

# Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and André Gide's *La Porte Étroite* (1)

— a comparative study —

Jiro ANZAI

If one is asked to name the very representative work that made the great French author André Gide (1869-1951) famous, one will not hesitate to choose *La Porte Étroite* (1909) as his. In the same vein, if asked to name the very work that established the distinguished American authoress Willa Cather (1873-1947) as the writer, one would be very likely to mention *My Ántonia* (1918) as hers. As we know, those two works were written by the authors whose personalities, temperaments and backgrounds are quite differing; moreover, they were written in the environments that were both spatially and temporally far apart.

Despite these spatio-temporal differences, the two masterpieces of literature bear a number of profound similarities or sharp contrasting points to such a degree that they seem to be deserving a comparative study.

## Part I

### 1 Similarities in thematic situations

In the first place I would like to point out a fact that the protagonists in both stories are sharing the same Dante-versus-Beatrice-kind destiny, although that *coup de foudre* element is more profoundly expressed in Gide's work. Nevertheless, that the two are harping on the same Dantian elegy over their own "Beatrice" is unmistakable. Moreover, we could point out the fact that not only Gide's Jérôme but also Cather's Jim is referring to Dante and Virgil, especially the latter by his quoting of that well-known Virgilian epigraph "Optima dies . . . prima fugit."

The semblance, however, does not end here. The foremost of all is the very presence of that intensely platonic love of Jérôme's or Jim's toward their respective sweethearts, with the molding of the two boys into a type that would face up to the ordeals so resolutely. In fact, both boys are to become the very urbane intellectual, a Dantian exile in spirit, whose body and soul are quite alienated from the life of primordial Eden, or a Florentine homeplace in which their versions of Beatrice live. Although Gide did not specify just where his Jérôme received university education, it is clear that he had turned himself a scholar as revealed toward the story's end, whereas Miss Cather cast

her Jim as a railroad lawyer with a Harvard education behind him.

In line with this railroad business, the fact that Ántonia's first husband, Larry Donovan, was made a train conductor, should not be so lightly dismissed. For the very fact itself is not only betraying a part nature of Ántonia's early experiences and of her dreams for future, but also the same *coup de foudre* experience of Jim's. For Jim too had worshipped a train conductor whom he had met on his first continental crossing. Moreover, the spell of this childhood experience seems to be running like a scarlet thread, as revealed in his becoming, not a city lawyer but a railroad one the position of which not only enabled him to flee from disagreeable environs, but also gave him chances to recapture the happy past entwined with his first railroad journey.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that this conductor worship shares a kinship not just with Ántonia's sentiment or Jim's or Jérôme's because of the spiritual affinity with Dante, but because of the fact that Virgil himself had been cast a spiritual conductor for Dante Alighieri's journey in the Divine Comedy.

The circumstances that had steered the heroes to meet their respective heroines are not dissimilar, too. That is, in case of Jérôme it is his father's death, whereas in Cather's Jim the deaths of both his parents. The semblance, moreover, goes into such things as naming of the protagonists and setting of their ages. Indeed, in Gide's *La Porte Étroite*, the hero's name is Jérôme and that of the heroine Alissa, whereas in Cather's *My Ántonia*, the hero's is Jim and that of the heroine Ántonia. And in their initial age settings we would observe that while Gide's Jérôme is cast as a boy of little over 11 years old and at least two years junior to Alissa, Cather's Jim is made as a boy of 10 years old and four years younger than Ántonia.

On top of these similarity notes, there is another and quite a symbolic kind of similarity, existing from the start. It is from the start, truly; for it is registered in the very beginnings of both stories, with an essentially same statement to the effect that the narrator had made no effort whatsoever to rearrange or beautify things, simply setting them down as led by recollections.

The very similarity business seems to be extending further into the real uses of symbolization in both stories.

## 2 Similarity in the use of musical symbolization

For instance, a similarity can be observed in the use of music in both stories. As recently pointed out by Richard Giannone in his *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (1968), music, especially that of the violin takes up a very symbolic role in *My Ántonia*.

As a parallel to this, I would like to call attention to the fact that in an effort to express the heightened sense of love, Gide's Jérôme is referring to the same instrument. Nevertheless, seen in the book's entire frame, in Gide's *La Porte Étroite*, it is the piano that is playing a prelude to the crucial moments. Thus, putting away of the violin by Mr. Shimerda or Ántonia's broken-hearted father, corresponds to Alissa's equally down-

hearted father Mr. Bucolin's lamenting over the hasty removal of the piano from the parlor, though to be exact, this removal had been effected by his daughter.

### 3 Similarity in the placing of thematic symbols in the evening glow

#### Plow versus Amethyst Cross

This similarity note, however, extends further into the realm of much more profound one or thematic symbolization which the two authors used. One of the most memorable scenes in Miss Cather's *My Ántonia* is the case of that forgotten plow being silhouetted against the setting sun. To this I would venture to add that Gide's amethyst cross, given to Alissa by Jérôme in memory of his mother, runs a very parallel, and that while this plow incident is anticipatory of Ántonia's future mission or the life of husbandry on the Nebraskan prairies, Gide's amethyst cross that runs a scarlet thread toward the end is also foreshadowing Alissa's future or her self-imposed exodus to the heaven.

Those taken together, one cannot help drawing a parallel between Gide's piano-and-amethyst-cross symbolization and Cather's violin-and-plow symbolization. These similarities extend further into the stages where most of their crucial moments are to take place. For they are almost without exception being experienced toward evening in the golden splash of the setting sun. In fact this plow incident in Cather's and that of amethyst cross in Gide's, of which I have just made a mention, are rendered to be happening in the evening glow.

### 4 Similarity in the use of vegetation myth

An impression that the poor, discolored Ántonia with her tattered rags and blemished past is no equal to the well-parlanced Alissa with her porcelain-white complexion and immaculate past, is quite misleading. For on the perusal, one can hardly fail to recognize the very presence of resoluteness with which Ántonia had borne her tragedy, whereas one cannot help discerning a good deal of unconscious sadism in Alissa's acts, the presence of which not only tormented her lover but also demoralized her own household.

In fact, a careful reading makes one wonder if Alissa's younger sister Juliette had been the very one that had been commended by the author. For one has to admit that in the end it is the very Juliette that had been blessed with half a dozen children and a dependable husband and a vineyard, the very fate of which is again quite comparable to that of Ántonia who is possessing orchards (her version of vineyard), and is married to a dependable husband and also blessed with half a dozen children.

This interpretation seems to be fitting quite snugly with the so-called vegetation myth interpretation of which John H. Randall III had spoken in his *My Ántonia* study.

For the essentially same sort of vegetation myth is discernible in Gide's work, too. In fact, from his own statement we are informed of the fact that much of Gide's and his wife's experiences (that had come to be revealed in the years 1920-1921 in an autobiographical novel entitled "SI LE GRAIN NE MEURT" or 'Except for a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die . . .') had been pre-written into *La Porte Étroite* as Jérôme's

and Alissa's. As such are the situations, we could turn the table around and say that it is Jim's or Jérôme's flashy success thirst that had been quenched, whereas it is not only Ántonia's but Juliette's honest striving, despite a pile of untoward circumstances, that had been rewarded, so fittingly in the midst of their vineyards.

## Part II

### 1 A contrast between the handlings of the deaths of the heroine's fathers

Jim's mentioning that all he had remmberd of the great Spanish explorer Coronado's westward push was a textbook description of the hero's dying of broken heart in the midst of the wilderness, is not only symbolic of the pioneer's fate but also expressive of Jim's immediate sympathy toward the surviving Ántonia. It is obvious that in this saying Jim, or for that matter Miss Cather herself, is equating the fate of the great Coronado to that of the late Mr. Shimerda, who had been, however precious to his daughter and Jim, but a nobody to the Philistine Black Hawkers and the world at large.

In this line, the fact that Charles Wesley's hymn, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* was sang at his funeral beccmes quite significant ; very meaningful, indeed, as we ponder on the occasion upon which the Reverend Wesley had conceived this song. For it is known that the song had been so composed by the reverend gentleman as to give to the God exceeding thanks, upon the termination of his precarious journey over the angry ocean. And inasmuch as those pioneers had been sharing their life's ups and downs on the precarious land ocean or the Nebraskan prairies, they were both consciously and unconsciously singing out their own anxieties as well as hopes for future.

Even here some sharp contrast could be pointed out ; that is, though both authors made their respective heroine's fathers a broken-hearted creature succumbed to death, Miss Cather took such a positive stand that even his death is dealt in such a way as to magnify the pioneer's spirit. The exaltation of the kind is quite lacking in Gide's. Yes, indeed, while Monsieur Gide had made his Mr. Bucolin to pass away without even a single comment, Miss Cather made Mr. Shimerda great even in his suicidal death.

### 2 A contrast in the heroines' parlances or behaviors

In line of those profound contrasts, I would like to add a finding that while Alissa's feelings and emotions are nearly always foreshadowed by the use of her hands or fingers, Ántonia's are expressed mostly by the move of her feet or legs. This Gidian presentation reminds me more of Theodore Storm's heroine, whereas the Catherian heroine makes me recall of Elizabeth Roberts' Ellen in that agrarian novel entitled *The Time of Man*. Perhaps we could compare such differences as existed between Alissa and Ántonia with those between the Taglionian ballet and Elslerian one. For Ántonia's Bohemian vivacity contains such sensual qualities that seem to have more affinity with the Elslerian ballet, the quality of which is quite lacking in Gide's Alissa whereas Alissa's behaviors or parlances are almost ephemerally platonic, thus reminding us of the

Taglionian ballet. And as a behavioral contrast, a sharp contrast between the solutions taken by the heroines can be pointed out, too. That is, while *Ántonia* was tenaciously clinging to the soil, Alissa had fled herself to the heaven for her solution. Thus despite the fact that both stories were set in an idyllic stage and in a very georgic environ at the start, their goals were made miles apart, their songs quite differing. In fact, Miss Cather's diversion from the Virgilian construct was much more marked, thus showing her literary independency.

### 3 A contrast in the narrative styles

There are some differences coming out of the heroines' differing environments that have resulted in the technical differences. To name one such example I would like to point out the fact that while Alissa, in an effort to unfold her inner heart, could resort to letters and that testimonial journal (which she had willed Jérôme to have) Miss Cather made *Ántonia* bespeak of her past through such things as her family, orchards and people's talks. Here one should have sympathized with Miss Cather. For in presenting the heroine she is faced with far more difficult task than Gide's, because of the profound reason of *Ántonia*'s ineffability borne out of her poor education.

In fact, when reading *My Ántonia* for the first time, I received an impression as though I were seated in the opera house, watching an operatic production whose theme was centered about this Bohemian girl, being personally commented by Miss Cather. On the other hand, reading *La Porte Étroite*, I felt as though sitting in Monsieur Gide's parlor, and being personally entertained by his piano playing, with a sonata entitled "Alissa." My feelings about these two stories are partly justified upon learning that Gide himself had been a piano player from his childhood, and that Miss Cather an opera enthusiast of long standing. And I believe that the so-called elusiveness or floating sensation one would feel upon reading *My Ántonia* is due to the fact that thing was written by this authoress whose body and soul had been so floatingly enthralled, in the world of music, especially by the operatic spell.

### Conclusion

When there are so many similarities as well as contrasting points between the two works, one may be permitted to pose a question that if Miss Cather had seen *La Porte Étroite* prior to her writing of *My Ántonia*, or whether she had been under the influence of Gide's work. And to this end I have combed through the so-called authoritative references not only on the Catherian literature but also on the Gidian one. The search seemed to have proven futile until very recently I had come across the page 114 of Elizabeth Sheply Sergeant's *Willa Cather*, a memoir (published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1963) that seemed to be hinting at a possibility that Miss Cather had read *La Porte Étroite* in her bedroom sometime in the year 1913, or at least several years before the publication of *My Ántonia*. Despite this, no one can deny the genuine gift

of literary art in the authoress of *My Ántonia*.

For all this, however, no one can fail to see that the *pièce de résistance* in the two works is about the stories of the people that are sharing the memories of the past so precious and endearing that they cannot possibly be obliterated. Thus, in the end, I would like to add a statement that both Gide and Cather had long before anticipated by their respective works that which the great Spanish painter Salvador Dali, a sort of Coronado in modern-day painting world, had done with his now-famed limp clock pictures entitled "Persistence of Memories" years later, and that whatever merits or demerits we could think up of, they had scored unparalleled success in their portrayal of the heroines as profoundly as the image of that plow silhouetted against the setting sun or that of the amethyst cross laid on Alissa's porcelain-white bosom.

#### References

1. E. K. Brown : Willa Cather, A critical biography; Alfred A. Knopf (1970)
2. Willa Cather : *My Ántonia*; Houghton Mifflin (1918)
3. Richard Giannone : *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction*; University of Nebraska Press (1968)
4. André Gide : *La Porte Étroite*; Mercure de France
5. John H. Randall III : *The Landscape and the Looking Glass*; Houghton Mifflin (1960)
6. Elizabeth Sergeant : *Willa Cather, a memoir*; University of Nebraska Press (1963)
7. James Schroeter (ed.) : *Willa Cather and Her Critics*; Cornell University Press (1967)