

論文

Messages from the Far-away: Willa Cather's and Georgia O'Keeffe's Visionary Landscapes of the American Southwest

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要 旨

アメリカ合衆国のアイデンティティ形成には大自然がずっと深く関わってきた。20世紀はじめに、最後のフロンティアがなくなろうとしているころ、作家のWilla Catherと画家のGeorgia O'Keeffeは砂漠地帯の南西地区を訪れた。人気が少なく、広々としたこの土地に彼女たちが新たな刺激を受けた。本稿ではCatherとO'Keeffeがどのようにこの砂漠地帯をみて、表現したかを論じる。そしてそれぞれの作品をとおして、アメリカと大自然との関係がどのように変化してきたかを探る。

Keywords: Georgia O'Keeffe, Willa Cather, desert, American identity, nature, and frontier

Abstract

The American wilderness played a central role in shaping the American identity. In the early years of the 20th century, when the last frontiers were being settled, the writer Willa Cather and the painter Georgia O'Keeffe traveled to the Southwestern desert precincts and found renewed artistic inspiration in the vast expanse of this sparsely inhabited landscape. This paper will discuss the artists' contrasting visions of the desert and show how their work reflects America's evolving relationship with wild nature.

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*We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand
it are the people who own it –for a little while– Willa Cather*

America's faith in the wilderness as a source of purity and spiritual renewal is reflected in the work of the writer Willa Cather and the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, who spent their childhoods in farming communities on the Midwestern plains and, later in life, found a lasting inspiration for their art in the Southwestern desert precincts. For these two artists, the encounter with the Southwestern desert was a transformative experience, coming at a time when each was in need of both personal and artistic rejuvenation.

In Cather's writing and O'Keeffe's paintings of New Mexico, the desert landscape is portrayed as a living thing, integral to the formation of the American character and spirit. For O'Keeffe, the Southwestern desert precincts offered the freedom and intimacy of vast space that allows an independent spirit to thrive. O'Keeffe used the natural features and desert artifacts to paint a portrait of a vanishing America. Her techniques were modern, but the results speak of a primal connection to the land that transcends time. For both artists, an unmediated experience of the natural world draws out what is best in the human spirit, and their respective visions convey a uniquely American experience of untamed nature.

Although the transcendent power of the landscape dominates the work of both artists, their perception of humanity's place in nature differs greatly. For Cather, humanity is as natural and as essential part of the landscape as are the mountains, rocks, rivers, and trees. Civilization grows naturally from the loving care of human beings who live reverently upon the land. O'Keeffe, on the other hand, is concerned with primordial features untouched by human endeavors. Few life forms find their way into her primal landscape. The topography is a work in progress, captured either before the creation of human life or after humanity has been extinguished forever. Yet, despite this fundamental difference, Cather and O'Keeffe share a similar primal relationship with nature. Whether cultivated by human hand or untouched by human footsteps, the landscape is a repository of ancient mystery and a source of inexhaustible

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energy that transforms lives.

This paper will first explore the relationship of New Mexico's diverse cultural groups to the land in Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Then it will examine O'Keefe's rendering of the same geographical areas. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) was Cather's last novel set in the American southwest, whereas O'Keefe continued to live and work in New Mexico until her death in 1986. Each artist found her own way, standing apart from the artistic trends and fashions of her time. Each, in her own way, reflects the evolution of America's relationship with the wilderness.

Willa Cather's Landscape of "Love and Yearning"

Willa Cather is best known for her pioneer novels set in the Midwestern plains. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a departure from her previous work, both in its modern style and in its focus upon a pair of itinerant priests who do not till the soil, but instead bring God's mercies to the Mexican peasants, Spanish colonists, Native Americans, and American adventurers who populate the vast diocese of the recently annexed territory of New Mexico. The missionary assigned to recruit the new priest who will unify this territory is quite frank about the dissenting elements in the new diocese. "The old mission churches are in ruins. The few priests are without guidance or discipline. They are lax in religious observance, and some live in open concubinage" (6). He is equally frank about the country:

The desert there has a particular horror; I do not mean thirst, nor Indian massacres, which are frequent. The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand." (7)

The missionary echoes the thoughts of the first European colonists to arrive in North America who associated wild nature with sin, evil, and the devil. The vast forests stretching halfway across the continent appeared uninhabitable. They were filled with dangerous beasts and untrustworthy savages who seemed only partially human. "Safety, happiness, and progress seemed dependant upon rising out of a wilderness situation," writes Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. "It became essential to gain control over nature" (9). Nash claims the first colonists dreamed of a Garden of Eden in which humankind could be fruitful and multiply, and where every plant, animal, and natural feature offered some benefit for human beings (chap. 1 & 2). However, an arid desert

on the scale of the New Mexican territory could never be transformed into a pastoral landscape. Hence, the horror the missionary-priest felt for the place in which the hero of the novel would live out his life.

When the new Vicar Apostolic, Father Jean Latour, finally arrives in his new home, one of his first duties is to make missionary journeys to all parts of his diocese. On one of these journeys, he discovered that the Mexican peasants have indeed created miniature Gardens of Eden in the irrigated valleys between the mountain ranges. These settlers, like so many of Cather's pioneers, live in a harmonious and respectful reciprocity with their natural surroundings. They do not conquer nature, but, like Antonia Shimerda in *My Antonia*, they discover a part of themselves in the soil that they till and, from their relationship with the land, they sustain families and found communities. Both civilization and the land reach their highest potential through a loving, respectful, and reciprocal communion between humanity and nature.

The peasant farmers' simple faith charms Father Latour, who has been rescued from almost certain death by his chance discovery of one of these hidden villages after losing his way in the mountains. In his imagination, the village is overlaid with Biblical references. The threshing of wheat reminds him of the Children of Israel; the frolicking goats remind him of "the whiteness of them that were washed in the blood of the Lamb" (31). "Goats," Father Latour reminds himself, "had always been symbols of pagan lewdness." However, he remembers also that "their fleece had warmed many a good Christian and their rich milk nourished sickly children" (31), thus he banishes evil from this pastoral scene. Even the stream that nourishes the valley is beatified. Released from its dark origins in the subterranean depths, the stream rises "miraculously out of the parched and thirsty sea of sand," and from it comes "household order and hearths from which the smoke of burning piñon logs rose like incense to Heaven" (31). As with the early European pioneers, hard work and simple piety cleanse the natural world of evil, order is imposed upon chaos, and the wild landscape is made fruitful and hospitable for humankind.

Yet, the isolated Mexican villages remain virtually inaccessible, nestled in protected valleys among the pitiless red hills and mountains that comprise most of the landscape. The Mexican farmers do not seek to extend their domain. Rather, they deepen their connection with the place in which they dwell until they have achieved an almost mystical connection with the land. Even their saints are localized and shaped by the

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environment. Saint Santiago, the protector of horses in New Mexico, is dressed as a Mexican ranchero and rides a fine horse. “Oh, yes,” says Latour, inspecting Santiago’s image. “He was a missionary, like me. In our country we call him St. Jacques, and he carries a staff and a wallet — but here he would need a horse, surely” (28). Santiago’s role in blessing mares is new to Latour, but he accepts the villagers’ need to transform the holy into something tangible and compatible with their surroundings.

Another cultural group living in the diocese, the American adventurers, receives ambivalent treatment in Cather’s novel. Traveling through the mountains, Father Latour and his companion, Father Joseph Vaillant, take shelter from a storm at the home of an opportunistic reprobate, Buck Scales. “He was tall, gaunt and ill-formed, with a snake-like neck, terminating in a small bony head. . . . [T]his repellent head showed a number of thick ridges, as if the skull joinings were overgrown by layers of superfluous bone” (66–67). This reptilian creature would have murdered the two priests but for the intervention of his abused wife who warns the men of their impending doom in time for them to escape. The association of an opportunistic and greedy American who has no sympathy for the land with a loathsome reptile contrasts sharply with the idyllic Biblical allegories assigned to the Mexican farmers.

On the other hand, the historical figure, Kit Carson, is portrayed as a noble frontiersman despite Cather’s admission that the “misguided” Carson was responsible for driving the Navahos of Canyon de Chelly from their land (291). However, Carson knows and respects nature. His mind contained “the most reliable map” of the land between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean (76). Carson lives simply in an adobe hut with a devout Mexican wife, and throughout his life had “preserved a clean sense of honour and a compassionate heart” (77). In her portrayal of Carson, Cather’s admiration for the pioneer spirit is in conflict with the loss of the wilderness that gave rise to the traits she admired. Nash observes that, “[In the early days of Westward expansion] . . . it was generally assumed that because the frontiersman was good, the wilderness, as his primary adversary, was bad — the villain of the national drama” (145). However, the vanishing frontier caused Cather and other Americans to reconsider the value of uninhabited space. As westward expansion pushed on, Nash says, “Many Americans came to understand that the wilderness was essential to pioneering: without the wild country, the concepts of frontier and pioneer were meaningless” (145). By the end of the novel, Americans have built railroads, confined the Native Americans to

reservations, and colonized the far reaches of the diocese. Cather expresses her sense of loss through Latour's Navaho friend, Eusabio, who, looking back upon the changes that have taken place, reflects, "Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things" (289).

As Carson represents the noble aspect of the Americans, Eusabio embodies all that is noble in the Native American people. Through his long friendship with Eusabio, Latour gains understanding and respect for Native American ways. "Travelling with Eusabio was like travelling with the landscape made human. He accepted chance and weather as the country did, with sort of a grave enjoyment." Father Latour observes that Eusabio buries their garbage and covers the embers of their fire. "When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, . . . [Eusabio] "unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand" (232).

Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air. (232-3)

Eusabio's humility recalls the words of Edward Abbey, ". . . out there is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men" (qtd in Nash 254).

After vanquishing the Native Americans and banishing them to reservations, America began to look back nostalgically upon the virtues of primitivism. The Native American way of living lightly on the land and their tremendous vitality and courage was eulogized. Ironically, this shift in thinking came only at "that great moment" celebrated by Ralph Waldo Emerson when "the savage is just ceasing to be a savage" (qtd. in Nash 93). Henry David Thoreau extended that idea to a "sort of border life" for Americans in which they would draw upon the hardiness and virtues of the Native Americans while also exhibiting all the intellectual virtues of western civilization. Like Thoreau's idealized savage, Eusabio stands "free and unconstrained in nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully." (qtd. in Nash 91-92).

Latour embraces the harmony and beauty of Eusabio's world. However, he leaves his own mark on the vicarage and on the little "country estate" that he purchases just

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outside Santa Fe. Here he grows lettuces, apricots, and other exotic fruits and vegetables in the parish gardens. He does this for the sake of his parishioners, whom, he believes, need “to add fruit to their starchy diet.” However, his vocation also enters into his desire to bring alien fruit and vegetables to New Mexico. He admonishes his students, “Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden of fruit trees and vegetables and flowers” for “Man was lost and saved in a garden.” (265).

The identification of human beings with a sentient landscape is a recurrent theme in Cather’s novels. Hiroko Sato in “*Willa Cather in Japan*” notes, “Willa Cather thinks of nature as an object of ‘love and yearning’ and as something that will respond to these emotions.” (89). In Cather’s pioneer novels, it is the assimilation of human beings and nature that makes civilization possible, as in *My Antonia* when Antonia becomes the Earth Mother, finding her true expression in the soil (70). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the identification of human beings with the features of the landscape is often concrete as with Eusabio, “the landscape made human” and the Indians of Acoma pueblo, whom Cather describes as “a tribe of ancient rock-turtles.” Other times, nature and human emotion are equivalencies, as when Father Latour gazes out over the snow-covered mountains, and “The peace without seemed all one with the peace in his own soul” (218). These images convey a seamless integration of humankind and the natural world that occurs only when human desire is brought into harmony with the laws of nature.

In the chapter called “Stone Lips,” the landscape literally replicates the human body. When Father Latour and his Indian guide, Jacinto, take refuge in a sacred cave, they enter by way of “a mouthlike opening,” and slide through “two great stone lips, slightly parted and thrust outward” into “the throat of the cave” (126–7). The womb of the cave is reputed to shelter a great snake, an ancient symbol of both female power and immortality. An underground river runs deep beneath the cave, filling the dank air with “an extraordinary vibration” that “hummed like a hive of bees”, another archaic symbol closely associated with women (129). The preponderance of female imagery recalls the archetypal Great Mother. Caves themselves were formerly regarded as places where the Great Earth Mother gestated life, as well as being the place where ancient people buried their dead. Divine births take place in caves and great mysteries are revealed during initiation ceremonies. The cave is Father Latour’s introduction into an archaic belief system in which all nature is regarded as sacred and imbued with

transcendent power.

In a less frightening encounter with the primal forces of nature, Father Latour retreats to Eusabio's village to reflect in solitude upon difficult decisions he must make on behalf of the diocese. As Eusabio's guest, he huddles in a Navaho Hogan for three days during a sand storm, experiencing the natural world in the way of archaic people, whose shelters were temporary and living was done primarily out of doors. "The Hogan was isolated like a ship's cabin on the ocean, with the murmuring of great winds about it" and Latour is left in alone to meditate (229). He penetrates to the heart of the mysteries of nature as he searches his soul:

. . . All day long the sand came in through the cracks in the walls and formed little ridges on the earth floor. It rattled like sleet upon the dead leaves of the tree-branch roof. The house was so frail a shelter that one seemed to be sitting in the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air. (229)

In the isolation of the hut, Father Latour participates in an act of consecration that places him at the Centre of the World, or the point of intersection between humanity and the gods. Eliade tells us the *heart of the world* is a holy place that draws every human to its center (*Images*, 51–6). In such sacred space, the forces and features of the natural world become "transparent to transcendence, . . . the whole sense of which is harmony and well-being" (Campbell, 20). Whether created by ritual intention or spontaneous transformation, such holy places become forever after places of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation.

Hereafter, Latour finds divine miracles are replicated in the topographical features of the earth and in the sky. As he watches the sun set over the Sangre de Christo Mountains, Latour is transported beyond the beauty of the red hills into a far distant past. The mountain range, Sangre de Christo, or "Blood of Christ," becomes virtually saturated with the blood of ancient martyrs in Latour's imagination:

Yes, Sangre de Christo; but no matter how scarlet the sunset, those red hills never became vermillion, but a more and more intense rose-carnelian; not the colour of living blood, the Bishop often reflected, but the colour of the dried blood of saints and martyrs preserved in old churches in Rome, which liquefies upon occasion. (270)

Latour now travels freely through time and space, linking the present physical reality

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with the more sacred and immediate reality of the miracle. He has broken through linear time and enters into an archaic apprehension of sacred space in which the spiritual is embodied in the landscape.

In his retirement, Bishop Latour renounces the comforts of his native Puy-de-Dôme, and returns to “the bright edges of the world,” where “old age did not weigh so heavily on a man.” He realizes that “[in] New Mexico, he always awoke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older” (272–273). The past lies too heavily over the cultivated lands and refined cities; he can breathe only in the “the light-hearted mornings” of the desert. In Santa Fe, the very air carries:

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)

The sky, earth, and air have the power to transcend time, and the Bishop has “come back to die in exile for the sake of it” (273).

O’Keeffe’s “Luminous Affirmations”

Georgia O’Keeffe found a refuge that nourished her creative spirit in the solitude of the New Mexico desert. Although she maintained a home in NYC with her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the land she called “The Faraway” drew her back again and again. For 30 years of her life, she divided her time between New Mexico and New York City. When Stieglitz died in 1946, she moved permanently to Abiquiu where she found her deepest inspiration and her most enduring source of subject matter.

In contrast to Cather’s concern with a reciprocal relationship between humans and the nature, O’Keeffe was drawn to the primordial vitality of uninhabited space. Her paintings reveal a transcendent natural world existing in self-contained splendor. No trace of humanity mars the pristine vistas. The desert floor is alive with bones, stones, and shells, which she gathered and painted, and the sky is filled with stars that tell ancient stories. The processes of nature are laid bare in the horizontal bands of the undulating hills, and the natural rhythms and music of the earth find their way into her art. There is something profoundly elemental and deeply moving in her vision of

the primal voices of the earth.

For Cather, the plains and mesas “had an appearance of great antiquity and incompleteness.” Without some evidence of civilization, past or present, she felt the topography was “still waiting to be made into a landscape” (94–95). In the eyes of O’Keeffe, the red hills and rock cliffs are complete and self-contained. O’Keeffe might be the woman Griffin describes in her dialogic poem, *Woman and Nature*: “He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her” (Griffin qtd. in Lippard, 179). As Cather cherished human endeavor and the “constantly refined tradition” of enduring civilizations, O’Keeffe found her inspiration in a land beyond human time in which the features of the natural world are the source of great power, meaning, and transcendence.

“It was the shapes of the hills there that fascinated me,” wrote O’Keeffe, and she painted the same mountain ranges again and again, reaching for “the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill” (Turner 19). In one painting, *Grey Hills* (1942), the undulating dark shapes of the eroded hills fill almost the entire canvas. Only a narrow strip of sky can be seen above the mountain range. Colourful bands of pink, yellow, and grey earth hidden in the heart of the mountain are laid bare, exposing geological forces in process since the beginning of creation. The mountains remain untouched by humankind. There are no welcoming paths or hidden trails that invite ascension. The sprawling mound placed front and center blocks entry into the further reaches of the mountain range. The mound itself appears to creep slowly forward, melting into rivulets of sand that sift between the massive rounded toes of what could be some giant prehistoric mammal. The rounded hills seem soft to the touch; the undulating lines recall the curves of a woman’s body. The mountain pulsates with the generative power of the Great Mother, enduring, but untouched by human emotion.

In an earlier landscape from the same period, *Red Hills and Bones* (1941), O’Keeffe employs the same primordial treatment of the mountains. This time, however, the red hills bring forth a few sparse clumps of vegetation. The hills in the background glow with an inner light. A suggestion of rippling water or a fine mist emerges from the crevice between the mountains. In the foreground of the painting, distorted in scale, lie the bones of some giant mammal. The association with the archetypal feminine is strengthened by the presence of life forms and the blood red color of the eroded hills.

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The painting speaks of a sentient, passionate earth that, at its center, is “burning – meltingly hot” (O’Keeffe qtd. in Greenough, 188), and of an ancient, cyclical, and sacred time flowing eternally beneath the surface of mundane reality.

Many have remarked upon the close correspondence between the forms of nature and the female body in O’Keeffe’s work. Her close-up view of flowers caused more than one critic to associate their vaginal forms with repressed sexuality. However, Estella Lauter reminds us the identification of women with nature is not a new idea, and that, whatever O’Keeffe’s forms suggest to the viewer, her artistic concern was always the objective rendition of the physical world. If line and form suggest a female body, then it is because this idea is inherent in the natural object. In calling upon feminine intuition to portray nature, O’Keeffe was not “inventing a vocabulary” for expressing physical love, “. . . she was inventing a vocabulary for envisioning nature” (151).

In Western art and literature, women have long been equated with nature, usually to the detriment of both. In colonial America, both women and nature were seen as a threat to a godly, ordered civilization. Both were subject to uncontrollable forces that could destroy all that man had created. As wild nature was subordinated to the purposes of mankind, so was woman tamed, her mind, heart, and deeds relegated to the family and the continuity of cultural traditions. Lauter claims that O’Keeffe challenges these assumptions. “As she consciously revalued the flower, she subconsciously revalued the female; neither was to be seen as an object for human use” (152).

The animal bones that littered the desert floor appear in many variations in O’Keeffe’s paintings. A series of almost surrealistic compositions involving skulls, flowers, and other desert artifacts floating above a miniaturized landscape resulted from O’Keeffe’s early pilgrimages to New Mexico. *Summer Days* (1936) is a happy conjunction of a deer’s skull, red cannas, sunflowers, blue sky, white clouds, and red hills. Like the skull, which occupies the upper and center parts of the canvas, the viewer feels suspended in space over distant red hills. The colourful summer flowers emerge from a misty cloud cover and rise up toward the skull. The clouds form an opaque grey background for the skull and flowers, but below is a layer of intense blue sky. The red hills at the bottom of the canvas are familiar from so many other paintings. The painting captures O’Keeffe’s lighthearted mood as she walked through the desert gathering bones, stones, and flowers for future paintings. In answer to critics who

found her fascination with bones disturbing, O’Keeffe writes, “I have used these things to say what is to me the wideness and the wonder of the world as I live in it.”

A subsequent painting, *From the Faraway Nearby* (1937) centers upon an enormous deer skull hovering just above a range of pink and white mountains. Alterations of perspective and scale cause the viewer to again feel suspended in the air, floating beside the skull. The skull’s unseeing eye and the subdued blue, rose, and grey colour scheme evoke a sense of harmony and well-being. Marjorie Balge-Crozier observes that the many-antlered deer is not a real animal, but a “mythic beast, a poetic evocation of all the animals that have lived on that land. . . . It is a statement about what endures, what transcends, what is eternal” (65). Although many viewers equated O’Keeffe’s paintings of skulls and bones with thoughts of mortality, O’Keeffe herself stated emphatically that this was not the case. “To me, they are strangely more living than the animals walking around. . . . The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho’ it is vast and empty and untouchable — and knows no kindness with all its beauty” (qtd. in Messinger 72).

In these paintings, the artist uses her powerful imagination to concentrate the immediacy and intimacy of vast space into a knowable, tangible form. O’Keeffe’s friend and fellow artist, John Marin, explains, “The one with the full imagination loses the far away and he immediately begins peopling it with his imaginings. Those things near too he pushes into the far away & brings them back with an added seeing” (qtd. in Balge-Crozier 65). What Marin calls “added seeing” is Black Elk’s “seeing in a sacred manner” or Blake’s cleansing of the “doors of perception,” which allows “everything to appear to man as it is, infinite.” This way of seeing leads to “the realm that lies beyond beauty”, the Romantic concept of the Sublime. (Campbell 125, 20–21).

The Transcendentalists valued the American wilderness for its attributes of the Sublime, or the capacity to evoke “sentiments of awe and reverence and a sense of vastness and power outreaching human compression” (Campbell 122). During the first half of the 19th century, the Ralph Waldo Emerson and H. D. Thoreau were key figures in disseminating the ideas of literary Romanticism and Transcendental philosophy to Americans. Within nature, Transcendentalists believed, could be found hard evidence of God’s divinity and his plan for the universe. Man was of the physical world, but possessed intellect and a soul, which gave him the potential to transcend material reality and experience the divine (Nash chap. 5). Thoreau, in particular,

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encouraged Americans to revalue the wilderness as a place of communion with God and as a repository of “vigour, inspiration, and strength.” Without regular intercourse with nature, mankind and civilization itself would become “effete, sterile, and moribund because ‘the wild man in her became extinct’” (Nash 88, 90). Thoreau’s writings returned to prominence in the early years of the 20th century, and the Stieglitz circle found themselves in harmony with Thoreau’s views, especially with his pacifism. O’Keeffe’s apprehension of nature is in accord with Transcendentalist principles; however, O’Keeffe, as one critic noted, was “a Transcendentalist without God” (Baker qtd. in Elderedge 194).

O’Keeffe’s unmediated Transcendental vision is best expressed in her *Pelvis* series, a group of some dozen paintings that display a smoothly contoured pelvis bone set against the sky. In some *Pelvis* paintings, the bone floats over the landscape; in others, a full moon appears in the background. In *Pelvis With Blue* (*Pelvis 1*) (1944), a fragment of the bone fills the foreground, its open bone socket opening into a brilliant blue sky. In the absence of a context, the rounded blue form in the center of the canvas could be either concave or convex. The intense blue dominates the canvas, and the smoothly sculpted bone becomes a graceful frame for the sky. The opening is a visual metaphor for the passage from time to infinity. The sky beckons, and the viewer is transported through the opening “. . . to lose oneself together with the world, in transcendence, . . . to the loss of the psyche itself” (Campbell 69). Curator Daniel Catton Rich calls the *Pelvis* series a “luminous affirmation,” and he concludes that, “once again, transformation has triumphed over observation” (qtd. in Elderedge 205). O’Keeffe’s explanation of the painting is far more down-to-earth: “[I was] . . . most interested in the holes in the bones — what I saw through them — particularly the blue from holding them up in the sun against the sky . . . The blue that will always be there as it is now after all man’s destruction is finished” (qtd. in Elderedge 205).

O’Keeffe was greatly influenced by Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. In Kandinsky’s system of symbolic correlations between colour and emotions, blue is “a call to the infinite, a desire for purity and transcendence” (Elderedge 164). For Kandinsky, the colour blue corresponded to feelings of spaciousness, tranquility, and peace. Elderedge, in light of O’Keeffe’s pacifism and the fact that the composition was painted during the Second World War, calls *Pelvis With Blue* “a pictorial appeal for peace.” (205). Whatever the interpretation, *Pelvis With Blue* remains an example of

O’Keeffe’s ability to reduce a subject to its essential elements while creating a composition with multiple layers of meaning.

O’Keeffe’s art was always localized. Each place or object she painted had a personal association, and her intent was to capture the emotion her subject engendered. “You paint *from* your subject,” she wrote, “not what you see. . . . I rarely paint anything I don’t know well” (qtd. in Elderedge 179). In one painting, *The Lawrence Tree* (1929), O’Keeffe immortalizes the ponderosa pine behind Dorothy Brett’s house. D. H. Lawrence had enjoyed sitting under this tree when he lived in New Mexico. O’Keeffe, who painted the canvas while lying on a wooden bench and looking up into the tree’s branches, invites the viewer to share in a primal vision of a harmonious, sacred cosmos. The Lawrence Tree rises into the star-studded heavens, its great trunk bisecting the canvas. However, the unconventional placement of the tree causes the crown to appear to be plunging into the depths of the earth. The tree’s tangled branches might well be its roots, and its crown a shrouded allusion to a dark realm below. The displacement of customary points of orientation charges the tree with symbolic meaning. It is transformed into the sacred Tree at the Center of the World, the tree that allows human beings to commune with the gods.

In most mythologies, the crown of the cosmic Tree supports the heavens and shelters the world, while its roots extend into the nether world to the ultimate source of being. In Egyptian mythology and in the *Bhavagad Gita*, the tree is reversed, representing the emergence of the universe from the sacred ground of all- being. Either way, the tree is the symbol for the Tree of Life, from which all consciousness flows, and the means by which the soul ascends to heaven.

O’Keeffe’s intent, however, was not to repeat a tradition of great antiquity, but to transform our vision. Joseph Campbell speaks of the artist’s fundamental purpose as that of “reawakening the eye and heart to wonder” (130). “Art, he claims, “is the mirror at the interface. So too is ritual; so also myth. These, too, ‘bring out the grand lines of nature,’ and in so doing, reestablish us in our own deep truth, which is at one with that of all being” (132). In this, the artist is like the shaman whose way is to see “the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all things as they must live together like one being” (Black Elk qtd. in Campbell 125). O’Keeffe’s work is infused with her intense love for the New Mexico landscape, and her feeling finds its truest expression in a primal integration of humankind and nature.

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When O’Keeffe first came to New Mexico, she was fascinated by the darker symbols of the Catholic Church. The Penitentes, a secret, forbidden sect that practices flagellation and mock crucifixion, held meetings near Ghost Ranch. At Easter, she could hear their chants as processions of devotees wound through the hills in the darkness to enact the Passion of Christ. She writes, “I saw the crosses so often — and often in unexpected places — like a thin dark veil of the Catholic church spread over the New Mexican landscape. . . . Painting the crosses was a way of painting the country.”

In *Black Cross with Red Sky* (1929), a simplified black cross stands in a stark landscape. A pyramid of deep blue hills stands on the horizon, and the sky and earth in the foreground are stained blood-red. The “carnelian sky” recalls Father Latour’s vision of the dried blood of “saints and martyrs” as well as the agonies of the crucifixion. In a second painting, *Black Cross, New Mexico* (1929) a partial view of a heavy black cross fills the foreground. The cross stands above a range of mounded hills illuminated by the setting sun. The cross is heavy and solid, and the hand-hewn pegs supporting the arms are barely visible in its center. Sunset is the time when the Penitentes began their procession through the hills to the place of mock crucifixion. The somber mood is conveyed through the simplified form of the cross and the intensity of the dark colours. Through the elimination of extraneous detail and the abstraction of only the most essential forms, the passion of the Penitentes’ dark rituals is realized in a most powerful way, even though the penitents and their ritual are not seen. “We may not know that [O’Keeffe] is referring to the presence of Catholicism in the Hispanic culture of the region, but we do know how she felt about it,” observes Elizabeth Hutton Turner. “Her radical simplification . . . of the cross raises it to the plane of universal meaning where it functions in the continual present” (71).

During the 1930’s, when O’Keeffe began her paintings of skulls, American artists and writers were engaged in quest of an indigenous, wholly American art form. Photographer Paul Strand complained, “Just now it is the fashion to bow the head in wonder before anything European, even before a tenth rate example of a second rate worker. . . .” Arthur Steiglitz raged, “Haven’t we any of our own courage in matters ‘aesthetic?’” (qtd. in Eldredge 159). For Americans, the wilderness had already become a symbol of national pride. As Nash notes, “While other nations might have a wild peak or patch of heath, there was no equivalent of a wild continent. And if, as many

suspected, the wilderness was the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe, where centuries of civilization had deposited a layer of artificiality over His works” (69). However, most artists of O’Keeffe’s time turned not to the wilderness, but to sterile urban settings or bucolic rural themes to express their vision of America.

As a sarcastic comment on the soulless canvases produced by the Regionalist and the Social Realist movements, O’Keeffe painted a cow’s skull against a red, white, and blue background. Entitled simply *Cow’s Skull Red, White, and Blue* (1931), the composition can be read on many levels. It is symbolic of New Mexico’s past, with its struggling ranchers, dead cattle, and the numerous wars that took place in the desert precincts before New Mexico became a state. It also represents the death of the frontier and the loss of a crucible for the nurturing of American virtues. The horns of the cow extend toward the frame of the canvas. A vertical black line (presumably the support holding the skull against the red, white, and blue banner) runs through the center of the canvas. Together, line and skull form a cross, transforming the skull into “an image of great mystical power, almost a sacred relic” (Messinger 76). Despite the painting’s religious and nationalistic connotations, O’Keeffe claims the composition was simply a response to her contemporaries’ subject matter and style:

... some of the current ideas about the American scene struck me as pretty ridiculous. ... For goodness’ sake, I thought, the people who talk about the American scene don’t know anything about it. So, in a way, that cow’s skull was my joke on the American scene, and it gave me pleasure to make it in red, white, and blue. (qtd. in Messinger 76)

Still, there is no doubt that O’Keeffe’s choice to paint what others thought was “a wasteland” was, in part, an attempt to present her own vision of the American experience. In so doing, she immortalized a unique American landscape and opened our eyes to a new way of seeing.

Conclusion

The art of Willa Cather and Georgia O’Keeffe is a product of America’s unique relationship with the landscape. From a limitless expanse of forest, American colonists built a civilization. In the process, a set of particular American values emerged— a love for freedom, a veneration of wide, open spaces, a belief in social equality, a talent for

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innovation, an unquenchable optimism, and a deeply ingrained habit of self-reliance. From their childhood on the Wisconsin prairie, the artists would naturally have absorbed these frontier values along with the rhythms of the seasons and the cycles of planting and harvest. The Transcendentalists' philosophy of the natural world would also have been part of their heritage, refined by hours of solitude spent in communion with the wilderness. In this way, what Greenough says of O'Keeffe, that "she draws not only her subjects, but her very artistic being from the soil" applies equally to Cather (qtd. in Elderedge 187).

It was the primordial vitality of the Southwestern desert wilderness, however, that, in later life, revitalized Cather and O'Keeffe's lives and played a crucial role in the development of their style as mature artists. America's wilderness not only was responsible for the evolution of a distinctly American identity, but it also has been the muse and crucible for much of America's art and literature. John Muir, writer and naturalist, wrote, "There is a love of wild nature in everybody, an ancient mother-love showing itself whether recognized or no, and however covered by cares and duties" (qtd. in Nash 128). Cather and O'Keeffe were particularly attuned to the song of this muse, and their distinctive evocation of the Southwestern desert in their art has awakened a new generation of Americans to the transformative power inherent in the wilderness landscape. Americans owe much to Cather and O'Keeffe's transcendental vision. Their art is a testimony to the necessity of preserving the remaining tracts of wild nature as a wellspring for future innovation and as a place to experience firsthand the indigenous wilderness that shaped American culture.

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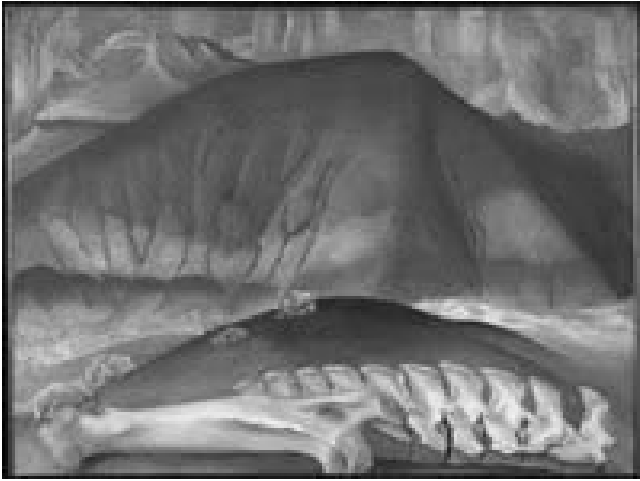
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Grey Hills 1942

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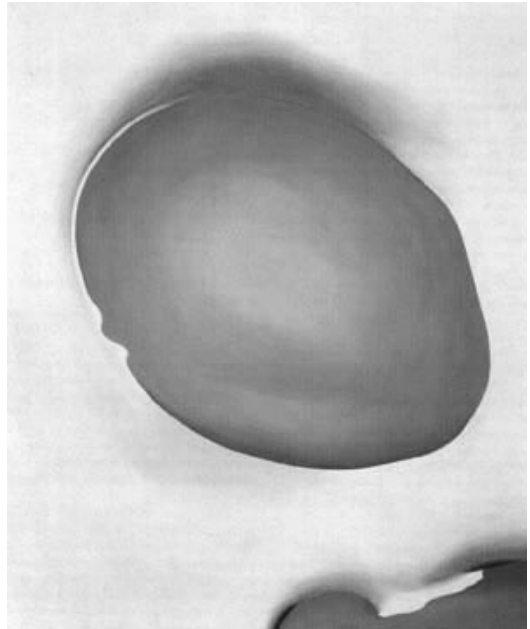
Red Hills with Bones 1941



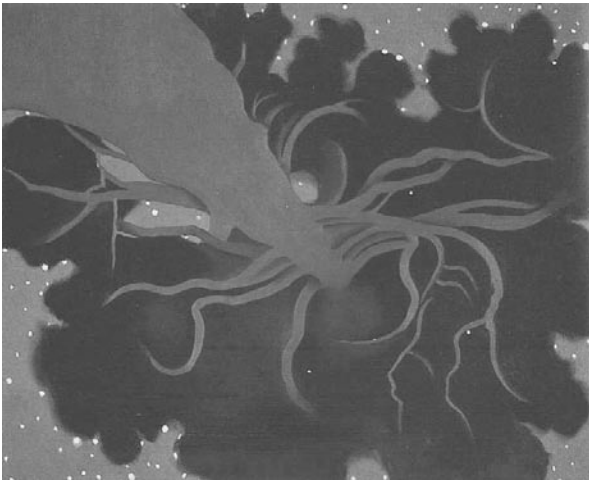
Summer Days 1936



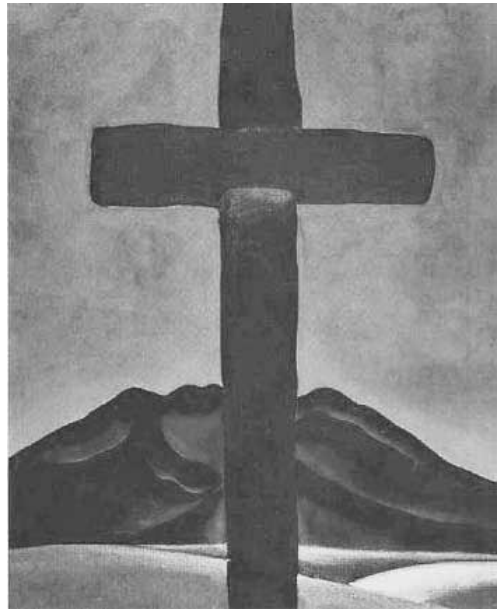
From Faraway Nearby 1937



Pelvis with Blue 1944



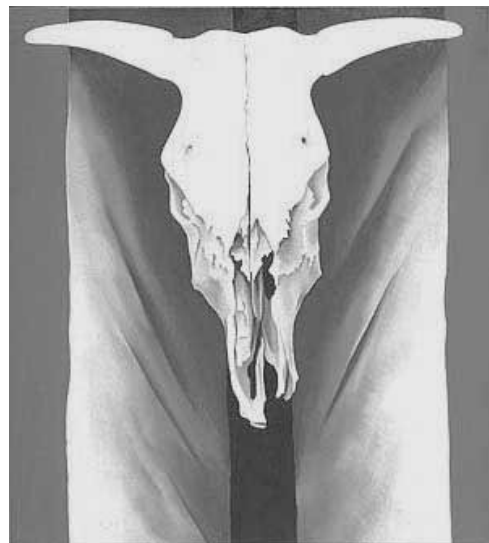
The Lawrence Tree 1929



Black Cross Red Sky 1929



Black Cross NM 1929



Cow's Skull; Red, White, and Blue 1931