represents the proverbial chicken-and-egg situation, both historically and philosophically.

Latour’s various confrontations with doubt echo Cather’s self-conscious concerns about the novel’s value. Both she and her story’s hero have their strongest convictions tested, and both sink to moments of doubt verging on despair. In her unpublished fragment “Light on Adobe Walls,” Cather offers this moment of vulnerability: “Art is too terribly human to be ‘great,’

perhaps. Some very great artists have outgrown art, the men were bigger than the game...Shakespeare died at fifty-three...But he died before he had tried to grow old, never became a bitter old man wrangling with abstractions or creeds..." (126). The tone of futility in this essay recalls the "coldness and doubt" of Latour's darker moments. Latour and Cather each have their metaphysical identity pushed to its breaking point when their aesthetic-bound religions are called into question. This tethering of fates is only natural, given that Latour is essentially a vessel of Cather's memories of the Southwest. When you consider this bond, the novel itself becomes another protagonist, raising the stakes for the reader as well- as long they, too, have a soft spot for art and want to believe in its spiritual power. The debate over whether or not it constitutes "escapism" is no longer a simple merit judgment for a piece of art, but a decision that impacts one's conception of time, reality, and the nature of the divine (in whatever form it may take).

By all standard measures, the novel seems to have a happy ending. Latour dies peacefully and contentedly, even though he did not succeed in his life's mission. He is satisfied with the cathedral that he has constructed, with no apparent sense of colonialist guilt. There are no last-minute epiphanies or laments. Cather stays true to the hagiographic formula, ending the book without accent. Latour is by no means "wrangling with abstractions or creeds." The story ends like a Jane Austen novel- no matter how sticky the problems are, everything miraculously ends up for the best, tied with a neat bow. Are we to assume, then, that Cather simply decided to leave the metaphysical questions unanswered for the sake of a feel-good ending? This is not an unpopular reading- many critics are unsatisfied by the novel's unanswered questions. I believe, however, that like Austen (whom she greatly admired), Cather's happy ending is a prompt for the reader to reexamine their own expectations and assumptions regarding the text. The million-

dollar question is this: how could Latour possibly be *happy* with this state of affairs- particularly at the end of his life, when metaphysical questions are brought to the forefront of the mind? Likewise, how could Cather be so satisfied with a novel that actively diminishes the spiritual significance aestheticism? Yet, even in the midst of these questions, many readers remain irrationally inclined to believe in Cather's assessment of her novel (again, just check the reviews if you're skeptical of this assumption).

To quote Hermione Lee, *DCA* is a novel that is "meant to be translated" (Stich 70). In other words, Cather puts the onus on the reader to interpret the meaning of Latour's metaphysical journey for themselves- it is not spoon-fed by any means. That being said, Cather offers plenty of hints, communicated through the body of the text, her essays, and her letters. Cather professed that she did not do much outside research in writing *DCA*, claiming that "knowledge that one hasn't gotten firsthand is a dangerous thing" ("On *DCA*" 11). Given this detail and her aversion to elaborate artifice in general, it is doubtful that Cather had any specific philosophical or theological movements in mind when it came to constructing Latour's metaphysical struggles; as such, it is also doubtful that she intended the spiritual subtext of her novel to demand any single interpretive lens. Critics of the novel have proved that for years, providing compelling readings that branch across a wide range of subjects, such as magical realism, comparative mythology, ecology, and even geometry- many of which engage with the metaphysical conversation that Cather starts with the novel.

Despite their obvious theoretical differences, these readings share a common sensibility. My goal is to distill this attitude, which I will refer to as "pragmatic liminality." By doing so, I aim to illuminate the *demand* for faith that is built into the fabric of the novel. In this respect, the novel is a religious text that demands a particular kind of exegesis. Cather hated low brow

sensationalism as much as she hated endless mazes of intellectualism- through this demand, she locates the potential to transform the narrative into something that satisfies the entire spectrum of embodied feeling and rational skepticism (the ingenious simplicity with which Cather accomplishes this end is the criminally unheralded aspect of the novel). Pragmatic liminality is predicated on the rejection of the ego and a willingness to confront the chaotic unknown of nonexistence. It also entails a tolerance for the ambiguity of the symbol. By connecting art and metaphysics in this way and turning the critical gaze back upon the reader, Cather places them in the cave next to herself and Latour, listening to the enticing and terrible flood. Only through an embodied understanding of the ontology of pragmatic liminality can one make sense of it, transforming the terrifying aspect of the cave into a point of contact into the incomprehensible nature of religious experience. The path that one takes towards that understanding is not as important as the attitude itself, which remains culturally independent. Thus, pragmatic liminality offers a vision of true multicultural spirituality.

## **Chapter 2**

### **From Catholicism to Chaos: Defining Pragmatic Liminality**

As discussed earlier, Cather praised the hagiographies in *The Golden Legend* for their ability to make events as dramatic as martyrdom equivalent to the tedious disciplines of everyday life. She explicitly stated that the structure of *DCA* was inspired by the structure of these hagiographies. Whether Cather intended it or not, the fictional life of Jean-Marie Latour reflects the mystical tradition of the saints and church fathers of Late Antiquity. Cather manages to tap into the apophatic vein of Christian mysticism that flourished from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. This connection is one pathway to understanding the novel's metaphysical questions. The apophatic attitude, which emphasizes the unknowable and chaotic aspect of God via negation opens up a door to an ontology in which the ego itself is faded into the background or completely dissolved, if only for moments at a time. One occupies the space between word and event, conceiving truths not as unmovable pillars of antecedent reality, but as living principles that must be studied in motion, from a variety of different perspectives. The Western philosophical tradition of binary, scientific thinking is displaced by chaotic or entropic methods of knowing. As a result, Cather's art allows one to envision their metaphysical identity not as a static image, filtered through the prescriptive lens of their own cultural symbols, rituals, and histories, but as a collection of living principles viewed in kaleidoscopic motion.

Of the saints recounted in *The Golden Legend*, none were more important to the initial advancement of the apophatic attitude than St. Anthony the Great. In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., Anthony the Great wandered out into the Eastern Desert of Egypt seeking an ascetic form of enlightenment. As a strict ascetic, Anthony's life struggle was against the desires of the ego. As the legend goes, this struggle manifested itself in the form of direct combat with the devil and his



demons throughout Anthony's lifetime of desert wanderings. He became famous for his almost superhuman feats of will. Anthony never loosened his self-discipline or ceased his prismatic focus on understanding nature of God. Even after he rose to prominence as a spiritual leader, Anthony retained his self-erasing sense of humility, constantly retreating further into the desert to avoid the pride that comes with fame. Finally, as Anthony grew older, he agreed to break his solitude and teach others how to live his lifestyle of self-denial and divine contemplation. Anthony's example paved the way for centuries of monks who came after him, earning him the title of "Father of Monasticism."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Anthony's story is the fact that it breaks some modern stereotypes about mysticism. Anthony's spiritual journey was not characterized by serenity, but by struggle and fear. He is not the happy philosopher discovering nirvana under a tree; he is the starving old man fighting demons in a cave. For example, in one of his famous bouts with tempting demons, Anthony was beaten within an inch of his life. He cried out for God, wondering why He had not been there to help. God responds: "Anthony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight; wherefore since you have endured, and hast not been worsted, I will ever be a succor to you, and will make your name known everywhere" (Athanasius 10). Not only does God allow Anthony to be tormented; he withdraws his presence from the entire event. Anthony is left on his own in the nihilistic darkness of the cave to wrestle with sin and doubt simultaneously. The struggle must have been intense- how does one fight for one's principles while also dealing with the creeping notion that those principles might actually mean nothing?

In Anthony's spiritual world, sacrifice predicates any understanding of or relationship with God. Internal peace can only be won through internal war. This struggle is inherently circular. No final victory can ever be achieved, which is why Anthony continued his ascetic

journey for his entire life. He constantly challenged both his faith in God and his own sense of ego, which together constituted the framework for his very existence. One of Anthony's lessons was to "live as though dying daily" (Athanasius 19). Today, we tend to translate the "carpe diem" message as a call to appreciate daily joys. Anthony meant it more literally- he urged his followers to actively confront the terrible concept of their own non-existence on a daily basis, "for the greater dread and danger of torment ever destroys the ease of pleasure, and sets up the soul if it is like to fall." Martyrdom is figured as a daily psychological routine, rather than a climactic physical event. It is easy to see how this darker brand of mysticism seems to have given way to the "happier" perceptions of the contemplative life, especially given the rise of individual subjectivity that followed the Middle Ages.

Anthony's followers became known as the Desert Fathers. These influential yet enigmatic monks cultivated Anthony's apophatic sensibilities and ascetic practices, establishing their presence in the collective mind of the church. The austerity of the landscape inspired spiritual reflection then as it does now, no matter the continent. James Cowan has aptly described the desert of Egypt as "a true laboratory of the spirit" (13). Men from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds descended upon the desert, pioneering "a new way of thinking that transcended the weary dialectic taught in the philosophic academies of Alexandria or Athens" (13). Like Anthony, they cloistered themselves in the austere deserts of Egypt to do battle with the demons of sin and doubt. Their temptations, however, lack the dramatic flair of Anthony's, at least in a literal sense. The Desert Fathers fought their war with mundane discipline and a meek disposition. These methods are conspicuously unsexy compared to the modern ecstatic model of mysticism. It seems obvious to say that the Desert Fathers were in search of ultimate humility, but to them, the very loftiness of that goal made it self-defeating. Instead, they submitted to the

fact that this goal is truly unobtainable, and learned to “be content with the ordinary lot of man who has to struggle all his life to overcome himself” (Merton 16). Their lives amounted to a massive struggle against the ego, desperately trying to dissolve it in order to come to a true perception of God himself. Though only the ultimate finality of death could truly unite them with God, they continued, like Anthony before them, to stare across the abyss on a daily basis.

In keeping with their humble attitude, the Desert Fathers did not seek a black-and-white system of theological truth. In his introduction to his translation of the sayings of the Desert Fathers, Thomas Merton provides this lucid summary of their philosophy:

The Desert Fathers were not, for the most part, ecstasies...The ‘rest’ these men sought was simply the sanity and poise of a being that no longer has to look at itself because it is carried away by the perfection and freedom that is in it...Rest, then, was a simple kind of no-where-ness and no-mindedness that had lost all preoccupation with a false or limited ‘self.’ At peace in the possession of the sublime ‘Nothing’ the spirit laid hold, in secret, upon the “All’- without trying to know what it possessed. (Merton 8)

Only through the denial of the ego can one access the ability to contemplate the apophatic aspect of God. This sense of peace is not something for the mind to contain, but something for the mind to be contained *by*. It is not conscious knowledge, but an unconscious attitude. The following saying of the Desert Fathers illustrates this sensibility:

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire? (Merton 50)

Here, Abbot Joseph reveals the apophatic mode of being that lies just beyond discipline and asceticism. After the rigid icon of the self is torn down, one’s being is conceived as a kind of fire- an excellent metaphor. In a literal sense, fire is something that is both ephemeral and

irresistible; it is not a physically distinct object, but an animating principle that connects those objects even as it subsumes them.

Fire is but one metaphor for the apophatic. For centuries after the time of the Desert Fathers, Christian mystics continued to expound their conceptions of this attitude. Perhaps the most famous example is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a handbook for contemplation written in the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, most likely by an English monk. The author explains in further detail the “no-mindedness” of the Desert Fathers and their contemplative attitude. Since intellect and reason are products of the ego, one can only perceive the nature of God by eliminating thought altogether and enter into the cloud of unknowing. The potential outcome of maintaining such an attitude is startling and enigmatic: “Insomuch, that when thou weenest best to abide in this darkness, and that nought is in thy mind but only God; an thou look truly thou shalt find thy mind not occupied in this darkness, but in a clear beholding of some thing beneath God. And if it thus be, surely then is that thing above thee for the time, and betwixt thee and thy God” (33). This “some thing” that permeates the space beneath, above, and around God and the contemplator is not a particular religious ideal (the author actually advises against the contemplation of any specific ideals or characteristics of God), but a kind of attitude. It is not a specific emotional sensation, but an awareness. Once again, this is not “some thing” to be grasped and contained by the mind, but a sensibility that permeates your entire, ego-free mental space.

The idea that there could be any “some thing” beyond God seems to verge on blasphemy—at least to the modern Christian. Here, *The Cloud of Unknowing* perfectly illustrates of the difference between Medieval (vertical) and modern (horizontal) conceptions of the relationship between God and man. As Denys Turner discovered in *The Darkness of God*, this shift in

perspective coincided with the disappearance of apophatic mysticism that occurred in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (7). The modern Western mind draws borders around the self. From this atomic subject position, all other ideas and entities, including God, are presented in an external relationship with the self. In order to make sense of these relations, a reliance on formal logic and a linear sense of temporality are developed. As a result, modern mysticism is, for the most part, bound to individual's contemplative experience with the doctrine, ideals, and myths of their religion, which creates an inflexible bond with a prescriptive cultural worldview. As John Dewey put it, "Interpretations of the experience have not grown from the experience itself... they have been imported by borrowing without criticism from ideas that are current in the surrounding culture" (36). The entire phenomenon represents a huge ontological shift for Christian spirituality, and by extension, the Western mind's *modus operandi*. Turner calls this "experiential mysticism," and describes precisely how it differs from medieval mysticism: "whereas it would come naturally to the contemporary, 'psychologizing' mind to think of 'the mystical' in terms of its characterizing *experiences*, the mediaeval mind thought of the 'mystical'... hidden precisely *from* experience" (4).

A concrete example of the rise of experiential mysticism is *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, written by the founder of the Jesuit order around 1522. These exercises remain a crucial part of training for members of the order. The exercises exhibit the sort of mysticism that is more palatable to the modern audience. The book of exercises contains specific instructions for a 30 day contemplative retreat. The exercises begin with an intense recognition of sin, followed by an extensive, step by step meditation on the events of Christ's life. Participants are urged to imagine these events with heightened sensory detail. Mysticism is conceived as a kind of embodied virtual reality experience, rather than a disintegration into the intangible and unknown. The

exercises become a kind of phenomenological experiment in which the participant projects their ego and sensory perceptions onto a template of different symbols, doctrines, and stories. The importance of the subject position and the individual's sensory experience is heightened by the structure of the exercises.

The exercises contain directions for confronting moments of metaphysical desolation. In direct opposition to the old apophatic approach, Ignatius urges his followers to look away from the darkness: "For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels" (142). Instead of imagining darkness as an aspect of God, Ignatius sees it as an opposing force that creates dramatic peaks and valleys in the life of a believer. Whereas God seems to leave Anthony completely during his battles with doubt and temptation, Ignatius asserts that God only *reduces* his presence during these times, and later sends "signal favors" of reassurance (143). For Ignatius, demons were something to be conquered and cast out. For Anthony, they were not even considered fully evil, for they were a different aspect of God. Ignatius' need to paint the experience as a warrior's struggle against evil betrays a lingering sense of ego-centric fear. Once again, Thomas Merton provides excellent commentary on the subject: "St. Anthony, of all people, thought the devil had some good in him... It showed that in Anthony there was not much room left for paranoia" (21).

As Turner has proven, the rise of the subjective ego as the starting point for Christian theology marked the beginning shift towards a black-and-white ordering of reality via doctrine that found its way into the mystical tradition as well. From a totally secular standpoint, this ethos attempts to dogmatically match culturally prescribed beliefs with antecedent reality in a flawed interpretation of the scientific method. The apophatic spiritual ethos and its tolerance for unknowing has faded into the background, just as it is represented in the subtext of the novel.

The story of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is initially presented as a journey to recover the glorious traditions of the Catholic Church in the deserts of New Mexico. Latour remains tied to modern experientialism by virtue of his devotion to a culturally prescribed set of aesthetics. The linear progress narrative of Western civilization drives him onward as he tries to uncover the Catholic treasures left behind by the Spanish who came before him. Instead, he finds that the power of all of his cherished symbols, traditions, and doctrine has been lost to the truth cultural relativism. This discovery causes Latour quite a bit of discomfort, because it is not packaged in aesthetics or mythology that he can understand, but in the ancient spiritual current of the indigenous people that (literally) runs beneath the surface of their land. Latour comes to the cloud of unknowing through the mysterious “other” of Indian culture. The fact that this same attitude lies buried in the past of his own religious tradition indicates that there may be some potential for spiritual multiculturalism at the heart of it.

The apophatic attitude is also a method of exegesis that searches for the creative consciousness in between the binary of word and meaning, creating a tolerance for the disruption of the signifier. The influence Neoplatonism on early Christian mysticism becomes apparent upon examination of the way the Desert Fathers practiced exegesis. The Desert Fathers shared the Neoplatonic concept of relative “realness,” with God (or the unifying “One”) being at the highest end of the spectrum. Starting with humans, everything in existence flows down to the other end of the spectrum in a hierarchy of relative “reality.” Essentially, this concept is a theory of entropy that applies to metaphysics rather than thermodynamics. The spectrum also applies to language. As the ineffable aspects of God are broken up into the binary system of language (word and meaning), the living principle that inspired them is reduced to confusion and chaos.

This is similar to the psychological phenomenon known as semantic satiation, in which repeated words cause a listener to mentally separate the signifying sounds from their meaning.

This entropic movement towards relativity does not just apply to individual signals, but to the interpretation of texts. Just like a word, the meaning of a text can be called infinitely into question due to the inescapable relativity of interpretation, which questions its authority as a symbol of spiritual “realness.” In his study of the exegesis of the Desert Fathers (*The Word in the Desert*), Douglas Burton-Christie asserts that the Desert Fathers sought to turn this relativity into a strength rather than a weakness. Doing so requires, once again, an abnegation of the reader’s ego. Since all interpretation is informed by individual prejudice, one must maintain a constantly shifting interpretive lens. The identity of the reader must be in a constant state of unsettled transition, caught in a feedback loop between the signal and the signified. To the Desert Fathers, the chaos of this feedback loop was the basis of exegesis, because it allowed them to occupy a liminal space in which truth making outweighs static truth, and word events are greater than words (Burton-Christie 12).

The exegetical methods of the Desert Fathers are not limited to the world of religion. In fact, they share some remarkable similarities with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, particularly when it comes to the concept of *pharmakon*. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida asserts that Plato’s work solidified the entire dialectic of Western thought and its logocentric obsession with binaries. Derrida defines Plato’s *pharmakon* as a “non-presence” and “non-truth” that precedes the antagonistic system of binaries (68, 70). Derrida also argues that writing can be envisioned as *pharmakon*, with the disruption of binaries serving as its significant purpose. In *Postmodern Belief*, Amy Hungerford reconnects Derrida’s theory to the religious aspects of literature in postmodern America. She describes a “belief in meaninglessness” in this literature that imagines



the formal and non-semantic aspects of literature as spiritually powered and particularly suited to serve the function of the *pharmakon*. The Desert Fathers saw both daily existence and exegesis as acts of unceasing self-criticism; likewise, Hungerford asserts that deconstruction in religious literature demands self-perpetuating motion: “seeking and desiring are limitless Derridean deferral of closure inherent in the sign as deconstruction understands it... Faith’s incarnation in contemporary culture is found in what I think can best be called an endless restlessness” (20).

The sum of this entire web of theory, from the Desert Fathers to Derrida, offers a resolution of the binary between escapism and divinity that manifests in Cather’s literary views. Given the subtext of liminality that runs underneath the surface of the novel, it is safe to assume that she came into contact with this sensibility before she finished the novel. Again, the exact is not as important as the resulting attitude. That being said, Cather has been described as a “devoted disciple” of the philosophy of William James, who pioneered pragmatism with the help of John Dewey in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Seibel 202). Pragmatism is another ontological lens that has an ethos of liminality, and it operates in the realm of traditional Western philosophy even as it disrupts some of its basic premises- a deconstructing *pharmakon* in its own right.

The basic premise of pragmatism is that it rejects the idea of antecedent reality. Pragmatists recognize the limited perspective of the conscious ego and the relativity of truth that comes with difference in interpretation (not unlike the Desert Fathers). Instead, pragmatists search for the spaces in between, more concerned with the effects of certain beliefs than the beliefs themselves- the ends always outweigh the means. In common speech, pragmatism is (erroneously) thought of as the opposite of philosophical concerns. Indeed, much of the criticism directed at pragmatism by philosophers is the charge of total relativism. The idea that there could

not be an antecedent reality contradicts the scientific process, which represents the “one sure road of access to truth” for the majority of Western philosophers (Dewey 32).

In *A Common Faith*, John Dewey seeks to extricate the affect of metaphysical peace that comes from spirituality, which he calls “the religious,” from the doctrinal constraints of any single religion. In doing so, he creates a template for a multicultural religious attitude. The “religious” is the polar opposite of experientialism, which Dewey claims is the principle fallacy in modern religions. By using a particular experience to justify a supervening, culturally-prescribed belief system, Dewey believes that those who are dogmatically invested in religious doctrine are pushed to do so by the Western demand for scientific thought, which they misappropriate in a futile attempt to rationalize the divine (11). Dewey decries the “othering” of the supernatural, advocating instead for a kind of magical realism that mirrors Father Latour’s concept of miracle- he seeks to unify the natural and the supernatural. For Dewey, the very distinction of “supernatural” is the starting point of restrictive binary thought, prompting the incessant and impossible search for divine cause-and-effect and obscuring the original essence of the “religious” feeling. Whereas the average theist would resist the idea that their sacred texts were simply works of imagination, Dewey embraces imagination as the keeper of the liminal space in between the known and unknown.

Faith is at the center of Dewey’s views on pragmatism and religion. Pragmatism in its most basic form demands a kind of faith in the creative power of the mind, since almost all of life’s philosophical content is judged based off of its subjective effects rather than its objective truth value. Dewey calls this faith an “idealism of action” that stands in direct opposition to rigid belief systems (24). Like apophatic mysticism, it constitutes an attitude rather than a metaphysical rulebook. Living principles outweigh any doctrine. The following saying of the

Desert Fathers encapsulates this attitude perfectly: “One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all I had and give to the poor” (Merton 37). The parable has a curious humor to it. At first, the idea of a monk selling his book of Gospels seems almost comical. Upon further thought, however, the idea of him *not* selling it is even more ridiculous. This simple little paradox is an illustration of the pragmatic sensibility- one must relinquish the desire for a static, black-and-white scheme of truth in favor of living principles, which require a philosophy of constant motion rather than the construction of immovable pillars of reality.

In order to have faith in the ontological power of Dewey’s religious pragmatism, one must actively choose to believe in a philosophy that is ineffable by definition and that goes against the central tenets of Western philosophy. Ultimately, faith hinges on choice. Just as St. Anthony chose to annihilate his own ego in the barren desert and face the terror of the unknown, the person in search of the “religious,” the apophatic, or the *pharmakon* must actively choose to embrace chaos in order to rise above the intellectual maze created by binary Western metaphysics. The liminal space in between this binary of natural and supernatural is where creativity finds its religious power and transcends escapism. To quote George Santayana, “Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry” (17).

In a word, pragmatism is like the clever workaround solution to the chicken-and-egg conundrum- the only thing that matters is that the chicken is here. While it may not be wholly satisfying to many, and requires some counter-intuitive mental steps, it does present a compelling case for being the basis of a multicultural religious attitude. The search for the “religious” that John Dewey conducted in 1934 with *A Common Faith* was predated by its

fictional counterpart, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by 7 years. The spirit of pragmatism is implicit in Latour's theory on miracles. Whether they come from an external divine source or they are simply shifts in perspective is not of great importance; it is the effect they have that holds the truly religious feeling that was "there about us always." In presenting the novel as a hagiography, Cather disrupts the Western obsession with cause-and-effect, inviting an exegesis of her novel that follows the pragmatic formula of liminality shared by the Desert Fathers, Derrida, and Dewey. The final key similarity between these two works is the element of choice; specifically, the choice of self-abnegation and acceptance of the chaos that comes with it that is the lynchpin of pragmatic liminality.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (a major influence on *A Common Faith*), William James observes the following: "[The] inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief is just as manifest when rationalism argues for religion as when it argues against it...vague impressions of the ineffable have no place in the rationalistic system" (74). The criticism that pragmatic philosophers lay on scientific thought is inherently vague. Furthermore, the positive effects of this mode of thinking are undeniable- from political philosophy to hard sciences, this ethos has produced some of humanity's greatest achievements. On the subject of religion, Dewey and James can be interpreted as backwards thinkers, seeking ignorance instead of knowledge. What these criticisms fail to recognize, however, is that pragmatism seeks to unify the chaotic and the scientifically knowable. Recent developments in the mathematic study of chaos have begun to make this unification a reality, revealing a hopeful vision of a scientific future in which chaos and order, the known and the known, faith and reason are finally united. These developments in mathematics, the most fundamental of human sciences, have profound

implications for the entire system of metaphysical reality that is characterized by pragmatic liminality.

In his paper entitled “Chaos, Complexity, and Entropy,” Michael Baranger outlines the broader implications of mathematical chaos theory on the scientific community’s ethos. Chaos is a “purely mathematical concept,” grounded in the abstract (1). In short, it represents the unpredictable nature of certain mathematical systems. For much of the history of mathematics, the very concept of chaos was largely ignored, because other branches like physics and calculus were still open frontiers of discovery. As mathematics and physics continued on this path of discovery, the invincibility of analysis turned into a collective intellectual hubris: “People forgot that there were initial assumptions. The conditional truths became absolute truths” (4). Starting around the 1970s, however, new breakthroughs in the study of chaos pointed out this arrogance.

Though the sciences are taught with the tacit assumption that simple problems must have concrete answers, mathematicians discovered that chaos could occur in incredibly simple systems. Furthermore, tiny changes in initial conditions can turn a mathematical system chaotic. This phenomenon is commonly known as the butterfly effect. Though this concept is often presented as a philosophical musing, it is a mathematical reality. Suddenly, the tables were turned, and the “known” quantities given to us by physics and calculus became exceptions to the rule of chaos. Chaos represents the “death of reductionism” as we know it (7). Spatially, chaos is visually manifested as a fractal, a repeating image that does not become simpler when it is reduced into smaller parts. It appears to be in a constant and fragmented motion, like an infinitely complex kaleidoscope.

At the same time, a fractal image can *seem* incredibly simple at times- no more complicated than the image that spawned it. This phenomenon is a model of the foundational paradox in the concept of entropy, which is a measure of disorder that tells us what we *don't* know about a system. According to the second law of thermodynamics, the entropy of an evolving system must always be increasing. This law is one of the arrows of time, used to justify a totally linear and forward-moving concept of temporality. Yet, in the study of some multi-constituent systems, entropy does not increase or decrease over time, even as the system is visually transformed into a fractal image over time. Chaos perceptually increases, but theoretically stays the same. As it turns out, it is the act of trying to comprehend the entire fractal that actually increases the chaos of the system. According to Baranger, the point of this example is that entropy is a purely subjective quantity imposed on the system by the observer. *You* are the one who satisfies the second law of thermodynamics; what seemed at first to be an incontrovertible law was actually a mark of the limitations of analysis. Understanding the resolution of this paradox requires a self-critical recognition of the interpretive impact of the observer, even in the supposedly black-and-white world of science.

In its resolution of the paradox of entropy, chaos theory parallels the Neoplatonic system of the relative “reality” of being. The more humans try to directly codify information, the more we lose the essence of that information. Like pragmatism, chaos theory may seem at first glance like a wrecking ball that is used against science for the sole purpose of pointing out its inadequacies. This is simply not the case. As Baranger asserts, “chaos and calculus need each other” (8). Chaos theory has opened the portal to the study of complex systems, such as the human body, that are theorized to be a massive web of different systems that exhibit both chaotic and non-chaotic behavior. Some scientists believe that the key to understanding these kinds of

systems lies at the precise, liminal space between chaos and order, and that this space represents the nexus of consciousness and self-order.

Given their extreme scope and complexity, the chance that we will comprehensively understand complex systems in our lifetime is very low. In fact, we have only begun to trace their edges. However, if we are to take anything away from the history of chaos theory, it is that focusing on concrete systems of truth is often detrimental to this process of metaphysical discover. It represents the recovery of this pragmatic liminality is the true spiritual quest of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, even though it seems to be a reaffirmation of a colonialist narrative at its beginning. The novel plays the same role in literature that chaos theory does in the world of science, that pragmatism plays in philosophy, that apophatic mysticism plays in Christianity, and that deconstruction plays in semiotics. It aims ego's incessant desire for objective truth towards the unknowable, demanding a liminal ontology that transforms confusing circularity into a self-fulfilling attitude of creative will, ironically asserted by dissolving the subject position.

The structure of Cather's novel is the catalyst for the recovery of pragmatic liminality, both in the lives of its main character and its reader, and it makes the difference between vapid escapism and religious empowerment. By giving the novel a structure that is representative of a certain attitude rather than a movement of dramatic action, Cather creates access points to this attitude. Though Latour's contact with this attitude often comes in the form of the colonialist "othering" of indigenous spirituality, textual evidence shows that he ultimately abandons this tendency in favor of a religious attitude that occupies the liminal border between the religions of these different cultures, embracing metaphysical hybridity while simultaneously respecting the inherent limits of one's empathetic access to another culture. Given the Southwest's multi-valent

contact with the idea of borders as well as its status as the regional “other” of American Literature, Cather’s achievement takes on a special significance to the region’s literary sense of place.

The austerity and aesthetics of the Southwest’s desert landscape are the starting point for pragmatic liminality. In the first chapter following the novel’s prologue, the reader is introduced to Latour during his perilous trek through the desert. This scene is representative of the novel’s hagiographic ability to distill its entire affect onto a single event, even in the absence of a linear dramatic build-up:

“The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike...They were so exactly like one another that they seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare...The blunted pyramid, repeated so many hundred times upon his retina and crowding down upon him in the heat, had confused the traveler, who was sensitive to the shape of things. “*Mais, c’est fantastique!*” he muttered, closing his eyes to rest them from the intrusive omnipresence of the triangle. (28)

This description of the landscape is the very definition of a fractal image. The spatial chaos is too much for Latour to handle. His vocal exclamation identifies the supernatural power of the land. However, the fact that he is “sensitive to the shape of things” is transformed from weakness to strength once Latour sees the image of the cruciform tree, which he interprets as a diving miracle. The pivotal change from confusion to spiritual wholeness occurs when Latour mentally neutralizes the supernatural status of the land, and the key lies, once again, in Latour’s unique interpretation of miracles. He imagines what his friend Joseph would think of the miracle, noting that “Joseph must always have the miracle be very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it” (29). Latour, on the other hand, is able to conceive of the miracle in pragmatic terms. The key is that *does not matter* whether or not the cruciform tree was an act of divine



intervention or merely a physical coincidence. Whether it is a manifestation of Christ or an oddly shaped stick is irrelevant. In fact, the very act of settling on one of those binary truths obscures the true significance of the object itself. Similarly, it does not matter whether or not Cather understood chaos theory when she chose to describe the desert as a fractal. Her sparse knowledge of Christian theology does not take anything away from the deep philosophical heritage of the novel. In fact, it does not even matter what that heritage definitively is. Defining that lens is like defining the cruciform tree, or defining the entropy of a fractal system- it just leads to further misunderstanding. Charting the novel's meaning in terms of definitive symbolism or attempting to define Cather's specific doctrinal views are fruitless pursuits. The novel itself is a "miracle" in that, through pragmatic liminality in its content and structure, it funnels readers towards a truly "religious" sensibility, in the sense that Dewey intended it. Because of its resistance clear resolutions, both dramatically and philosophically, it requires a constantly-shifting perspective that constitutes the attitude of pragmatic liminality. Cather recognized the curious double-status of her art as being both escapism and religious enlightenment; through *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she reveals the circular idea that art is only religious enlightenment *because* it is escapism.

The appropriate "lens," then, for interpreting the novel is not a lens at all, but an exegetical attitude that is based in liminality. During her wanderings through the Southwest, this sensibility was inspired in Cather, just as it was in the Desert Fathers of Egypt centuries before. Thus, in the spirit of the novel and of pragmatic liminality, we have come full circle. The reopening of the apophatic sensibility, both in exegesis and in metaphysical contemplation, is a restoration of a lost awareness in Western thought. It is an extremely humble sort of awareness

that revels in circularity, to which the statement “I am that I am” is not self-defeating, but totally affirming. Thomas Merton sums up this ethos perfectly:

They had no set doctrine about freedom, but they had in fact become free by paying the price of freedom. In any case, these fathers distilled for themselves a very practical and unassuming wisdom that is at once primitive and timeless, and which enables us to reopen the sources that have been polluted or blocked up altogether by the accumulated mental and spiritual refuse of our technological barbarism. (10)

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Ego-death Comes for the Archbishop: Locating a Middle Consciousness**

Now that we have developed a comprehensive exegetical lens, all that is left is to apply it to the text. In doing so, the essential problems of the text are unraveled, transforming the novel into a self-fulfilling testament to the power of liminal spirituality. The first order of business is to return back to the cave scene that found Latour is a state of extreme flux. The “antediluvian” terror Latour experiences in the cave represents a form of temporal chaos. The underground flood predates Latour’s entire Christian cosmology; in turn, the paradox of the creator and the creation is brought to the foreground of his mind- who created who? As mentioned before, the subterranean serpent is a truly multicultural symbol. Its obscure origins only enhance its symbolism as a being that is in a constant and fluid motion. Deciphering its beginning and end is impossible. It represents circularity, which means it encompasses the extremes of both chaos and order. Until this point, the idea of pragmatic liminality has been explored through its connections to Western philosophy and Christian mysticism, which constitute the more obvious pathways that lead from the text. However, the indigenous people of the Southwest and their ancestors have embodied this attitude for thousands of years. For all of the oppressive history and impassible barriers between these two groups, the ambiguous symbolism of the cave creates the opportunity for a shared multicultural consciousness.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa integrates the religious tradition of the Aztecs into a state of being that she calls the *mestiza* consciousness, which incorporates pragmatic liminality as a survival tactic against the oppressive intersectional borders of race and gender. This consciousness represents an entire system of metaphysics. Her description of this consciousness has some very close similarities with the Western philosophies

discussed in the previous chapter. Obviously, the *mestiza* consciousness is unique to Chicanas, and to draw a comparison with the experiences of white men is impossible. The experience can never be shared. The similarities in *attitude* can. Though centuries of oppression stand between these two radically disparate groups, pragmatic liminality offers a potential point of connection between different varieties of religious experience.

The *mestiza* consciousness requires being in a constant and often painful state of transition across the borders imposed by the white and patriarchal powers that be. Reaching this consciousness entails a shift in metaphysical perspective. Anzaldúa calls this perspective the “*Coatlicue* state,” named after the powerful creator-goddess who was driven underground during male domination of the Aztec culture (Anzaldúa 49). She represents a confluence of paradox: “*Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche...she represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective- something more than a mere duality or synthesis of duality” (68). Anzaldúa goes on to describe her entrance into the *Coatlicue* state as a painful but enlightening experience, in which constant rebirth leads to a constant renegotiation of her consciousness. She must surrender to “a greater power than the conscious I” as she is transported to the very edge of chaos and order, a place occupied by the serpent (72).

Clearly, *Coatlicue*'s serpent imagery is only a superficial connection to the cave scene in the novel; the ontology behind Anzaldúa's unique spirituality is the true link between these works. The openness of the symbol that Cather chooses to employ in the cave scene is a privilege afforded by the accent-free style of the novel. The arcane imagery does not stop there. The entrance to the cave is described as “two great stone lips” that lead into an expansive cavern (126). Klaus Stich and others have made the connection between the cave's overt femininity and

the disruption of the masculine, logocentric gaze. Stich connects the consuming femininity of the cave to an archetypal “Goddess’s womb,” and the serpentine imagery of the underground river to the Goddess’s power to disrupt the “patriarchal worldview of Genesis” (66). He also frames these opposing forces in terms of Jungian psychology, identifying Latour’s fear as a product of the sense of loss that accompanies “the logocentric reduction of nature or the Great Mother to mere physical matter” (65).

Anzaldúa pointed out the same problem: “Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them” (59). Her mystical *Coatlicue* state achieves a similar disruption of this mindset. Anzaldúa describes entering this state as being “devoured” and descending into a dark underworld, transforming into the consciousness of the serpent (64). Once again, the openness of the symbol creates a seemingly infinite number of different interpretations for the novel. Ironically, the cave becomes a nexus of symbols that is ultimately anti-symbolic, denying any definitive interpretation. The synthesis of these different interpretations through the lens of pragmatic liminality is what allows for the distillation of a truly multicultural religious attitude.

Despite all of this multicultural optimism, for Latour, the cave ultimately represents the dark, living religious practices that Martínez warned him about- a terrifying “other.” Though he has genuinely good intentions, he inevitably represents the colonialist narrative in some capacity. Latour recognizes this fact, observing the massive cultural gulf and power disparity between himself and the Indians. The central challenge of his life is finding a common spiritual ground while respecting the inviolable differences between cultures. As Dewey noted repeatedly in *A Common Faith*, this is easier said than done; it requires extreme humility and flexibility for all parties involved. It would seem, however, that Latour’s experience is *not* representative of

liminality. He leaves the cave terrified of Jacinto's culture, even if he does have a newfound respect for it. Ostensibly, binary thinking is reinforced in this scene.

However, it would not be in the spirit of the novel's structure to make the cave scene an overtly transformative experience for Latour. Yet, by the end of the novel, Latour *is* transformed. His entire worldview is changed by the time he reaches old age, but the reader has no idea exactly where those changes occurred. The tight grip on linear narratives that Latour formerly possessed is totally evaporated: "[Latour] observed also that there was no longer any perspective in his memories...He was soon to have done with the calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him" (288). This is not a loss of temporality, but an acquisition of a new perspective: "He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible...He could see they thought his mind was failing; but it was only extraordinarily active in some other part of the great picture of his life- some part of which they knew nothing" (288). This centering of consciousness represents a perfected sense of liminality. Latour can simultaneously hold a limitless number of perspectives, ignoring the constraints of linear time. The fragmented pieces of his egotistical subject position are pieced back together to form a new, kaleidoscopic lens for his life that is both constantly unsettled and perfectly whole.

Even his relationship with the landscape is transformed. He chooses to stay in New Mexico even when he has the opportunity to retire to the comforts of France. The fractal landscape becomes a source of daily renewal and inspiration. This connection to a sense of place lets unabashedly ecstatic prose shine through the austerity of the novel for the first time. The prose exalts the desert air as "the wind that made one a boy again...Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked

the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!” (273). This passage confirms that the spirituality he uncovers in the desert has been quietly unlocking the chains around Latour’s metaphysical perspective. In his old age, he is filled with a sense of spiritual youth through constant rebirth. The grand irony of the novel’s title is finally revealed- the arrival of death is not a final, tragic event. Cather bends the linear arrow of time into a self-fulfilling circle. As Latour states himself: “I shall die of having lived” (267).

Latour is only comfortable with death because he has already achieved ego death: “More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself. This conviction, he believed, was something apart from his religious life; it was an enlightenment that came to him as a man, a human creature” (288). By the end of his life, he has stared into chaos long enough to implement it into his entire ontology, freeing him from a culturally prescriptive faith. His religious feelings are no longer bound to a Western or Christian narrative. In her letters, Cather declares that “all Christians ought to know a little more history before they decide that there is only one kind of religion” (“Selected Letters” 475). Certainly, Latour takes this message to heart. Various actions over the course of his life also point towards his growing tolerance for hybrid spirituality. For one, he gives his blessing to Juan Diego’s vision of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, a hybrid religious figure of profound importance to the mestizo/a population of the Southwest, seeing it as a site of multiculturalism rather than a distortion of European Christianity. Latour cites his pragmatic view of miracles as the reason for his decision- the effect of the *Virgen* is of profound importance; whether or not it has “pure” cultural origins is but a matter of artifice.

Latour's miracle theory is the key to understanding Latour's transformation. Fittingly, this theory is not something that strikes obvious dramatic blows in the novel. It is something that is always around, an attitude that exists under the surface- as Stich has observed, the grand "quest" narrative of the novel is interior and subtextual (66). Like magical realism, it levels the natural and the supernatural, creating liminality. In structuring the novel as a hagiography, Cather doubles down on this sensibility- it is hidden from the didactic, linear flow of drama because it simply cannot be contained within that storytelling paradigm. Alexander Hollenberg has called the novel's form "structural parataxis," pointing out that the bare sparsity of dramatic action raises an awareness of the interpretive impact that the reader has on the text while simultaneously resisting them (367). The disruption of cause-and-effect generated by the novel's structure demands pragmatic liminality from the interpreter. Without this sensibility, the novel is riddled with unsettled paradox, torn in half by interpretations of escapism/colonialism and of spiritual enlightenment/multiculturalism. The sensibility is not just about miracles; it *is* the miracle of the text. Like Latour, the reader must learn to occupy the center of consciousness. The interpretation of the novel through this lens transforms Cather's piece of art in a self-fulfilling way. The untold genius of the novel, however, lies in the self-fulfilling circularity that it creates between text and reader. The very attitude required to understand the narrative is the end goal of the narrative itself.

As he stands back to admire to final completion of his cathedral, Latour has no internal conflict. He does not see it as a monument to the old world of Catholicism, nor does he see it as a meaningless structure. Instead, he loves it for what it is. The Midi-Romanesque style of the church is, by nature, a style of cultural hybridity. In this moment, Latour recalls the words of his architect: "Either a building is a part of a place, or it is not. Once that kinship is there, time will



only make it stronger” (270). The implication is that Latour finally sees *himself* as part of the multicultural Southwest. Mary Austin’s outrage over this architectural imposition on the indigenous people of New Mexico is understandable; coming across the ocean to revel in multiculturalism is easy to do if you are on the right side of the dominant colonial culture. Once again, we are face with the paradox of multiculturalism: often, the honest desire for empathy becomes a patriarchal attitude of superiority.

This problem, however, is not enough to write off the novel’s spiritual politics as backwards, like so many critics have done over the years. This final ethical challenge to the novel’s spiritual ethos is defeated, at least partially, by the most basic attitude of pragmatism. Latour may have a long way to go in recognizing his lingering colonialist attitudes. That being said, his genuine good will and cultural tolerance go far and beyond the normative standards of the white society that surrounds him. Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood have pointed out that the novel’s structure emphasizes daily spiritual discipline, not instant revolution (81). In a world in which the fates of cultures are irrevocably intertwined, the commitment to the constant reexamination of cultural values must take precedence over both the idea of total segregation as well as instant resolution. As a land of profoundly visible borders, the Southwest the perfect locale for focusing in on this perpetual negotiation.

At its heart, the idea of pragmatic liminality is about choice. It is about eliminating the idea that there is a single reality or truth with which one has to conform. Choosing constant mental discipline and self-abnegation are the only way to access the liminal, truth-making space that lies outside of the realm of linear thought. Choice also constitutes the ultimate “drama” of the novel. In his final vision of life, Latour flashes back to the pivotal moment of his life- his decision to take on his missionary calling. The boat is leaving for America, and he is trying to

“forge a new Will” in his partner to join him on his journey. As the reader, we can see this moment from Latour’s centered consciousness. Latour’s decision means the sacrifice of his entire life, his cherished history, and every symbol that he holds dear to him. His last vision is a total and unified acquiescence to the chaotic unknown. He realizes that faith is a human choice that lies outside the bounds of any single religion, and the only choice that gets you anywhere closer to understanding is the choice of facing chaos head-on. In that moment, his central consciousness is completely unified, just as his physical body exists in the liminal space between life and death.

The choice is an incredibly difficult one to make. Latour’s worldview is one of radical vulnerability. When he decides to go to New Mexico, his life becomes a gauntlet of metaphysical challenges. Given the evidence from her other writings, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* represents an act of willful vulnerability for the author herself. The novel itself is a stylistic anomaly, which must have felt like a huge risk for her before its publication. With *DCA*, she proves (mostly to herself) that she is neither an anti-pragmatic classicist, as Savelson would suggest, nor is she a vapid sentimentalist. If her novel represents a revolution to unite art and religion for a modern age, Cather’s journey in writing it constituted her own metaphysical struggle with pragmatic liminality. Her insecurities are literally grafted onto Latour, who is a vessel of her own memories. In her letters, Cather described her relationship with her characters as “companionship with a human soul” (“Selected Letters” 319). Through Latour, Cather creates another miracle. She levels the “supernatural” status of the story to the level of the natural world that exists off of the page. Interpreting his life through the consciously chosen lens of pragmatic liminality transforms his life from story to hagiography. Consequently, the simple, peaceful affect of the novel is transformed from a subconscious notion to an entire system of metaphysics

that is more suited for a scientific, post-colonial world. Art gave Cather a picture of her “whole self” (“Selected Letters” 39). With *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather gave that gift back to her readers.

## Conclusion

### **Laboratories of the Spirit: Connecting the Southwestern Canon**

As a pioneering work of liminal thought in Southwestern literature, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* helped to establish the regional “otherness” of Southwestern literature and establish its sense of place, which is indelibly marked by cultural and metaphysical borders. Latour adventures into a supposedly “new” landscape; however, the metaphysical demons that he confronts are more ancient than he ever could have imagined. In *DCA* and other Southwestern novels that followed it, the desert region carved out of the frontier West began to represent an anti-frontier. From a regionalist perspective it stands against the Northern ideals of colonial progress. At the same time, it lacks Southern literature’s obsession with history and nostalgia. In fact, it disrupts a central premise of American literature in general: the primacy of linear time as the paradigm of self-definition. Ironically, one of the early great works of the American canon foresaw the disastrous effects of the closing of the “New” World’s frontier. With *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville prophesied that the ego-driven hunt for the unattainable would ultimately lead to metaphysical turmoil for all cultures touched by colonialism.

Liminal sensibility makes the body of Southwestern regional literature an alternative to the linear narratives of American literature as a whole. Specifically, it is the region’s aesthetic and political negotiation with sharp binaries that allows this liminal attitude to blossom. The harsh landscape and the decentering of white cultural traditions inspire a sense of existential humility. The obsession with immutable truth, ego-fulfillment, and historical progress is disintegrated into the fluid between-ness of pragmatic liminality. Like the desert landscape that inspires it, Southwestern literature truly represents a “laboratory of the spirit,” offering a site for critical self-reflection that extends to even the most basic prejudices. On the map of regionalist

literature, the Southwest is a veritable Bermuda Triangle that unsettles the entire bearing of the American literary consciousness and the Western ontology that underlies it. Though it exists on the map, its substance lies in the chaotic and disorienting fragmentation of borders. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was a seminal work in the establishment of this sense of place, at least in terms of literary canon. It is a foundational text of pragmatic liminality, which I would argue is the unofficial “religion” of Southwestern literature. This sensibility is present in works by white, native, and Chicano/a authors, which attests to its viability as a form of multiculturalism. In the canon of Southwestern literature, pragmatic liminality also serves to validate the creative power of storytelling as an agent of metaphysical healing, just as it does in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. This is yet another vital component of the Southwest’s intertextual sense of place, uncovered by studying texts through the lens of regionalism.

The vast majority of titles in the syllabi of Southwestern literature courses were written in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Southwestern literature began to establish itself as a distinct regional tradition. The thread of liminality found in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* joins some of most acclaimed and scrutinized novels of this period. Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) is one example. The novel takes the form of a spiritual bildungsroman. Its protagonist, Antonio, struggles to reconcile his family’s Catholic roots with the indigenous spirituality of the *curandera* taught to him by Ultima, who serves as his mentor. Early in the novel, his family prays for Antonio to become a “man of great learning” (55). Antonio eventually fulfills this wish; however, his education does not consist of filling himself up with knowledge, but rather developing an attitude that allows him to transcend the bonds of the confusing cultural prescriptions that he is given- particularly when it comes to religious metaphysics. This, of course, is the attitude of pragmatic liminality, which both Ultima and Antonio embody.

As a *curandera*, Ultima practices healing through a hybrid form of spirituality that is a microcosm of Chicano/a culture's mixed religious roots. As the story unfolds, Antonio is forced to straddle all sorts of borders in his life. In fact, his parents physically represent this sense of internal division. His father wants him to adopt the roaming *vaquero* culture, while his mother wants him to stay at home. His father mistrusts priests and the doctrine of the Catholic Church, while his mother pushes him to become a priest. His father looks forward to Antonio becoming a man and learning the ways of the world; his mother looks backwards, longing to preserve Antonio's boyish innocence. Antonio is caught in between, and the strain is the crisis of his young life. In teaching him about what it means to be a Chicano, Ultima encourages Antonio not to choose between the cultures of his parents, but to encompass them all into his own identity and embody a fulfilling sense of hybridity (Antonio fittingly connects her to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*).

Antonio's contact with the liminal, unsurprisingly, raises alternating feelings of bliss and terror for the young boy. The most pervasive example of this is the feeling he gets when he makes physical contact with Ultima. The first time he touches her hand, he describes the feeling: "The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being. A cry came to my throat, and I wanted to shout it and run in the beauty I had found" (12). However, later in the novel, the same touch produces existential terror in Antonio, as the supernatural force that he experiences seems to contradict his newly developed Catholic worldview. Understandably, this turn of events causes great confusion for Antonio. He wonders, "[Are] the power of good and evil the same?" (55). Through the touch of Ultima, he comes face to face with the same dark, apophatic feeling that Father Latour faced in the cave. It is the ouroboric circularity of being and un-being, knowing and unknowing- and it is equally

fulfilling and terrible. This small detail speaks to the novel's entire dramatic structure. Antonio's growth is fueled by his direct contact with death, which moves the action of the novel. As Antonio grapples with the most difficult paradoxes of human existence, it is Ultima's guidance in the realm of liminal spirituality that enables him to forge his own identity.

The tradition of *curanderismo* depends on the power of myth. The supplicant is a "character in a set story of healing" (Hendrickson 8). The power of the *curandero/a* is at least partially derived from storytelling. However, as a hybrid spiritual practice, *curanderismo* is a pragmatic venture in which "the faith of the supplicant [is] tested" (Torres and Sawyer 40). The "magical" healing power of the *curandero* depends on the subject's level of belief. The circularity of this phenomenon explains why Western medicine often dismisses *curanderismo* as quackery- the system of direct cause and effect that scientific medicine relies on is thrown to the wayside. In a certain sense, *curanderismo* is a real-world manifestation of magical realism in literature. Manuel Broncano has already made the connection between the magical realism of *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, concluding that the leveling of the natural and supernatural that makes up Latour's view of miracles is equivalent to the blending of myths that ultimately allows Antonio to conceive of a hybrid identity for himself. The origin of a miracle or a story is not nearly as vital as its *effect*. In this view, magical realism is the aesthetic manifestation of pragmatic philosophy.

Antonio comes to understand pragmatic liminality through his encounters with death. Violence becomes a catalyst for metaphysical self-examination. No author has explored this theme more thoroughly than Cormac McCarthy. From a critical standpoint, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) is the crown jewel of Southwestern literature. It has been intensely scrutinized since its publication; however, most critics do not stress its importance to the Southwestern

regional canon. Both *Blood Meridian* and the “Border Trilogy” that followed it participate in tradition of pragmatic liminality.

*Blood Meridian* has been called the quintessential anti-western. The novel absolutely dismantles the ideals of colonialism as its protagonist murders his way across the country, reaching the Pacific ocean in a moment of nihilistic anti-climax. The white bounty hunters indiscriminately murder nameless masses of Indians and Mexicans, representing the brutal zenith of colonial “othering.” It treats nostalgia the same way- the Judge, the book’s infamous antagonist, makes a point of erasing material history (here, magical realism is used for humiliation rather than healing). In other words, *Blood Meridian* represents the total destruction of man’s linear timeline that “suggests meaning on a scale of time that we cannot even perceive” (Phillips 452). The metaphysical crises that present themselves in other Southwestern novels are cranked up to a fever pitch. As the murderous band of bounty hunters toil across the deserts of the Southwest, they are presented in what Dana Phillips calls an “optical democracy”- they are no more significant to the landscape than any of its other components (444). Thus, *Blood Meridian* is not just a temporal disruption; it wrecks our entire anthropocentric view of human life. There is absolutely no room for the ego in McCarthy’s Southwest. Cather offers us brief moments of existential terror; McCarthy throws us, kicking and screaming, into a metaphysical crisis.

Though the rest of his “Border Trilogy” is not *quite* as dark, the novels collectively represent the Southwestern book of Job. Any spiritual “enlightenment” is obtained through tragedy, hardship, and humiliation. The religious metaphysics of McCarthy’s Southwestern novels have been studied exhaustively, and are certainly not subjected to any unifying theory. That being said, all of these books assert the pragmatic power of storytelling. Take, for instance,



the Judge's first scene in *Blood Meridian*, in which he disrupts a religious revival by falsely accusing the priest of heinous sex crimes, at which point the priest is violently driven from the town. In doing so, the Judge reveals a familiar paradox: objective truth has no bearing on the power of a story. In *The Crossing*, the second novel of the "Border Trilogy," a heretic anchorite expresses a similar sentiment: "the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it." (108). As the anchorite struggles with the who-created-who dilemma surrounding the idea of God, his ultimate conclusion (which saves him from nihilism) is that the pragmatic recognition of this fact is the key to "that elusive freedom which men seek with such unending desperation" (110). Just as Cather believed in tapping into the "eternal material" of art, McCarthy's anchorite believes in a mystical unity of all stories and experiences.

Obviously, I have barely scratched the surface of pragmatic liminality's role in the Southwestern canon. Even so, it is apparent that this spiritual thread is a profoundly important piece of the puzzle when it comes to understanding the Southwestern sense of place as it manifests itself through literature. In an era of intensified globalization, the very idea of "sense of place" seems to be going out of vogue; at worst, it is heading towards total irrelevancy. This is a bit of an existential crisis for the scholar of regional literature, creating a pragmatic imperative to draw borders around a particular discipline and thereby assert its legitimacy as a distinct object of study. Paradoxically, in a land ostensibly defined by borders, it is the border-busting liminality of the Southwestern sense of place that makes it worth studying in its own regional context. Only through the "othering" of the Southwest in literary terms allows us access to the non-binary sensibility that it embodies.

Again, the inherent circularity of such an argument may seem blatantly anti-scientific or anti-rational. However, in a laboratory of science, one must be prepared for both the shattering of past assumptions and the unveiling of unknown future possibilities. The discoverer must occupy a liminal space, focusing not on the sanctity of truth, but its chaotic mutability. Truly, then, works of Southwestern literature are “laboratories of the spirit.”

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