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A Colloquy with Clio: Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*

In its highest reaches Willa Cather's was an art of celebration. Yet as she approached her sixties the ardor that had once bestirred those sensuous tributes to her Nebraska immigrant girls now faced a world that seemed irremediably diminished. One other astute witness had already symbolized the post-Versailles years as a wasteland. Notwithstanding its popular success, in 1927 the pilgrimage of her Southwest missionaries struck some critics as the book of an antiquarian recluse. But like one of her Great Plains farmers she persevered. Seventeenth-century Canada, her most far-reaching exploration into the white man's North American past, might disclose new embodiments of human potential. At her first sight of Quebec City she must have relived the emotions of one of her earlier émigrés, a mix of wonder and anxiety. As she planned her new novel she drew strength from yet another community anchored in rock during a time blighted by the deaths of her parents and the Great Depression.

When *Shadows on the Rock* appeared at the low point of that depression a number of reviewers dismissed it as a Tennysonian idyll, melodious but irrelevant at an hour that called for protest, brass crescendos, not lute music. In a brief letter Cather applied the "shadows" of her title to her characters (*Willa Cather on Writing* 15). I suggest she would not judge it superfluous if we drew attention to other shadows that help to account for the book's continuing resonance. For in her tale of old Canada, more than anywhere else in her oeuvre, she wrote with Clio, muse of history, at her elbow. Those more sequestered shadows are cast by forces beyond Quebec's walls: the immobilizing solitude of a northern wilderness, the hostile Iroquois "invulnerable as ghosts," as Francis Parkman said of them (208),

their English business partners and inciters to the south, and, most fatefully, a dandified autocrat in France itself. One common oversight has been to ignore these peripheral forces, nor is this hard to understand. Willa Cather has been justly praised for her advocacy of the novel *démeublé*, unimpeded by blocks of reportage disguised as personal vision. Here as elsewhere in her mature work she downplays clutter, in this instance that of "bestseller" historical fiction. Her method resembles what later decades have acknowledged as another bulging storehouse. We call it oral history: tales of courage relayed around campfires and only later recorded, family anecdotes, diaries, even the minutiae of domestic routine that, as we now concede, have their place in fleshing out how the psyche of a region was shaped and nurtured.

To explain her text she chose an analogy from music: ". . . it was more like an old song, incomplete but uncorrupted, than a legend . . ." (*Writing* 15). My dictionary defines a legend as an unauthenticated story from earlier times, preserved by tradition and popularly thought to be historical. One fact defies doubt: farthest from her purpose was any escapist idyll. The advocacy of family life in *Shadows on the Rock* finds a robust parallel in another song of our own time. "*Et ta valeur, de foi trempée, / Protégera nos foyers et nos droits*" (Wilson 111). Those are the closing words of today's French text for the Canadian national anthem. That "*foyers*" (homeland) is identical in form to the term for "hearths." By intent or happy intuition her narrative strategy fixes on a preoccupation that has loomed large among our Quebec neighbors to this day.

At its start that same *hymne national* addresses Canada as "*terre de nos aïeux*" and later affirms how "*Ton histoire est une épopée / Des plus brillants exploits*" (Wilson 111). A second parallel, a more sober one this, deserves notice. In Willa Cather's world victories are won in the psychological, for yet braver explorers even the spiritual, domain—not among the *mêlées* of power politics, martial coups, or stock markets. It has been in that inner space where French Canadians have had to find their victories, an exploit of rare order indeed in that those victories were wrested from what must be designated as an abandonment, not a defeat. Indeed, one source of the novel's continuing resonance might well be the occasion it provides for a closer look at her New France *habitants*. Their experience has become progressively more familiar in decades where mounting numbers have found themselves on a strange shore as *émigrés*—by exclusion as often as by choice.

Lurking behind its vistas of a transfigured autumn, a countervailing motif recurs in the first two books of *Shadows on the Rock*. Cécile's litany of treasured names, persons, places, even utensils required to manage a proper kitchen, stems from a protective instinct, no indulgence in cloistered timelessness. When Champlain founded Quebec earlier in the seventeenth century only eight of his twenty-four men survived the first winter. Decades later, after Frontenac's punitive raids against the Iroquois and English, the future remains problematic. One morning as Cécile does errands she hungrily registers her surroundings. Yet much of the settlement is "blotted out by rolling vapours that were constantly changing in density and colour; now brown, now amethyst, now red-dish lavender, with sometimes a glow of orange overhead where the sun was struggling behind the thick weather" (61). Those warring colors might apply to a smouldering forest fire as much as to an outpost of two thousand souls.

With the departure of the ships the settlers' lifeline is being cut for another eight months. Their vulnerability is unsparingly specified: "No supplies; not a cask of wine or a sack of flour, no gunpowder, or leather, or cloth, or iron tools" (4). Another early passage underscores the proximity of the first of our external shadows: "The forest was suffocation, annihilation; there European man was quickly swallowed up in silence, distance, mould, black mud, and the stinging swarms of insect life that bred in it" (7).

Notwithstanding the loving portrait of Cécile's father, an apostle of civilization caught in a war zone, he functions as a Virgilian tutor, no shield against intruders. He exemplifies one of the book's key themes, but in doing so he maintains that same exquisite reserve which he displays to his neighbors. Quite properly, given the novel's preoccupation with the founding of a new society, its plot fixes primarily on the younger generation. For Cécile, who like Pierre Charron will inherit the future, *Shadows on the Rock* explores the transformation, in her case hesitantly faced but bravely achieved, of a European into an authentic Canadian.

Shadows on the Rock is full of conflicts, albeit often obliquely reported. Prior to its start Governor Frontenac had led a spirited defence against a New England invasion fleet. Despite their landing to the east of the walls, the enemy force was repulsed. Seven years later Quebec remains on guard against *les Bostonnais*.

Two characteristics of her early Canadians must have lodged deep in Willa Cather's mind. One is their conviction that not only safety but self-knowledge itself can only be authenticated by action, not by hermetic

introspection. Apart from those two offstage exemplars of private colloquy with the transcendent, Jeanne Le Ber and Noël Chabanel, her people depend on their capacity to interact with others on the spot, here and now. Even among the clergy, Bishop Laval has much in common with that other sturdy guardian Count Frontenac. While still in charge Laval dispersed his priests like shock troops, assigning them to locales where a need existed, then recalling them to base for new duties. Another robust doer is Father Saint-Cyr. At one point he gazes down at the vast St. Lawrence. Even now, in midsummer, his mind bestirs itself with images of obstacles to be met and vanquished. He asks himself why this shore should be echoing with the sound of French songs. He compares the colonists to those sea birds that yearly return to the islands in the river. Quebec becomes "a crag where for some reason human beings built themselves nests in the rock, and held fast" (226). But in one corner of his mind he already knows a more satisfying reply to his own question. What this new place presents is a future as yet unrealized, a place where even a man of God could display the physical vigor, even the daring, of his lay companions. Saint-Cyr's achievements draw on his temperament as much as his sacerdotal status. His decision to spend the rest of his days on this frontier begets an extension, no immolation of self.

Euclide Auclair is hardly a man of action in this sense. Yet better than anyone else he embodies a cognate trait Willa Cather must have pondered long and hard. That is her characters' readiness to cede primacy to the needs of a group over their own desires. He comes closest to demonstrating that hunger for commitment in healthy tension with a measure of scepticism that we think of as quintessentially modern. A scholar, cowed by the prospect of an ocean crossing, yet he was motivated to come at least in part because of distress over social evils back home. His report on the fate of Bichet, the old knife grinder hanged for the theft of two brass kettles, exposes brutality as grim as any backwoods ambush. Better than any of his neighbors, he understands the nightmares of Blinker, who once worked as a torturer in Rouen. For in his ordered domicile Euclide has faced down nightmares of his own.

Throughout he lives mindful of the caveat of Pascal, a kindred seventeenth-century reconciler between intellect and faith, that the misfortunes of man stem from his not being able to remain alone in a room. The sympathy that makes him refer to the abandoned Dido rather than that indomitable traveller Aeneas implies his sensitivity as well as his special

burdens. Yet he is not passive. His attacks on harmful, even when modish, medical practices put him at risk, as when Bishop Saint-Vallier wants cauterization to be used to relieve the varicose veins of old Laval.

The temptation to despair accosts Euclide most forcibly as he returns home, exhausted and ashen, after the death of Count Frontenac. He carries the heart of his patron, now soldered in a lead box, to be transported for burial in France. The apothecary's heart aches to return with that of his sole defender. Yet he stands steadfast. Again like Pascal, he knows that the dropping of a single pebble can influence the great ocean itself. The task of his will, now, is to make an achievement out of a relinquishment. Nothing he does prefigures more touchingly the cohesion that has sustained the ethnic group to which he has pledged himself.

Those perils deftly intimated in *Shadows on the Rock* are exhaustively documented in Francis Parkman's sequence of histories collectively entitled *France and England in North America*. Parkman's magnum opus reads like a training manual wherein all the heights possible to valorous action, as well as the disasters subsequent upon its misuse, are dramatized before us using an entire continent for a stage. For our purpose the most relevant volume is *Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV*, a source Willa Cather knew well and adroitly drew upon.

Ten years prior to Frontenac's appointment to the New World for a second tour of duty, his predecessor Denonville had conducted a major foray into the country of the Senecas, the most bellicose tribe within the Five Nations. Denonville burned crops and laid waste dwellings, but ultimately his tactics enraged rather than cowed his opponents. Soon after this the Iroquois retaliated with a raid on what is now Lachine, ominously close to Montreal. Parkman's summary still stops us short: ". . . the whole number carried off was more than a hundred and twenty, besides about two hundred who had the good fortune to be killed on the spot" (180).

On his arrival, now a grizzled veteran of seventy, Frontenac was quick to take countermeasures. Despite his hauteur, his unruly temper, his disputes with colleagues secular and clerical, Parkman characterizes him as "strenuous," "undaunted," even "audacious" (186). It was Frontenac who, at least temporarily, saved New France. He ordered border attacks on English settlements as far away as what is now Schenectady in New York State. Another raiding party reached Casco Bay, now Portland, Maine. His bold actions reduced the Iroquois to a state of military impotence for decades thereafter. Unlike his predecessor, Frontenac was no victim of what

Parkman tartly calls "martial foppery" (265). He possessed an innate grasp of the hit-and-run stratagems later centuries would define as guerrilla war. With typical élan, he even proposed the capture of both Boston and New York, but this project was overruled from Paris on the grounds of financial constraints.

The problem of financial constraints leads us to the most baleful shadow of all. In a century well supplied with monarchical egos, Louis XIV was the foremost proponent of absolutism and its corollary, the divine right of kings. By 1663, impatient to bring it under tighter control, he decreed that New France would henceforth have the status of a royal province in the mother country. Its administration was eventually shared by a governor, personal representative of the king, an intendant charged with fiscal affairs and the dispensing of justice, the bishop, and a Superior Council comprising the three men already mentioned and fourteen others appointed from Paris. Judgments passed by these surrogate figures could be, and often were, countermanded.

A canny letter writer of the time, Madame de Sévigné, summarized the idolatry Louis sought and received. "One is not content to compare him to God; the comparison is made in such a fashion that it can be clearly seen that God is only a copy of the king" (Wade 33). The most notorious symbol of this would be Versailles, the royal headquarters ten miles outside Paris. Historians cite its cost as the equivalent of 100 million dollars in today's money. Not surprisingly, Louis was said to have destroyed the accounts so that no one could ascertain its true cost.

Inside this sumptuous hothouse the appetite for display grew like some tropical plant. In the 1670s Louis launched a series of wars that extended French power to the Rhine, the Alps, and the Pyrenees. At the battle of Blenheim in 1704 the Duke of Marlborough's forces defeated the French. By 1713, when *Shadows on the Rock* closes, the Treaty of Utrecht forced France to relinquish her rights to Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and the Hudson Bay territory. For the *habitants* of New France the noose was already tightening. It would be only a matter of time before the sun king's heir, Louis XV, by the Treaty of Paris in 1763, would cede New France, with the exception of two minuscule islands, to the English. This fateful moment must have given satisfaction to Voltaire, who in his *Candide* had already dismissed Canada as nothing more than several acres of snow.

In *Shadows on the Rock* Count Frontenac is the one most thwarted by overseas priorities inimical to his mission. As a consequence his final days

project a tone not met elsewhere in the novel, that of tragedy. Yet negatively at least his fate underscores his subordinates' fierce devotion to communal effort. Ostensibly the most powerful figure in the Auclairs' Quebec, patient liege of an egocentric king, only as death approaches does the governor draw on the inner strength so doggedly nurtured among those in his charge. His passing attests to how much more candid a view he has been forced to adopt. For some time he has been conscious of the diminished attention given to his appeals. "Nothing is more unpopular at Court," he explains to Euclide, "than the geography of New France" (239).

In tardy imitation of his apothecary, now his sole confidant, Frontenac fixes his mind on the more private corners of his life, not his fame as a soldier, his tempestuous wife, or his checkered career as a candidate for honors. His memory evokes instead a nurse who once showed him maternal tenderness in his childhood. On his deathbed he awakens to find a number of attendants hovering near. For a last time the instincts of a commander revive. With a feeble gesture he motions them to withdraw. Then, realizing that the ultimate enemy presses close, his gaze seems to say, "This I will do alone" (262).

Two among his last requests reinforce our sense of what will help the orphan colony to survive. Cécile's father is to convey to her those pieces of glass fruit that have long kindled her childish imagination. The second request is even more suggestive. Euclide is to bring her a supply of table linen for use when she establishes a family. Once more, as the novel repeatedly confirms, the little people will create new life long after more eminent votaries at less trustworthy shrines have been disillusioned and entombed.

Pierre Charron, at first the most footloose of wanderers, makes a happier example of fulfilment after trial. Son of a rich Montreal merchant, disappointed in his early love for Jeanne Le Ber, his solitary treks have brought him face to face with what must have proved the worst tribulation among *coureurs de bois*: loneliness.

Pierre boasts of his capacity to withstand physical privation: in snowdrifts he can survive on moss when short of food. As he tells Cécile, ". . . it's a truth, monkey, I wouldn't like a country where things were too soft. I like a cold winter, and a hot summer" (188). Yet his nature simultaneously enjoins him to seek membership in a community. He takes an almost physical pleasure in human company. This trait enlivens the meal he hosts for Captain Pondaven. Life in the woods has sharpened his hunger for interdependence. This lies behind even his anticlerical gibes. He has no

patience with the ostentatious living quarters Saint-Vallier has provided for himself. The new bishop shares the wasteful extravagance of Versailles. Yet Pierre can respect old Laval, a man who acknowledges the need for frugal sharing in circumstances where survival depends on restraint.

The future is prefigured in Pierre's final appearance. After the death of Count Frontenac he arrives unexpectedly at the home of the Auclairs. Cécile feels distraught: her kitchen stores are depleted. To her relief, Pierre has brought a haunch of venison that will serve as the main dish of their simple meal. Cécile soon reaches the point where, unreservedly and with joy, she can start her new life. Their subsequent marriage formalizes their mutual commitment. They already share something equally crucial—a common presentiment about their new homeland. It may one day excel the riches of that fabled Orient searching for which brought Jacques Cartier and Champlain to Canada in the first place. Yet Cécile and Pierre's treasure will be founded on proportion, measure, not Chinese silks and spices. As the finale unobtrusively verifies, blessed are they who have found their own corner of this earth and who recognize that, properly worked, it will sustain life.

As if encouraging us to think about the future, a brief epilogue takes place a decade and a half after the main events. The key exchange involves our Pascalian apothecary, now the least garrulous of grandfathers, and Bishop Saint-Vallier. The latter has returned, chastened by more than physical illness, after confinement as a political prisoner in England and, more shaming yet, after having been detained by his own king. Nor have his flock been eager for his return.

The novel concludes with a conversation both ironic and prophetic. The once arrogant Saint-Vallier has been reduced to yet another among our conveyers of oral history, even though his accounts bristle with the names of wielders of power. With a feeble flicker of pride he confides news of the king's failing health. Even now, as Euclide has recognized, there persists the smell of greasepaint about his visitor. Saint-Vallier's piety still exhibits itself most markedly in public places. Here as always, though, the apothecary's manners are irreproachable: he offers Saint-Vallier a glass of cordial. Yet even careerist members of the hierarchy may become eligible for infusions of grace. When he is told about Cécile's marriage and her four sons we realize how much Saint-Vallier's enforced pilgrimage has sharpened his vision. He pronounces the most insightful benediction of his

life. He predicts that Cécile's boys will take their place as "'Canadians of the future, the true Canadians'" (278).

On the final page, alone with his thoughts, Euclide muses that he has been "indeed fortunate to spend his old age here where nothing changed . . ." (280). The sight of his once haughty visitor may have unsettled him. For the first time our apothecary is wrong, honorably wrong but wrong nonetheless. Yet nothing endears him more than this misjudgment: now more than ever he becomes one of us. His wistful hope for a future safe from upheavals is beautifully expressive of his flawed but irrepressible courage.

In picturing her novel as a song, Willa Cather cautioned us that song was incomplete. This may explain why we enjoy speculating about the descendants of her characters. Like their forebears, they would continue to be tested. After the death of Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham and Governor Vaudreuil's surrender a year later, a number of officials and merchants returned to the mother country. Understandably, those dispersed *habitants* and woodsmen who remained fell back even more on their ethnic inheritance. What education there was came under the supervision of a church impelled by its need for discipline in the face of an occupying force.

The roots of such vigilance are not hard to trace. To cite but one example, in 1839 Lord Durham, the governor sent from London, wrote a famous report in which he urged that all Francophones be absorbed into the Anglo community, and that they adopt English as their language. More humiliating yet, as *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* concedes, Durham "offended the French Canadians by referring to them as a people without a history or a culture" (237).

Earlier I spoke of celebration as the main impetus behind Willa Cather's art. One meaning of the Latin *celebrare* is to make known. In this case, outside sources strengthen our familiarity with persons and events in the story. A cognate meaning of *celebrare* is to praise, to extol. This denotation of the verb permeates *Shadows on the Rock*. In the early 1930s Willa Cather was living in her own beleaguered citadel of the mind. Her French Canadians' passionate fealty to their hardy patrimony must have caused her to take heart. To return to her Pascalian apothecary, late in the novel, as Bishop Saint-Vallier importunes him to cooperate in persuading Frontenac that death is imminent, Euclide refuses in one of those respectful yet unyielding replies that make him a hero *malgré lui*. He will do nothing to

discourage his patient. "The mind, too," he counters, "has a kind of blood; in common speech we call it hope" (257).

That sentence might well have served as an epigraph.

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