The Ethics of Simplicity: Modernist Minimalism in Hemingway and Cather

By

Alexander Jay Hollenberg

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Alexander Jay Hollenberg 2011
Abstract

This study investigates how minimalist narrative techniques in American modernist literature oblige us, as readers and critics, to be self-reflexive about the ethical basis of interpretation. Through a concentrated narratological analysis of Hemingway’s and Cather’s fiction, I identify three major elements of what I term the “simple text”—thinness, smoothness, and spaciousness—and I show how each category engages a hermeneutic ethics. By gesturing towards accessibility and straightforward comprehension while also producing moments of indeterminacy that subtly resist the reader’s inferences, the simple text challenges the reader to conceive interpretation both as a positive exercise of individuation and imagination and, simultaneously, as a potentially unethical mode of critical violation and imposition.

My introduction contemplates the ethical foundations of Hemingway’s and Cather’s famous aesthetics of omission to argue that such simplicity conveys a complex theory of reader engagement. Chapter One defines “thinness” by examining “thin characters” in A Farewell to Arms and My Ántonia—characters whose simplicity makes them paradoxically unreadable in a way that foregrounds the nature of our accountability towards others. The second chapter, focusing on In Our Time and Death Comes for the Archbishop, defines “smoothness” as a simple paratactic patterning that challenges our critical desire to generalize meanings from particular experiences. While the smooth surface invites our interpretive touch, its structural integrity
resists marking and inscription. The final chapter details the element of “spaciousness,” showing how open and simple settings in *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Professor’s House* inspire, in the protagonists, moments of self-conscious interpretation of the nonhuman other and solicit a practice of accountable freedom. I argue that the foregrounding of such spaces proffers a subtle yet pointed critique of American individualism, but this critique is learned only through our encounter with the text’s interpretive limits. The study concludes by suggesting how these strategies both respond to and participate in specific criticisms of American democracy that circulated during the modernist period.
Acknowledgments

My deepest thanks go to the members of my thesis committee, and I hope that my own simple words here might describe the gratitude I feel for their enduring support and kindness. It would be hard to find a supervisor more dedicated, thoughtful, and generous than Melba Cuddy-Keane. Her guidance and her insights have so positively shaped me as a scholar, and in her I see the academic community at its best. I find myself inspired by Melba’s passion for her field; she is a model of the type of teacher and thinker that I hope to one day become. Sarah Wilson was, from my first days at the University, a supremely encouraging force in my life. Always friendly and always shrewd, she was able to nuance my thinking and at the same time ease my scholarly anxieties. Michael Cobb’s enthusiasm, kindness, and thought-provoking perspectives have made this entire experience all the more worthwhile.

I would also like to thank Jesse Matz, Daniel Justice, and Deidre Lynch for their perceptive and challenging comments during the final oral examination, and for the ways in which they shared in my own excitement and helped make talking about this project such a pleasure. This thesis was researched and written with the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program, and the University of Toronto.

It is a blessing to have such dear friends and family, from whom support has come in many different forms. For keeping me grounded, for keeping me smiling, for exposing me to the varieties of life and living, I thank them all. Special thanks must go to Tony Fong, whose reading of my work and confidence in my ideas helped me hear my own voice amidst the noise. And to my parents, Barbara and Robert, who taught me to fill my life with words—a simple lesson that continues to stretch over me—I offer this thesis.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Simple Recalcitrance, Accountable Freedom  

One: Thin Characters, Thin Narrators  
1.1 How We Use Hemingway’s Characters in *A Farewell to Arms*  
1.2 Thinning Narrators: The Quiet Witness of *My Ántonia*  

Two: Smooth Structures  
2.1 Smooth and Violent: Structural Parataxis and *In Our Time*  
2.2 Interpretive Marking: Smooth Things in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*  

Three: Spacious Settings  
3.1 The Spacious Foreground: Interpreting Ecocritical Ethics in *The Old Man and the Sea*  
3.2 Excavation and Lyric: The Ethical Call of the Vast and Simple Southwest in *The Professor’s House*  

Postscript: Journalism, Democracy, and Simplicity  

Works Consulted
Introduction: Simple Recalcitrance, Accountable Freedom

“Art,” wrote Willa Cather, “should simplify” (On Writing 102). So why, almost a century later, do we rarely talk about simplicity when we talk about modernist literature? Simplicity is an important thread of modernism and one that ought not to be separated from the complexity that critics have attributed to the putatively difficult, or dense, text. The “simple text” in my discussion denotes not a naïve text but a deliberate minimalist strategy that presents its own challenging dynamics. In the following study, I ask what happens to our interpretations when we think of simplicity as a specific narrative strategy—an aesthetic that encompasses both stylistic techniques (the consistent and repetitive use of simple language and sentence structure) and broader discursive techniques (simple characterization, simple settings). How does simplicity ask us to think hard about the ways in which we conceive of and perform interpretation? How do its gestures towards accessibility challenge the reader to think of interpretation itself as both a positive exercise of individuation and imagination as well as a potentially unethical mode of critical violation? And how does simplicity, perhaps, teach us about our relationships in the real world, about the ways we respond to others (both texts and people) who, upon first reading, appear fully knowable and known?

A serious investigation of simplicity is not fundamentally antithetical to other modernist conceptions of literary form. In fact, T.S. Eliot’s 1921 critical call to arms—that poets of his time “must be difficult” because of the great “variety and complexity” of modern civilization (65)—resonates throughout this study. But is the capacity to capture complexity solely a property of modernism’s denser texts? In Modernist Literature: Challenging Fictions, Vicki Mahaffey claims that modernist literary works “stimulate engaged readers to interpret more independently,
more sensually, more thoughtfully, more joyfully, less deferentially” (vii). She locates the source of these positive qualities in the ways that formally difficult texts challenge us, guide us out of our comfort zones, and demand a reading practice that is particularly attuned to “subtext,” an implicitly more valuable source of meaning because it is there that we can better “read the signs of human desire and fear” (xiii). Further, Mahaffey argues that

When we read books that are easy to understand and assimilate, we often forget that they are comfortable precisely because they share and confirm our preexisting assumptions, and sometimes even our prejudices . . . . Such reinforcement makes it easier for well-defined cultural communities to act on shared prejudices in ways that seem justified and fulfilling, even to the point of waging war against offenders. Naturally, better reading habits won’t bring world peace, but they do provide a mechanism for individuals to examine and reevaluate their unconscious assumptions. (ix)

But the easy text is not the same as the simple text; simplicity does not leave the reader unchallenged—far from it. Mahaffey’s category of the easy (formally conservative serial fiction) elides the potential impact of simplicity in modernism. Although an aesthetics of simplicity presents us with a text whose formal properties make it, upon primary reading, “easy to understand,” this cognitive accessibility works in conjunction with the ways the text also produces moments of hesitation in the interpretive process, moments where we are asked to question our tenuous hold upon the meaningful “subtext,” and where we are challenged to think about the ways in which we impose meaning upon the text. Thus, I diverge from Mahaffey’s argument where she implies that simplicity was not a part of “challenging” modernist literature. I dispute her assertion that accessible and straightforward texts only cause us to “abdicate our
capacity to interpret” and therefore lose “[o]ur responsiveness as ethical subjects” (xix). As I will show, the simple text does not cause us to lose responsiveness; rather, in the way that it questions the nature of the ethics involved in our responses, the simple text can help us gain a more nuanced understanding of our role as accountable readers in the world.

The issue of reader accountability, of how we ought to respond to and interpret texts, is a significant question in the field of narrative ethics. Reading is a mode of encounter, and as with our encounters with others in the everyday world, in reading we establish a variety of relationships to the text. It is through these relationships, moreover, that we develop ways of both respecting and responding to alterity. Texts offer us opportunities not only to envision otherness but to engage with it, not only to see beyond ourselves and how we might help others but to cultivate new ways of speaking, writing, and acting in the world. This is not to equate the ethical with the political—the idea that narrative requires us to act either for ourselves or for others; rather, it is the more modest suggestion that texts solicit a response and responsibility to their otherness. Ethics, in this formulation, does not refer to a code that we must follow, nor to the idea that we must choose between “good” and “bad” criticisms; ethical reading requires merely that we be attentive to the text, whether or not it advances ideas of which we approve.

What I hope to demonstrate, nonetheless, is the intellectual value of a reading practice that concentrates upon the ways in which texts can suggest the terms of their own interpretation. Simplicity’s ethical call is constituted through an embedded hermeneutics. Texts, like people, suggest the ways they want to be read, and how we as readers respond to this obligation is implicitly structured by the way those texts envision the ethical relationship between self and other. Such a principle has been well-established in readings of dense modernist texts: claims such as Adam Zachary Newton’s, that “a Jamesian puzzle story forces upon its readers the
perturbations of hermeneutic self-consciousness” (20), are customary in modernist criticism. This study argues that the same interpretive self-consciousness is a property of the simple text as well.

I have chosen to focus on the fiction of Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather to suggest that what these two authors share is significantly more complex than a formalistic resemblance. Underlying their aesthetics of simplicity is an anxiety regarding the very practice of reading in America during the modernist period. Hemingway and Cather converge in their criticisms of a potentially irresponsible readership—that is to say, both authors are wary of an interpretive practice that would only ever confirm a reader’s comfortable beliefs. Their narrative strategies establish ideologies of freedom for the reader, but they also speak to an ethical criticism by insisting upon the reader’s accountability. These brands of minimalism compel us to question our own authority as interpreters of texts, to recognize how we categorize and mobilize people and their stories.

At the same time, I show that both writers bear witness in their literature to a difficult, uncertain, and oftentimes despairing modern context. The soldier’s simple yet immediately expressive idiom on the Italian front in *In Our Time*, the strikingly bare storytelling techniques of poor immigrant farmers in America in *My Ántonia*, these moments communicate in their own rhetorical terms the social, political, and cultural challenges of modernity that Eliot argued its literature needed to express. Simplicity’s challenge arises out of the recognition that even the most simple, knowable things—sentences, objects, people—can also be opaque and produce uncertainties. In consequence, this study’s sustained narratological attention to Hemingway and Cather demonstrates that the simple text does not necessarily force us to withhold our own
interpretation or to more broadly forgo critical reading habits; to encounter the opacity of the modern world is to be compelled to “make sense” of it.

But if reading is an encounter in which there is always a question of ethics, how do we know if we are reading ethically? How do we recognize strategies of ethical reading and interpretation? In *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, Wayne Booth describes an interpretive phenomenon that he calls “overstanding” (236). To overstand is to resist the demands of the text—to make it mean in different ways and ask questions of it that it doesn’t ask itself. Although overstanding is a necessary critical violation, according to Booth, it must be accompanied by a prior act of understanding. To understand before overstanding—to adopt the perspective of this otherness, to engage in the experience afforded to us—puts us face to face with the text’s integrity. Here, ethical reading depends upon the reader’s ability to negotiate the demands of the text’s alterity with his or her own resistances. Implicit in this theory is the idea that individuation can occur (and should occur) through a process of overstanding, and that part of the ethical value of reading is the way it offers us an opportunity to actively create ourselves (to differentiate ourselves from the text through our encounter with it). Overstanding’s value also derives, in part, from the ways in which we move beyond mere respect for the text and generate responses to its otherness. At the same time, Booth’s imperative to understand first implies that even with what we perceive as the most unethical of texts, with whose values we are completely at odds, there must be a moment of engagement or even submission to the text’s discursive logic. It is this moment of understanding, moreover, that substantiates our potentially resistant readings, that imbues them with a necessary degree of self-reflexivity, and that prevents them from becoming mere interpretive impositions.
Such moments of limitation in which we defer to the demands of the text do not strip away our responsibility as ethical subjects. Unlike Mahaffey, whose hazy description of the “easy” text implies a passive and unresponsive reader, Dorothy Hale has argued that the concept of self-restriction is not only a choice central to ethical reading but also a subject position that is often solicited by texts. Hale argues that what she calls “self-binding” is fundamentally “an act of free will” (suggested to but not enforced upon the reader), and that the very unknowability of the text’s otherness grants it “a positive ethical content” (190). Hale stresses the capacity of the text to construct a free subject and simultaneously to offer the reader an opportunity to recognize his or her interpretive limits, and my own study explores the ways modernist simplicity activates this ethical encounter. At the same time, I argue that such self-binding is by no means guaranteed; the simple text offers ethical opportunities to which the reader may or may not respond. We can always choose to overstand without understanding—to immediately resist the text—but the risk of such a venture is that our individuation may come at the cost of the text’s misappropriation. When in Chapter One, for example, I read Frederic Henry’s opening narration to *A Farewell to Arms*, I note how the simplicity of the scenic description (the short declarative sentences and monosyllabic diction) works in conjunction with the paratactic patterning (the lack of explicit causation between sentences and between images) to solicit the reader’s self-awareness as an interpreter. While the parataxis produces logical and causative gaps that beckon the reader’s inferential work, the linguistic simplicity simultaneously suggests a boundary to interpretation: it intimates that the inferred subtext (Frederic Henry’s interiority) may ultimately be a meaning that is imposed upon rather than found within the text. However, that there is still interpretive choice—that the simplicity of Hemingway’s discourse does not force the reader to self-bind—
suggests the degree to which the text offers a glimpse of new ethical opportunities as opposed to obligatory codes.

Such interpretive choice implicitly raises the issue of criticism’s larger responsibility towards the literary texts that it mobilizes: how do we negotiate our need to use texts with their integrity as a form of otherness? According to Robert Eaglestone, our responsibility as critics lies partly in our openness to otherness and partly in our ability to interrupt the text’s putative familiarity and speak to the ways it can (at least temporarily) free us from our interpretive orthodoxies. ¹ To imagine criticism as interruption is to conceive its ethical basis in terms of its interrogative capacity (the ways it resists the stability of the known by taking the form of a question), which in turn envisions the text’s otherness as a source of productive inquiry. ² But this study also puts pressure on Eaglestone’s equation of ethical criticism with “all critical approaches which interrupt established understandings” (177), by suggesting that the ethical is defined not solely by our resistance to habitual meanings but through our willingness to build upon the rhetorical cues that indicate the text’s own hermeneutic protocols. In my view, ethical reading (and reading for ethics) is constituted through the ways in which we attend to, negotiate, as well as resist certain value systems that the text constructs. This vision of critical responsibility aligns implicitly with Booth’s recognition of the necessity of overstanding and explicitly with Emmanuel Levinas’s theory that “a relationship with alterity as such is constitutive of subjectivity” (Lingis xix), because it suggests that the self-construction and

¹ Heavily influenced by Levinas, Eaglestone contends that “the task of criticism is to interrupt the said in the name of the saying in literary works” (176). Levinas’s conception of the said, according to Eaglestone, is the part of language which “designates” and refers to “a concrete world of meanings and history” (145), whereas the saying refers to a sense of language’s unfinished or untotalizable quality, “the idea, but not actually the practice of language: it does not communicate anything except the desire to communicate” (142).

² According to Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods, “Eaglestone tends to locate his aporetic moments in the words and presentation of characters, the ‘people’ in books, moving from this to an idea of the literary character as other, ultimately unknowable, and therefore ethically problematical and significant, in a way that is exemplary of all interpersonal transactions” (6).
individuation which occurs through the process of interpretation is only productive when we expose ourselves to others and, paradoxically, expose our dependence upon the text-as-other even as we sometimes speak against it.

Thus, my own sense is that before we attend to the interests of the critic, an ethical criticism must first attend to the hermeneutic protocols staged by the text. Derek Attridge contends that responsibility for the text-as-other begins with the reader’s attempt to accurately understand “the repeatable rules according to which the work operates” (81), and continues through a type of creative reading that demonstrates the other’s influence upon us (124). What this suggests is that ethical interpretation is not predicated merely upon our respect for the irreducibility of the text’s otherness—simplicity, as I will demonstrate, does not ask that we commit ourselves permanently to a position of non-interpretative self-binding and thus sacrifice our innovative and individuating selves—but upon the attempt to sustain such otherness in order to expand and refashion our current modes of creation. If, as Attridge says, in affirming the singularity of the other, “I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge” (33), then embedded within this recognition of one’s limits is the imperative to change the strategies of one’s understanding. Even in the process of recognizing our interpretive limits, our creative impulse—our will to individuate—does not wholly recede. This formulation revises both Booth’s notion of understanding (the act of momentary deference to the other) and Eaglestone’s vision of ethical criticism by suggesting that responsibility to the text becomes a process of “building upon” the presence of the other rather than only appropriating otherness as an instrument of critical interruption.

To conceive of the text as other, as a singular something that “is not knowable until by a creative act it is brought into the field of the same” (Attridge 33), is to foreground the idea that in
every encounter—whether it is with the text or in the real world of people—there is a question of ethics, a question of how to proceed responsibly. Hemingway and Cather both present us with simple others whom we cannot fully know despite their accessibility and despite the fact that the text pushes us to continue to try to know them. The oscillation between these poles—to feel sometimes as if you know a character and at other times feel only his or her opacity—is consistently staged in modernist minimalism. Such an ethics of oscillation, according to Namwali C. Serpell, pushes readers to alternate between empathy and alterity, without negating either value (245).³ In this sense, I will show simplicity itself as a formal means of negotiating the difficult divide between our desire to know someone’s experience in order to understand, speak for, and respond to their actions and the responsibility of maintaining their autonomy and unknowability so that we do not reduce them to uncritical generalities or, worse, reinscribe our own interpretive wills upon them. At the same time, this conception of ethics recognizes and embraces the inevitable (but not necessarily unethical) violations performed by the interpreting subject.

Simplicity can lead the reader towards a self-conscious recognition of the violations of inference, but it does not reject the reader’s interpretive gestures. The unstated implications of Frederic Henry’s discourse in the first chapter of *A Farewell to Arms* will always remain important affective and cognitive markers for the reader. They crave articulation. Likewise, the ethics that I am describing (and that the following chapters flesh out) is founded not in the self’s passivity towards the other, nor in the impulse to fully withhold judgment, but in the self’s

³ Serpell’s article, “Mutual Exclusion, Oscillation, and Ethical Projection in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Turn of the Screw*,” does not specifically treat simplicity. Its purpose is to exemplify a new, broader conception of ethics. That she finds in other narrative strategies the same oscillatory dynamic that I intend to show in modernist minimalism suggests that simplicity’s dynamics are not necessarily a radical departure from those of other twentieth-century literary works. Simplicity, I am arguing, makes this oscillation emphatic by gesturing towards the hermeneutics through which that ethic comes into being.
recognition of his or her accountable freedom. I use this term to emphasize the necessity of creative reading but also the idea that an interpretation which does not attend to the discursive logic of the text-as-other risks undermining the impact of its own statement. The simple text emphasizes the prospect of interpretive choice for the reader; its linguistic accessibility, its minimization of interiority, its imagistic settings all cohere to present the reader with an other that needs to be read, excavated, and even exposed. It allows us to individuate ourselves, to play our imaginations upon it. And yet its opacities, its ambiguities borne of simple statements and omissions, hold those moments of individuation in check by insisting on the incompleteness of our readings and thus point to the complexities of responsible encounter in both the text and the world beyond.

To say that an aesthetic of simplicity makes us especially aware of the consequences of interpretation is to focus on issues of accountability that are embedded in the acts of reading, viewing, listening, and inferring. In this sense, my overarching objective will be to locate and elucidate in minimalist narrative what Newton has labeled, a “hermeneutic ethics,” one that investigates “the extent and limits of intersubjective knowledge in persons’ reading of each other, and the ethical price exacted from readers by texts” (25). To attend to the hermeneutic ethics of a text, Newton contends, is to attend to the modes of accountability that acts of reading entail and to “the paradoxical lesson that ‘getting’ someone else’s story is also a way of losing the person as ‘real,’ as ‘what he is’” (18, 19). Like Newton, I argue that interpretation can

---

4 John Guillory contends that “reading is the principal ethical practice of modernity, the site where a practice of the self has not been entirely or easily subordinated to the moral code, or rendered solely an instrument of power/knowledge” (39). Although I am reluctant to say that reading is in and of itself an ethical practice, Guillory’s point that reading texts can help us to negotiate and move through various modes of selfhood also underlies my own argument regarding simplicity’s hermeneutic protocols.
appropriate the text in ways that risk understanding, and that our responsibility to the text grows from our recognition of this paradox.\footnote{This does not mean that my version of narrative ethics will be silent on “narrational ethics,” what Newton describes as “the conditions and consequences of the narrative act itself,” or “representational ethics,” which refer to “the small but still momentous distance that lies between person and character . . . the gains, losses, and risks taken up when selves represent or are represented by others” (17-18). Indeed, the ethics of telling and the ethics of character creation are integral to a fuller picture of modernist minimalist ethics. The relationship between these three categories is recursive, or as Newton states, “interlaced” (18), and thus to speak of simplicity’s ethics is to initially acknowledge that a sufficiently comprehensive ethical inquiry arises out the complex ways in which these categories inform one another.}

But recognition of interpretive responsibility is not an end point in and of itself; rather, the significance lies in the way such recognition produces new readings, new relationships between subjects, and new analyses of the intersections between ethical modes that makes modernist simplicity a worthwhile point of study. I foreground this issue in Chapter Two when I read Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The protagonist, Jean-Marie Latour’s encounter with the smooth and simple aesthetic objects of an Indigenous culture teaches him a new, contemplative way of interpreting and responding to otherness. That he is able, at least partially, to incorporate this hermeneutic mode into the rest of his life—beyond the realm of aesthetic appreciation—suggests the capacity of simplicity to present the subject with an alternative, but not necessarily reductive, view of the world, offering at the same time a protocol with which the reader can approach Cather’s simple text.

This example more broadly demonstrates the underlying methodological thinking of the following study. Insofar as Latour’s comprehension of the simple aesthetic object is formed both by the way he imagines it but also through the way the art form solicits its beholder—that is, through the way it asks to be read—this interaction proffers a glimpse of what James Phelan refers to as “rhetorical reader-response.” Such a practice, according to Phelan, “maintains both that the text constructs the reader and that the reader constructs the text, with the result that it
does not believe that there is always a clear, sharply defined border between what is sharable and what is personal in reading and interpretation” (*Narrative* 177). What I continue to ask throughout my analyses is how the experience of simplicity constructs its readers and how that experience might be ethically inflected. Embedded in my rhetorical approach is Peter Rabinowitz’s concept of authorial reading, which imagines responsible reading as an attempt to recognize the discursive logic of particular texts and how they subsequently “give directions for their own decoding” (*Before Reading* 37). Insofar as listening for these “directions” ultimately involves a choice of how to respond, this practice of reading helps to structure my own study, as I theorize simplicity as an aesthetic whose hermeneutic protocols foreground the ethics involved in this interpretive freedom.

By focusing on modernist simplicity, this study attempts to broaden our range of critical reading strategies and, at the same time, to suggest that through a practice of authorial reading, we can locate significant flaws in certain interpretive programs that would impose themselves on a text—what Rabinowitz terms “institutional reading” (*Authorizing Readers* 58)—rather than arise from the text’s particular rhetorical strategy.⁶ This is not to say that texts inevitably force their ethics upon us—indeed, actual readers can (and often do) resist the text’s complex demands; my mode of analysis, building upon Rabinowitz, stresses the way the simple text offers the authorial reader a glimpse of the choice between different hermeneutic ethics. In taking a rhetorical approach, I try to nuance our understandings of how texts make their demands upon us.

---

⁶ Rabinowitz observes that “the academy tends to favor complexity; as a result, the modern classics of our culture tend to be elaborate . . . [T]exts become canonized in part because they work with particular reading strategies” (*Before Reading* 11, 12). However the key, according to Rabinowitz, is not to wholly reject our critical legacy, but to broaden our reading—literally, to read a wider variety of books so that we can secure a wider variety of reading strategies (231).
and how protocols inborn to particular texts might change our practices of critical reading and interpretation in the world.\(^7\)

When in 1920 Cather said that “Art . . . should simplify,” she was speaking against a mode of realism that she believed was excessive in its descriptive techniques, a mode that stuffed its pages with observations that could just as well be left unsaid, and that relied upon the “multiplication of phenomena” (\(OW\) 102). For her, simplicity encouraged a contract between reader and text that was founded upon the reader’s active engagement with text’s omissions. If the simple text was engendered through a patterning of absence and reduction—that is, through the author’s conscious decision to leave things unexplained, to withhold herself as an interpreter and minimize her own presence as an authority—then it also reimagined the reader as a subject capable of recognizing such patterns and locating meaning for him or herself. This does not mean, however, that the simple text can be “solved” as if it were a puzzle waiting for some intelligent and imaginative person to piece it back together correctly. In her famous statement from “The Novel Démeublé,” Cather describes not only a fiction that is suggestive but one that is ultimately unknowable as well:

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (\(OW\) 41-42)

---

\(^7\) Rabinowitz’s plea, “to teach ourselves to read in new ways (not simply a new way), ways that are self-conscious about how interpretation itself can be ideological, and ways that can thus help us to make the most of the rich literary heritage that has been passed down to us” (Before Reading 230), intimates that reading becomes an ethical act when it pushes us to discover new ways of interpreting the world. To value “self-conscious” interpretation, moreover, is to recognize that interpretation ought to demonstrate accountability in its encounter with the text-as-other.
To describe fiction in this way is to value a mode of reading and interpretation that attends to suggestion in hopes of the possibility of a fuller narrative experience. But there is a paradoxical difficulty here too: whereas we know the “thing” probably exists, we also know we can never fully experience it. Cather’s diction—“inexplicable,” “divined,” “mood,” “aura”—suggests the inevitable indeterminacy involved in the hermeneutic protocols of the simple text.

Cather imagined her fiction as a room with all the furniture thrown out the window, “the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre . . . bare for the play of emotions, great and little” (OW 42-43). Such a metaphor works against Mahaffey’s view that modernist literature primarily teaches its readers to discover and “name” subtext. In the empty room, nothing is hidden, indeed, there is nowhere for it to hide. Meaning is no longer a function of what the reader can reimagine as visible but of the productive friction—the interplay—that occurs between the text’s simple suggestiveness and the creative impulse that stimulates the reader as he or she observes, explores, and temporarily reconstructs the details of the empty space. The simple, empty room permits the subject a certain freedom of movement (it is an occasion for imaginative activity), but it also confronts the subject (for it is markedly different from other rooms) as an autonomous and individualized space that implicitly resists a process of imaginative furnishing or “filling in.” Its bareness makes our imaginative powers momentarily intimidating, compelling us to question what we are about to do to it and in it.

Cather criticism has, in the last twenty years, concerned itself with the freedoms proffered by her aesthetic, but it has not, perhaps, attended quite as fully to the ways in which her simplicity also implies hermeneutic limits. This study by no means argues against interpretation, although it does seek to articulate the ways in which modernist simplicity anticipates the ethical
risks of imagining an other that is only ever worked upon by the subject.\(^8\) Cather obviously did not reject the value of the reader’s inference—the impulse to create meaning from the interplay between the said and unsaid—but her aesthetic does produce moments of self-doubt, where interpretation can sometimes be seen as more of an imposition than elucidation. Jo Ann Middleton, for example, reads Cather as “deceptively simple to read” and imports the term “vacuole” in order to mine her texts for their absences (21).\(^9\) In this view, the vacuole becomes a node of meaning, an absence that, once recognized, the reader can fill in with specific information. Instead of reading simplicity itself as an aesthetic worth our attention, Middleton treats it as a sort of strategic mask, as something we need to get past and move beyond. In this hermeneutic model, the interpreter’s desire to know the other-as-text always trumps the integrity of the text’s otherness. Cather’s aesthetic, as we will see, also asks the reader to account for the ethical limits of such imaginative excursions. What Middleton’s criticism in fact reveals is the need to formulate a vocabulary of simplicity, one that attempts both to describe its narrative characteristics and account for its potential effects upon the reader.

---

\(^8\) In “Fiction as Interpretation / Interpretation as Fiction,” Naomi Schor argues that because interpretation can be viewed “as something that is done in fiction” to be against interpretation is an untenable position (168). Though Schor was speaking specifically against the structuralism of Susan Sontag, her introduction of the term “interpretant”—also known as an “interpreting character” (168)—begins to suggest the ways in which texts can thematize hermeneutic inquiry and suggest protocols, terms, and limits for the interpreter. To the extent that my own study, especially in Chapter One, locates these moments of reading and interpretation in the text as significant hermeneutic cues, my inquiry echoes Schor’s simple suggestion that “via the interpretant the author is trying to tell the interpreter something about interpretation” (170). At the same time, I hold onto the idea that interpretation is also something that is done to fiction. Indeed, a major undercurrent of my analysis (and one which I articulate more fully in the Postscript) is that Hemingway’s and Cather’s aesthetics of simplicity constitute a response to and criticism of modes of interpretation that only do things to the text—modes that have the potential to evoke freedom without accountability, individuation without responsibility.

\(^9\) In The Difficulties of Modernism, Leonard Diepeveen argues that when critics in the late twentieth-century sought to canonize simple moderns such as Cather and Robert Frost, “they did so by claiming for them a kind of difficulty, by claiming that simple, univocal readings of these writers were not a naive start in the right direction, but were fundamentally inadequate. Critics argued that below the surface of these writers’ texts lay interesting difficulties, that their simplicity was deceptive, that it was, in fact, a form of difficulty” (193). Like Diepeveen, I believe that simplicity ought to be understood as its own aesthetic, and this study attempts to articulate the elements and effects of that aesthetic. Unlike Diepeveen, however, I don’t think it is possible to speak about the stylistic and discursive properties of simplicity without also speaking about the ways in which it particularly challenges its readers—without the ways in which it can also produce difficulties. This is not the same thing as saying the simplicity is “deceptive”; rather, it is to say that simplicity helps the reader negotiate the inferential difficulties of the text.
What is the risk of not theorizing modernist simplicity? In *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, Joan Acocella observes a proclivity in various critics to appropriate Cather’s aesthetics of omission unethically. Contending that Cather’s omissions have the capacity to be instrumentalized “merely to support the critic’s idea of what is wrong with Western culture” (72), Acocella points to the dangers of misreading her narrative strategy:

> The political critics do of course cite Cather’s text, but only in the service of the political argument. Typically, as noted, they discover “gaps” or “silences” or things not named—great holes in which, they decide, Cather is hiding something. Then they tell us what the thing is: homosexuality, gender conflicts, American Indians, the true story of Ántonia Shimerda, or whatever . . . . That done, the text is then twisted to prove the presence of the great hidden subject. (68).

I am reluctant to say, unequivocally, that Cather’s texts are not about all those things too. Cather’s omissions solicit the reader’s inferential work but simultaneously solicit self-reflexive and accountable interpretations that must inevitably address the limits of the text’s readability.10 Nonetheless, Acocella’s point is timely. When we attend only to what is not said, the said slips

---

10 This issue of the relationship between reference and inference finds a parallel in the listening protocols of a form of minimalist music called real-world music. Real-world music, in the vein of Katharine Norman, Paul Lansky, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, removes conventional instrumentation in favour of sounds already occurring in the world. Norman claims that real-world music requires of its audiences “non-musical strategies” of listening in order to make sense of what are generally simple and familiar sounds (2). When listening to Paul Lansky’s *Night Traffic*, for example, the listener participates in two types of listening: on the one hand, he or she searches for a referent, for the specific source in the world of the traffic sounds (tires on pavement, a car horn, a cyclist, etc.). “Our immediate reaction,” says Norman, “is to supplement, or supplant, sound with visual data; we look for the sounding object, either in reality or by using remembered knowledge to envisage a likely source” (2). On the other hand, the listener also experiences a certain ‘removal’ from the desire to attach sights to sounds, and participates in the conceptual possibilities of the sound once they are divorced from a particular temporal and spatial context. This second type of listening is more imaginative and creative, indeed metaphorical. The larger point, however, is that there is always an interplay between “referential” and “reflective” listening (Norman 5). The composition’s meaning arises out of the listener’s respect for the simple real-world reference and his or her responsibility to imagine beyond that boundary: “This continuous shifting between referential remembering and reflective, imaginative forgetting may be constructive in itself. Perhaps one nourishes the other so that contradictory meanings can provide a multi-faceted and richer understanding of a source” (Norman 7). The analogy between real-world listening and the interpretive protocols of simplicity in literature rests on this idea of interplay. Minimalist literature certainly does not deny the reader’s creative impulse—to imagine meanings and connections where the text remains silent and understated—but it does ask us to temper these free, imaginative wanderings against the simple presence of what is said.
from memory and becomes almost tangential. What Acocella asks is that we pay a “sustained attention to what the artist is saying” (72), or in Booth’s terms, to understand before we overstand. In fact, because of its accessibility, and because of the apparent ease with which we can rearticulate and recreate its meanings, simplicity works to cue us into the prospect of responsible reading by refocusing our attention upon the interpretive processes through which we construct our institutional readings. Whereas Acocella mainly points to the negative consequences of a mode of interpretation in which the reader imposes him or herself upon the text, I build upon her critique by locating the ways in which the text also demands from us these moments of mastery. Simplicity does not demand that we stop reading and stop interpreting, nor does it construct an implicitly passive subject; rather, its vision of ethical subjectivity rests in the ways it asks us to negotiate the terms of our imaginative power with the other. We move—we oscillate—between moments of imposition and moments where we surrender ourselves to the autonomy of the bare room.

Cather’s empty, unfurnished room challenges us to rethink what it means for a text to be readable. As Deborah Carlin points out, many of Cather’s later texts “are essentially at odds with the limits of interpretability posed throughout their narratives . . . . They both are and are not readable.” (25). These texts waver between readability and un-readability not in spite of their simplicity but because of it. They question the terms through which narrative communicates its messages, placing less emphasis on art as something in which meaning can be found and more emphasis on the ways in which meaning develops through the mutual engagement of text and reader. Moreover, Carlin implies that in the ways Cather dramatizes the artistic process in its many complex manifestations, her narratives bear witness to the obstinacy of the aesthetic object that seeks to be knowable but at the same time is manifest as its own individual and self-
sustaining vision. How do we negotiate the need to communicate ourselves and be understood with the need to protect and control the terms with which we are imagined? An aesthetics of simplicity persistently rehearses this ethical dilemma.

This argument that the simple is also recalcitrant does not sidestep the project of understanding simplicity as a strategy in and of itself. It is not to transform it into its opposite; rather, to talk about simple recalcitrance is to gesture towards the way certain styles and discourses can work simultaneously as a means of accessible communication as well as an obstacle to interpretation. “Obstacles,” according to Doris Sommer, “enable something different from control; they summon the kinds of interpretive labor that accept the burden of difference instead of wishing it away” (207-8). Phelan divides recalcitrance into “the difficult” and “the stubborn.” He argues that “The difficult is recalcitrance that yields to our explanatory efforts, while the stubborn is recalcitrance that will not yield” (Narrative 178). Like Sommer, Phelan implicitly recognizes that the will to explicate—to know and explain something—can lead to an unethical reduction of a text’s autonomy. But what Phelan’s theorization of difficulty as a subcategory of recalcitrance also suggests is that not all recalcitrance must be difficult. In other words, he leaves room for a mode of simplicity that does not always already yield to our explanatory efforts. His categorization allows us to see not necessarily the difficulty of simplicity, but the possibility of talking about a simple aesthetic as an interpretive challenge without minimizing the reader’s experience of its formal manifestations.

In her short story, “Paul’s Case” Cather relies upon an aesthetic of omission that importunes the reader to question the terms of his or her interpretive choices. There is “something” we do not know about the protagonist Paul, something, perhaps, that we cannot know; this omission in a sense simplifies the text, but it also produces a recalcitrance insofar as
that something confronts our desire to better know and empathize with Paul. When in “The Novel Demeublé,” Cather speaks of “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” (OW 41), she suggests that the ethical valence of her aesthetic lies in its very resistance to explanation. In “Paul’s Case,” the something left out is never stated:

Until now [Paul] could not remember the time when he had not been dreading something. Even when he was a little boy, it was always there—behind him, or before, or on either side. There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him . . . . But now he had a curious sense of relief, as though he had at last thrown down the gauntlet to the thing in the corner.” (231)

One of the most potent ethical questions that this story asks of its readers and critics is what happens when we try to name this thing that isn’t named. What violences do we do to the text? What is our responsibility—to uncover a secret? Or to respect the secret? Claude J. Summers’s interpretation of this story focuses on Cather’s relationship to the Aesthetic movement at the turn of the century, dandyism, and homosexuality more generally. It is comprehensive and convincing, but it largely overlooks this hermeneutic issue, only stating that Cather’s “lack of explicitness reflects both the difficulty of writing about homosexuality in 1905 and Cather’s own preference for insinuation and implication” (103). Indeed, Summers hastily “outs” Paul, asserting that “In ‘Paul’s Case’ . . . the thing not named is Paul’s homosexuality” (103). This is not to say that Paul is not homosexual, but Paul himself struggles with the question of identity—as is suggested by the various costumes he dons and imaginative roles that he plays—and so to label him hastily is perhaps to push a categorization upon him that he is not ready for, that he can only think of as “something.”
There is, moreover, a certain fear of surveillance that pervades the story. Framed, graven images of Washington and Calvin sit above Paul’s bed and appear to watch him while he sleeps. Paul is described as “always glancing about him, seeming to feel that people might be watching him and trying to detect something” (222). His last movement, right before he jumps in front of a passing train, is to “glance . . . nervously sidewise, as though he were being watched” (236). As we observe the scene of Paul’s death, we might recognize a significant parallel between our own critical modes of detection (watching, attempting to understand, explicating) and what Paul seems to fear most. Knowing what we do of Paul, limited as it is, this story asks an important interpretive question: is detection and unveiling the ethical course of action for the critic? The simple recalcitrance of the story is founded in the way the author’s omission of the “something” creates a minimalist character—the motivations for Paul’s misbehaviours Cather leaves undeveloped—and in the way that absence produces an obstacle to our explication of both the boy and the larger text.

In fact, Cather’s aesthetic of omission works in tandem with the ways she dramatizes the risks of overstanding modes of human otherness. From the very beginning of the story, the implied author censures a certain type of reading practice that is constituted through the ostensible necessity of detection. In the opening “inquisition” (222), Paul’s teachers do not try to understand the reasons why Paul misbehaves; their only objective is to rationalize somehow their antipathy towards him. They do not question him at all and instead rancorously state “their respective charges against him” (221). They censure him for what they concede is “scarcely possible to put into words,” but lies “in a sort of hysterically defiant manner” (221). The point, here, is that despite the teachers’ inability to classify Paul, to place his defiance in any sort of definable category of transgression, they still search for ways to justify their reading of him as an
outlaw: “His teachers felt . . . that his whole attitude was symbolized by his shrug and his flippantly red carnation flower, and they fell upon him without mercy, his English teacher leading the pack” (221-222). The teachers imagine the carnation as a symbol of something that is wrong with Paul and defies normativity; it is also a sign of a reading strategy that will always already substantiate their prejudices. Through this short scene, Cather admonishes her readers against this type of clue-based reading—the teachers leave the meeting with Paul feeling “humiliated” and “dissatisfied and unhappy” (222)—in which “things” are instrumentalized in order to detect, expose, and shame the other. Whereas the text’s omissions appear to open up interpretation—to make it more free—it also confronts such freedom by dramatizing the interpretive failures of the English teacher who reads Paul only as a “case,” as something that can be figured out through a certain type of surveillance and subsequently known.

Where an analysis of modernist simplicity builds upon Summers’s criticism is that it conceives Cather’s omission not only as a discursive technique meant to catalyze the reader’s reimagination of the unsaid but as part of a hermeneutic protocol that confronts the reader with the ethical consequences of his or her interpretive choices. This protocol retains the possibility of Summers’s inference of Paul’s homosexuality but complicates that knowledge by claiming that it is no longer essential to understanding the text-as-other. The “something” demands explication, and yet its simple absence produces a moment of interpretive self-reflexivity by asking us what violations we perform in our desire to reconstruct the other. Furthermore, such a reading strategy attempts to understand Paul as a character who serves both synthetic and mimetic functions.\footnote{These are narratological terms that Phelan uses to describe the essential elements of characterization. “Synthetic” refers specifically to “[t]hat component of character directed to its role as artificial construct in the larger construction of the text; more generally, the constructedness of a text as an object” (Living 218). “Mimetic” denotes “that component of character directed to its imitation of a possible person. It refers, second, to that component of fictional narrative concerned with imitating the world beyond the fiction, what we typically call ‘reality’” (216). “Thematic,” a term that I will also use in this study, refers to a character’s or text’s “representative or ideational function” (219).}
conceive of Paul only as a narrative device—that is, as a construct whose quality of recalcitrant simplicity is merely a sign of Cather’s aesthetic program—is to forget that in creating a character who hides behind his well-polished, “glistening surfaces” (224), Cather creates, in a sense, a very real other. To consider his mimetic dimension is not only to retain the possibility of Paul’s “realness” but a responsibility to act as if he were, in fact, real. “What ethical acts are we, as readers, performing,” asks Rabinowitz, “when we escape from the pain of the text, distancing ourselves from the narrative audience by treating these concrete images of pain as but stepping stones to a discussion of something more abstract and implicitly more important, like ‘narratability’?” (Authorizing Readers 28). This question comes to the fore in Chapter One, where I consider in more detail the ethical effects of simple or thin characters. Not to be confused with minor characters, thin characters (of which Paul is an inchoate form) are realistic characters who produce self-reflexive moments in reading by means of their simplicity; they challenge the reader to reconsider the terms with which he or she uses them for interpretation by obscuring the boundary between their synthetic and mimetic dimensions.

Hemingway also developed, throughout his career, a strategy of omission. Like Cather, he believed that absences worked to imagine a more engaged and participatory reader. Hemingway’s chosen metaphor for this aesthetic was not, however, an empty room, but an iceberg. In Death in the Afternoon, he wrote

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits
things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.

(192)

Significantly, this theory of omission does not propose that the reader can ever fully reconstruct the text’s absences. Similar to Cather’s invocation of “the emotional aura,” Hemingway’s appeal to the reader’s “feeling of those things” suggests a mode of interpretation that is not founded in the perfect articulation of an unstated reality but in the communication of an experience that language on its own cannot recover. To use such affective terms is to underscore the ways in which an aesthetic of omission confronts the reader with the very difficulty of articulating otherness without necessarily exposing it, without violating its dignity.

Many previous readings have tended to reconstruct the Hemingway text only in terms of its patterns of omission and excision. The text, according to this view, always demands a specific critical excavation or recovery. As one critic has put it, “everything in a successful minimalist story is a sign or a key to meaning” (Hallett 140). Such readings not only straightforwardly assume that the reader can and should know exactly what has been omitted from the text but that the tip of the iceberg—what is said—is only important for the way it can reveal a subtext. Carlos Baker, one of the most prolific Hemingway scholars, reads the imagery of plains and mountains in the opening sequence of A Farewell to Arms wholly allegorically: “Despite the insistent, denotative matter-of-factness at the surface of the presentation, the subsurface activity of A Farewell to Arms is organized connotatively around two poles . . . . The images tend to build round the opposed concepts of Home and Not-Home” (Writer as Artist 101). The mountains signal “life” and “love,” whereas the plains represent “war and death” (116). However, by treating the discursive technique of simplicity as only ever something to move beyond in search of an implicitly more valuable subtextual meaning, we run the risk not of locating a painful
subtext but imposing our own imaginative constructions upon the text. Though this may serve to emphasize the liberating and creative powers of the critic, it is a false freedom; for to read simplicity—sentences, images, patterns—as always already a sign of something else locks the reader in a paranoiac spiral. As Umberto Eco argues, “The overestimation of the importance of clues is often born of a propensity to consider the most immediately apparent elements as significant, whereas the very fact that they are apparent should allow us to recognize that they are explicable in much more economical terms” (Overinterpretation 49). Sometimes the simple needs to be read on its own terms; the iceberg exists as something more than just the secrets of its depths. Its dignity exists, at least in part, through the immediate and opaque presence of its surface. To approach the text already looking to articulate what it does not say is to forgo responsibility to the simple other—to perform our interpretive freedom at the expense of the text’s autonomy.

In the Hemingway text ethics and aesthetics are never mutually exclusive categories. Beatrice Penas Ibáñez perceptively notes, for instance, that the author oftentimes faces truths that others would want to keep hidden; the ethical valence of Hemingway’s aesthetic, according to Ibáñez, arises out of the way in which the text encourages the reader to confront the nasty realities of the world along with the implied author. In this view, truth for the reader comes from a process of perfectly “matching” his or her emotional and intellectual experience with that of the author (108). Ibáñez describes the iceberg text as one “whose comparatively small visible or readable tip addresses a reader willing to take risks and go far down below the surface in search of the vast hidden meanings recoverable only in a process of interpretation” (96). In this theory of interpretation the reader transforms into the implied author’s double, someone who has the capacity to experience exactly what Hemingway does if only she sufficiently excavates the text’s
architecture of omission. My intervention, however, asks how the text’s stylistic and discursive forms of simplicity work not to wholly prevent these important inferential steps but occasion a more protracted consideration of the iceberg’s surface. In other words, how does the text by what it does say, by what it allows us to know, and by how it says it, encourage an interpretive practice that moves between moments of critical mastery and non-mastery? How does simplicity remind us of the integrity of the text-as-other? Reading strategies such as Ibáñez’s are valuable because they implicitly seek to understand otherness, to identify and communicate even the most unimaginable of experiences, but such readings of modernist minimalism are also symptomatic of a grey area for criticism in which the word “iceberg” too quickly legitimizes certain modes of interpretive violation. To attend exclusively to hidden meanings (to what we think the text does not say but means), and to make that our reading’s raison d’être, does violence to the voice of the other because it strips it of its very mechanism of recalcitrance. That is, it robs the text precisely of its otherness.

Omission is only one part of Hemingway’s aesthetic and it has, perhaps, become overemphasized in the course of twentieth-century criticism. Chapter 20 of Death in the Afternoon, for example, is a chapter of excess, of extra details, of supplementation. It is, in fact, contrary to what many would expect from early Hemingway because it operates upon a principle of inclusion rather than omission. It is a chapter ripe with scenic description, character sketches, anecdotes, vignettes, and reflections. The prose is simple and imagistic, allowing the reader to imagine particular events and experiences, but it also resists the interpretive impulse to reimagine it as a sign or symbol of something else. “If I could have made this enough of a book it would have had everything in it. The Prado, looking like some big American college building, with sprinklers watering the grass early in the bright Madrid summer morning . . . the bare white mud
hills . . . days on the train in August” (270), and so it goes. The reader is beckoned to attend to the abundance of what is simply said. When Hemingway concludes the chapter by saying, “It is not enough of a book, but still there were a few things to be said. There were a few practical things to be said” (278), we recognize that the text does not so much ask us to name those unnamed things as it does show us the inevitable limits of our knowledge. Its recalcitrance confronts us, and we are shown, in the space of a chapter, just how much we could never have known. Although those “practical things,” were they apparent, may have helped us to better explain the text-as-other, the recalcitrance of the phrase prevents us from wholly mobilizing the experience and absorbing it into ourselves. These “things” are practical in a new sense, for they help to maintain the rhetorical separation between self and other, reader and text.

Hemingway’s short story, “Indian Camp,” depicts the young Nick Adams as he is introduced into a difficult and violent world. His father, a doctor, forces the boy to witness him perform a grueling Caesarian section on an Indian mother with “a jack-knife and . . . nine-foot, tapered gut leaders” (18). Nick also bears witness to the aftermath of the suicide of the newborn’s father, who has, in the bunk above his labouring wife, slit his throat “from ear to ear” (18). Nick, we learn, has “a good view” of the dead man, of “the blood [that] had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged in the bunk” (18). The narrative also recounts Dr. Adams’s developing sense of self-awareness as a father, what Max Nänny describes as “a more mature understanding of his parental responsibility” (176). Dr. Adams is “terribly sorry” for having forced Nick to see a part of the world he is too young to understand (18); that by the end of the story the father can no longer confidently answer his son’s questions about death illustrates the fallibility of his authority, both as a doctor and father. In the beginning, Dr. Adams is a source of knowledge for the uninitiated boy who quietly accepts his lessons:
“This lady is going to have a baby, Nick,” he said.

“I know,” said Nick.

“You don’t know,” said his father. “Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labour . . . That is what is happening when she screams.”

“I see,” Nick said. (16)

By the end of the story, however, the father cannot answer his son’s questions satisfactorily. He must either admit his own fallibility or equivocate:

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

“I don’t know, Nick. He couldn’t stand things, I guess.”

“Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?”

“Not very many, Nick.”

“Do many women?”

“Hardly ever.”

“Don’t they ever?”

“Oh yes. They do sometimes.”

[ . . .]

“Is dying hard Daddy?”

“No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.” (19)

The suicide that occurs between these two exchanges radically alters the relationship between Nick and his father, insofar as Dr. Adams’s hesitations reveal the gaps in his own knowledge. As both a doctor and a father he stumbles in explaining the deadly events of the morning to his son. Similarly, Hemingway asks the reader to reconsider the extent of his or her understanding of the text-as-other. Like the doctor, we learn of the Indian husband’s suicide only after the fact,
and yet the earlier phrase, so easy to overlook amidst the pain of the operation—“The husband in
the upper bunk rolled over against the wall” (16)—resonates because it solicits an inferential act
(is this the suicide, unnoticed?) and because it marks our limits as readers (our knowledge of the
event remains tentative). Its simplicity, its matter-of-factness, in other words, appears to require
little translation or interpretation, and yet by the end of the story we come to realize that this
small movement contains within it a surfeit of emotions and motivations that we can never know.
The recalcitrance of the simple sentence, in conjunction with the thematics borne out of the
changing relationship between Nick and his father, suggests a hermeneutic protocol: the
simplicity provokes a hesitation in the way that it asks us to realize the limits of our capacity to
understand otherness. We become highly aware of the need to discover the text’s omissions but
we also recognize its inevitable opacity. In the same way, Nick’s presence iterates the ethical
challenge of simple recalcitrance; we see him clearly and yet our access to his perspective is
indeterminate. Hemingway’s aesthetic asks us to understand that the pretense of authoritatively
“knowing” things comes up against obstacles, and that ethical interpretation must ultimately
become a self-reflexive exercise.

The story, in fact, is composed of two levels of focalization. The reader receives much of
the narrative as it is filtered through the consciousness of Nick. George is referred to as “Uncle
George” (15), and we are also privy to samplings of Nick’s inner life, things that no other
character can observe: “Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the
morning” (19, my emphasis). On the other hand, the implied author offers more information than
Nick can possibly know, and so we recognize a second, expanded field of perception that
intermingles with Nick’s:
Inside on a wooden bunk lay a young Indian woman. She had been trying to have her baby for two days. All the old women in the camp had been helping her. The men had moved off up the road to sit in the dark and smoke out of range of the noise she made. She screamed just as Nick and the two Indians followed his father and Uncle George into the shanty. (16)

This mixture of focalizations produces structural irony insofar as the interplay between the two widens the reader’s perspective of the events, allowing him or her to see more than if Hemingway had restricted the narrative to a single focalizer. But who sees the Indian husband roll over in his bunk? Whose experience is this? It is likely not Dr. Adams’s, who is intensely focused on the operation. For it to be Nick’s, the reader must infer that he is not wholly distracted by the mother’s screams—“Oh, Daddy, can’t you give her something to make her stop screaming?” (16)—and that his attention upon the operation does not preclude his attention to the events of the background. This is not an unreasonable inference, but it is still a fundamental indeterminacy that Hemingway embeds into the text. Moreover, because it is unclear whether this simple observation is focalized through Nick or is imparted by the external narrator, this is an example of “ambiguous focalization,” which according to Mieke Bal occurs when “it is hard to decide who focalizes” (163). That the reader sees the husband roll over in the bunk but cannot necessarily match that experience with any other character illustrates how the text’s narrative strategy implicates the reader in the same type of epistemological difficulties that the protagonists also must face. The strategy also suggests, because of its indeterminacy, that any inference the reader makes—that this is, for example, the moment of suicide—must be tempered

---

12 J. Andrew Wainwright notes the important difference between the narrator’s diction and that of the other characters. Unlike Dr. Adams, who refers to the mother as a “lady” (16), or George who calls her a “damn squaw bitch” (17), “Hemingway’s narrative voice employs the less limiting term ‘woman’ when referring to non-males in the story” (Wainwright 182), and furthermore, “even when she is being held down by four men, she maintains the dignity of ‘the woman’” (184).
by the fact of the phrase’s recalcitrance. That is to say, the very fact that I cannot locate in this
phrase a particular agent of focalization, because the external narrator and Nick intermingle to
the point that neither is fully recognizable, the text confronts me with the very limits of my
capacity to know. I hesitate. I become aware of interpretation as a potentially imposing
discourse.

In many ways, modernist literary minimalism shares with minimalist art of the mid-
twentieth century a theory of audience interaction, response and engagement. There is a
significant parallel between the interpretive protocols of their simplicity. Moreover, the rich
history of criticism in the visual arts—which explicitly engages with the effects of simplicity—
helps to elucidate this study’s conception of simple recalcitrance. Frances Colpitt’s definition of
minimal art in the 1960s states that “Its predominant organizing principles include the right
angle, the square and the cube, rendered with a minimum of incident or compositional
maneuvering,” and furthermore, that “the Minimalists eschewed any form of comment,
representation, or reference” (1). This idea that minimalist art is, in a sense, autonomous, simply-
built, and non-progressive, is repeated consistently in much of the literature on the movement.
Harold Rosenberg, for example, claimed that, “the Minimovement affirms the independent
existence of the art object as meaningful in itself” (303). The cube, the prism, and even the
pyramid, are certainly quite familiar objects. They are regular, standard, and recognizable as
concepts in and of themselves—they appear to exist independently in the space of the gallery.
Barbara Rose, in her famous essay, “ABC Art,” attempted to describe from the viewer’s
perspective the influence of the minimalist object with its “concrete thereness”: “There is no
wish to transcend the physical for either the metaphysical or the metaphoric. The thing, thus, is
presumably not supposed to ‘mean’ other than what it is; that is, it is not supposed to be
suggestive of anything other than itself” (291). Minimalism thus emphasizes the fact of art’s literalness and the artist’s belief that art ought to resist interpretive instrumentalization. This describes, on the one hand, a resistance of the art form to political exigency—insofar as the viewer’s act of making meaning is hindered, the minimalist object cannot be transformed into a workhorse for specific interest groups. To call attention to the integrity of the object in its space, to its “independent existence,” is to attempt to define it as an object that does not depend on any experiential or interpretive engagement from its audience. On the other hand, such an argument proffers not a vacuous anti-intellectualism, in which we sacrifice meaning for an ethic of non-use, but new ways of seeing how simplicity can affect the viewer’s encounter and subsequent explication of the object.

More recently, critical discussions of minimalism remark upon the way in which artists sought to dramatize the very centrality of “the viewer’s engagement with the art object” (Wolff 66).13 The artist Robert Morris, in his 1966 “Notes on Sculpture,” argued that as the spectator moves through the gallery space, the cube engages him or her in a productive process—with each new perspective a new relationship to the object is established, and each perspective

13 Susan Best, for instance, argues that the historicization of phenomenological approaches to minimalism has occluded a more complex investigation of subjectivity in minimalism. In her study, Best puts two theorists, Rosalind Krauss and Thierry de Duve, into dialogue with one another, not in an attempt to resolve the discussion of what the minimalist subject is, but rather to show that a minimalist aesthetic already sets up the parameters of the discussion. “What they [Krauss and de Duve] share,” argues Best, “is the belief that minimalism is something like a sensuous theory of the contemporary subject. In other words, minimalism can be understood as setting forth or generating a particular model or theory of contemporary subjectivity. Krauss and de Duve do not agree on the theory of the subject that Minimalism enacts, despite agreeing that a model of subjectivity is what is at stake in minimalism art” (127). Best arrives at an essential paradox of the minimalist aesthetic: essential precisely because without this characteristic ambivalence, minimalism would lose much of its creative and critical power: “Putting the spotlight on the performance of the viewing subject, is at the expense of the minimalist objects, and in turn, emphasizing the object’s power to entrain the subject is at the expense of the subject’s agency. The entanglement of the beholder and work of art, however, is clearly present in both accounts, but figured differently: in Krauss it turns on the subject’s blind adherence to the work’s intentions, in de Duve the subject blindly performs the work’s meaning (127). A fuller understanding sometimes must account for the viewer (an aesthetics of reception in which the work becomes an undifferentiated object), and sometimes it must account for the authority of the work (an aesthetics of production in which the work has power not only to suggest relationships but to coerce them, impose them—in other words, to act rhetorically). The paradox of minimalism is that the viewing subject is both active and passive, situated in a free space but equally constrained.
supplements its counterparts. This notion of relationship leads to a vision of subject that is active, self-aware, and also resistant to notions of the autonomous and unimpeachable otherness of the simple object (232). Morris remarks,

For it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work. Oddly, it is the strength of the constant, known shape, the gestalt, that allows this awareness to become so much more emphatic in these works than in previous sculpture. A Baroque figurative bronze is different from every side. So is a six-foot cube. The constant shape of the cube held in the mind but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related. There are two distinct terms: the known constant and the experienced variable. (234)

Despite the gestalt’s tempting presence, it is not ever fully there, never fully experienced. The work is, thus, in progress. (In a parallel way, the accessibility of the simple text’s discourse is inevitably tempered by our creative readings.) For the viewer even to say the word “cube” is to make an inference from experience, and so we see that minimalist art solicits a hermeneutic protocol that relies on this social-inferential work while it tests the limits of our experience.

When Rose describes Robert Morris’s “early plywood pieces” as being “all . . . elementary structures: a door, a window-frame, a platform. He even did a wheel, the most rudimentary structure of all” (291, my emphasis), we realize that even to describe these simple objects involves some sort of interpretive slippage. It is not necessarily a lapse or a stumble by Rose; her judgment testifies to the inevitability of the subject’s will to individuate herself, to assert the reality of her subjecthood in the presence of the simple other. Colpitt argues that minimalist art is the creation of new realities—of forms of otherness. It is not simply imitations of old,
preexisting geometric forms; their materiality places them as “themselves new and unique objects, referring to nothing” (102). But even when the object refers to nothing but itself, the subject will infer something. And it is this relationship between reference and inference—or I should say non-reference and the impulse towards inference—that imbues minimalist art with its particularly narrative dynamic.

In “Indian Camp” Hemingway also gestures at the interpretive problems of seeing an event in its entirety. More so than any other construction, variations on the simple phrase “I see” are repeated throughout the story. Such an iterative technique, which I expand upon in Chapter Two, not only foregrounds the challenges of perception, but in the way that it helps to create a narrative structure whose simplicity is founded in the putative predictability of repetition, it challenges the reader to consider the limits of his or her own interpretive vision when that predictability ultimately breaks down—that is, when the simplicity of the narrative structure shows its own recalcitrance: “‘I see,’ Nick said” (16); “‘You see, Nick, babies are supposed to be born head first but sometimes they’re not’” (17); “‘See, it’s a boy, Nick’” (17); “‘Ought to have a look at the proud father. They’re usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs’” (18); “Nick, standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian’s head back” (18). But, notably, when Hemingway switches from a strategy of external focalization to Nick’s perceptions of the event, the nature of the repetitions gradually change.14 It is the act of not seeing, of looking away, that becomes persistent: “He was

---

14 The repetition of simplicity also bears a striking resemblance to a compositional technique in minimalist music that prospered in the second half of the twentieth-century under such figures as La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley. In “The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music,” Jonathan W. Bernard argues that the aesthetics in minimalist art and music are commensurable: like the minimalist cube, whose emphatic, simple material surface appears to resist subjectivity, “[t]he simplification of musical materials that accompanies the suppression of chance procedures also results in the equivalent of a ‘shiny’ or ‘nonpainterly’ presence” (Bernard 99). According to Bernard, minimalist music arises out of two specific compositional choices: firstly, composers radically limit their sound sources in any given piece; secondly, a minimalist piece employs repetition extensively in order to foreground the possibilities of change over time (Bernard 99). Insofar as these features combine to “evoke a
looking away so as not to see what his father was doing” (17); “Nick didn’t look at it” (17); “Nick did not watch” (17). In order to be a successful “interne,” which is what Dr. Adams at one point calls Nick (17), the boy must closely observe the details of the operation and try to see everything. Yet this is a role that Nick eventually refuses to play, as he refuses to watch any more after the child is born. These simple repetitions emphasize the significance of perception in the story, but more than this, they assert a certain incommensurability of perspectives—the friction that will inevitably occur between father and son, between two interpretations of the world; insofar as these repetitions emphasize the very difficulty of seeing an event in its entirety—in seeing the gestalt—Hemingway’s strategy asks us to consider the necessity of inference but also its inevitable imperfections. The repetitions, in this sense, evoke a paradox of the simple text: they coalesce in order to allow the reader to more easily see the characters’ experiences of the narrative’s events and yet their particularity simultaneously withholds from the reader a complete view. I am forced to recognize the limits of my imaginative power; the sentence, “The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall,” begins to look a lot like Morris’s minimalist cube.15

sense of flatness” (99), minimalist music provides an aural analogy to its visual counterpart. Moreover, what this “sonic flatness” implies is that small changes in the musical structure must be, in one sense, noticed, or otherwise the piece remains not just uninteresting but uneventful. The simplification of compositional means solicits from the listener a different kind of attention than is required of him or her in, say, a piece of serial music. To pay attention to this flatness is to pay attention to a certain type of surface, whereby the so-called meaning of the piece is a function of the listener’s concentration upon the intricacy of what is directly present—what sounds are there and how they change. “This reduction of music to its basic elements, the elimination of imperceptible complexity,” states Elaine Broad, “allows the simple aspects to have greater importance: a change in harmony or texture in a minimalist piece can be a major event” (52). Whereas the surface of the minimalist cube may challenge our inference of a gestalt, surface in minimalist music more definitively draws our attention to the changing of sonic details over time. Such attention, I think, significantly parallels the reading process in a story like “Indian Camp.” A minor change in the nature of Hemingway’s repetitions becomes a major event, but one that comes into being only through the reader’s noticing of it.

15 Cynthia Whitney Hallett argues that literary minimalism is grounded in “Hemingway’s ‘tip of the iceberg’ aesthetic principle,” but minimalist art depends upon the “‘whole ice cube’ effect, with which all that is seen is all that there is” (1). For Hallett, minimalist literature requires the reader’s powers of figurative association to make sense of the iceberg’s tip, whereas minimalist art’s literalism defies figuration. But the minimalist cube—just like the iceberg—is activated through the interplay between a preconceived gestalt and the real experience of fragmentation: neither the cube nor the iceberg is ever fully seen in one glimpse. Both emphatically assert their
Phelan’s rhetorical definition of narrative is here useful to consider because he emphasizes that the concept of “narrative as rhetoric” means “that narrative is not just story but also action, *the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose*” (*Narrative* 7-8). And though, of course, the type of action differs depending on whether we are talking about art or literature (there is of course no-one narrating the story of the cube; it is silent), the beholder of the minimalist sculpture is still, as Morris suggests, called into action—the object solicits his movement around it, asks how to be viewed, and yet his performance is still improvisational, not wholly bound to the object. We must always attend to surfaces, be they rough, smooth, opaque, etc., and these surfaces engage us at the same time that they resist us.

The cube’s lack of interiority frustrates us but also inspires us to imaginative action. It asks us to forgo interpretation at the same time that it requires it, and so it makes us especially aware of our roles as both receivers and creators of meaning. This is the very beauty of the minimalist object: its story is the story of reception. If the rhetorical theory of narrative, which “shifts emphasis from author as controller to the recursive relationships among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (Phelan, *Narrative* 19), indicates the need to interrogate how texts condition their own reception, then minimalist art illustrates the particular ways in which simplicity might occasion an especial awareness of our ethical roles as interpreters of otherness.

Subjectivity in minimalism is constituted through the way the simple object asks us to negotiate between the poles of reference and inference. When Toby Mussman, for example, sought to explain Robert Morris’s flat grey box, divided into four equal parts, his self-presence by means of their surfaces, and our knowledge of both of them ultimately rests on this surface experience. Moreover, the depths of the iceberg are just as hidden as the interior of the cube. The difference between Hallett’s conception of the iceberg and my own is that I see the iceberg as another minimalist object, different perhaps in degree from the cube but not in kind. One ought to attend to the terrible beauty of its surface—for that is what we experience—even though we are aware of the existence of the frozen depths.
reflexivity—his interpretive accountability—was borne out of the very recalcitrance of the simple construction:

In our mind’s eye it is clear that the box was originally made whole and that it has been doubly bisected so that when the quarters are then put back, one would naturally expect them to fit cohesively enough to reestablish the primary box. But in actual fact, the integrity of the original box is never reaffirmed. Bisection is an abstract principle just as \( \pi \) is, and the viewer is left to fend for himself to do the best he can to reconcile this difference between the abstract and the concrete.

(248)

Mussman explicitly recognized that the minimalist project insists on the very limitations of inference on the part of the viewing subject. And this constraint comes in spite of the need and desire of the critic to individuate him or herself by making sense of the putatively autonomous object. Because it is something newly real, because it is something not quite the same as all other objects that have preceded it, because of its emphasis on its own materiality, the object insists on its own irreducible presence. All of our inferences and interpretations of its meaning must face this limitation, even if we then choose to resist it.

To see but not see beyond, to know depth likely exists but never be fully able to apprehend that depth, to infer interiority but never fully know the character or extent of that interiority, that is what the minimalist aesthetic (artistic or literary) gives us. It proffers a viewing and/or reading experience that attends to surfaces first and foremost, because surfaces are, ultimately, all we have. There is, then, ingrained in the minimalist aesthetic a lurking uncertainty. The epistemological challenge of its reception is that it asks us how we can ever fully know what we think we know: how do we know a cube is just a cube, how do we know it is not that and
more—both a cube and a person? How and when do we justify interpreting a literary character as both a person (mimetic) and a symbol (synthetic, thematic)? How do we draw the line between good and better interpretive strategies, which is to say, how do we maintain accountability in our freedom as critics and readers?

The following study observes that the ethical protocols of literary simplicity are constituted through the ways in which the text asks its reader to negotiate this interpretive issue. In its various manifestations, simplicity intensifies the reader’s awareness of his or her active interpretive role and simultaneously exposes the ethical challenges of that putatively free activity. Through my attention to moments of interpretive hesitation, moments in which the text exposes the violences of our readings, and moments in which we must confront the limits of knowability, I locate an ethical opportunity in the self-reflexive work that our encounter with otherness asks us to perform. Each chapter attempts to distinguish a specific narrative element of simplicity in order to offer as precise a view as possible of how Hemingway and Cather construct their hermeneutic ethics. The three major narratological concepts of this study—thinness, smoothness, and spaciousness—are meant not only to provoke intellectual curiosity but, more fundamentally, to begin to use a new language to talk about simplicity in literature. It is the attempt to shift the word “simple” from its neglected place in criticism to a position where it can effectively stimulate discussion by producing new understandings of modernism, particularly, and literary interpretation more generally.

Chapter One introduces the twin concepts of the thin character and thin narration. Looking at Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, I ask how a simply-wrought character within a linguistically accessible text asks that the reader be self-conscious about the ways in which he or she mobilizes narrative elements for interpretation. By focusing on both the synthetic and
mimetic dimensions of the protagonist, Frederic Henry, as well as those of Catherine Barkley, I consider the ways in which their simplicity both revises commonly held distinctions between major and minor characters (round vs. flat, three-dimensional vs. two-dimensional) and also operates as a hermeneutic frame that reiterates the reader’s rhetorical relationship to the larger text. Without ignoring the implicit sexism embedded in Hemingway’s depiction of Catherine, I consider how Frederic’s responses to her thinness parallel the same ethical challenges of interpretive “use” that the reader faces when confronted with the simple text. The second section of the chapter analyzes Cather’s constructions of thinness in *My Ántonia*, paying particular attention to the difference between the narrative modes of the novel’s homodiegetic narrator, Jim Burden, and the character Ántonia. If from Hemingway we learn that thinness can operate as a key to understanding how a text suggests the terms of its interpretations, in Cather’s novel we see how she substantiates this ethical call by counterpointing one hermeneutic protocol against another. The ethical pressure that Ántonia’s thin hypodiegetic stories place upon Jim works to align her with the simple recalcitrance of the novel’s frame narrator. Through these techniques of thinness, Cather suggests a hermeneutic ethics founded not primarily in the self’s imaginative individuation but in a quality of sustained attention to the other-as-text.

Chapter Two focuses on definitions of structure and genre within the simple text. It defines *smoothness* as a mode of structural parataxis, a predictable rhetorical rhythm that relies not upon the explicitly logical connection between events as much as the persistent repetition of various narrative forms and elements. In my analysis of Hemingway’s short story cycle, *In Our Time*, I explore how parataxis on the linguistic level (the patterning of words and sentences within each story) and on the generic level (the patterning of images and stories within the larger text) posits a pluralistic ethic that challenges an interpretive impulse that would too quickly move
from the particulars of an experience to a universalizing theme. The cycle’s smoothness beckons
the reader to attend to the inevitable distortions involved in the explication of meaning. From
there, I move on to a consideration of the relationship between Cather’s smooth narrative and her
depiction of smooth material things in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather suggests a
parallel between the way characters in the novel interact with and respond to simple and smooth
aesthetic objects and the way in which readers might engage with her episodic text. Jean-Marie
Latour’s handling of certain Indigenous artifacts of the Southwestern United States, as
previously mentioned, leads him to contemplate the larger implications of his touch as a physical
but also a cultural act. In the same way, Cather’s smooth text asks the reader to contemplate the
ultimate impositions involved in his or her own interpretive touch: if the act of interpretation
unavoidably marks the other, how does a smooth text—which makes the traces of that mark
emphatic—define accountability? Cather’s simplicity sharpens the reader’s awareness of this
conundrum, asking how we might inscribe ourselves upon the text (how we might assert the
individuality of our vision) without, paradoxically, inscribing too much of ourselves.

Chapter Three explores the ethical consequences of simple setting. I use the term
*spaciousness* to describe the images of vast space that invite characters and readers to change the
way in which they interpret the world and their place in it. In both *The Old Man and the Sea* and
*The Professor’s House*, representations of natural space temporarily occupy the narrative
foreground—asking us not to view them as backdrops against which individual human
excursions can be measured but as active spaces. In Hemingway’s text, I locate a connection
between the novella’s hermeneutic and ecocritical ethics. The treatment of simple and wide open
space by the author is a sign of interpretive freedom but also, insofar as such spaciousness
overwhelms the protagonist, Santiago, it exposes the individual’s imaginative limitations. In
particular, I examine how the sea solicits Santiago’s attention and conditions his transition from an anthropocentric to a biocentric ethic, how that ethic only comes into being through an interpretive protocol that exposes the inevitable violences of individualism in the text and the world beyond, and how simplicity might begin to help the reader negotiate that inevitability through moments of self-consciousness. In Cather’s text, the character of Tom Outland is inspired by the spacious Southwestern landscape. It provokes in him a mode of lyric narration which both arrests the forward progression of his personal narrative and conditions a mode of interpretation that differs in kind from the novel’s other protagonist, Professor Godfrey St. Peter. The contemplation of simple space causes Tom to hesitate, to reconsider his adventurist impulse and the ways in which he has sought to excavate the space in order to know it. These moments in which he comes to recognize his hermeneutic limits align him with Cather’s strategy of focalization, a strategy that emphasizes the importance of understanding Tom’s simple narrative as a shared text that solicits an awareness and performance of accountability.

In moving towards a discussion of how simplicity frames the reader’s understanding of interpretive accountability, this study intimates that a text’s politics emerge through the connection between its themes and its hermeneutic protocols. In the postscript, I consider these politics more directly and ask how Hemingway’s and Cather’s aesthetics—in the way that they propose limits to our freedoms as interpreting subjects—are structured by a democratic impulse. I also observe how the early journalism of both authors helped to shape their ideas and criticisms of an American democracy that oftentimes appeared to legitimize an irresponsible readership. That in their fiction Hemingway and Cather found an effective means of challenging the parameters of the subject’s freedom, that they implicitly theorized interpretation as fundamental to the criticism and practice of democracy, and that they implicated their readers in complex
ethical negotiations—this is what makes their aesthetics still relevant today. The concept of responsible interpretation extends far beyond the literary realm, but it is often literature that makes its significance so emphatic. “[L]anguage is one instrument of human violence,” says Tobin Siebers, “and in that respect literary critics have a responsibility not only to supervise their own unjust practices as critics, but to think about the ways in which language carries on the work of human prejudice” (7). If through a conversation about simplicity new understandings of this responsibility emerge, then this study will have begun to do its work.
Chapter One: Thin Characters, Thin Narrators

In this chapter, I examine how simplicity and “thinness” operate as implicit hermeneutic frames, what Werner Wolf refers to as “basic orientational aids” which “inform our cognitive activities and generally function as preconditions of interpretation” (“Frames” 5). I propose the term “thin character” as a way both to nuance traditional distinctions between minor and major characters and to introduce the idea of simplicity as recalcitrant. With A Farewell to Arms, I consider how a simply drawn character can suggest the terms of our rhetorical relationship to the larger text while also causing us to think self-consciously about the relative importance we assign to mimetic, thematic, and synthetic character dimensions. I argue that our interpretation of the novel must account for the ways in which Frederic Henry’s reading of Catherine Barkley influences his own minimalist narrative technique. In the second section, I take this idea of thinness-as-cognitive-key and analyze how, in My Ántonia, thinness counterpoints the thicker, more dominant mode of telling proffered by the novel’s homodiegetic narrator, Jim Burden. I argue that in the way Cather frames and reframes thinness, she engages an alternative ethics of narration that rests upon the ostensibly audience-centered qualities of witness and sustained attention.
1.1 How We Use Hemingway’s Characters in *A Farewell to Arms*

Towards the end of Book IV of *A Farewell to Arms*, just before Frederic and Catherine flee Italy to Switzerland, Frederic plays a game of billiards with Count Greffi in their Stresa hotel. Positioned as it is, in the midst of this narrative of war, desertion, and vigorous love, such a peaceful interlude might strike the reader as strange. Both Frederic and Catherine know that he is “liable to be arrested [in Stresa] at any time,” and Frederic has already insinuated his plan of escape to Catherine: “Switzerland is down the lake, we can go there” (251). Thus, the reasoning behind Frederic’s decision to play with Greffi in such a public space as the hotel billiard room—a space where he can be monitored and detected—is, from the perspective of survival, difficult to determine. Unlike the barman, who takes Frederic fishing as a pretext to offer him his boat—“Any time you want it . . . I’ll give you the key” (256)—Greffī is of no material use to Frederic. Although the Count shares in Frederic’s war weariness and skepticism, summing up the entire affair as “stupid” (262), Frederic does not solicit any sort of substantive help from him. He does not ask for money (actually, Frederic loses money to him in the billiards game), or any means to aid his escape at all. Indeed, the advice and counsel that Frederic solicits from Greffī is not in any way *practical* in the context of desertion: “Would you like to live after death?” (261). The conversation moves through literature and aging, to love and religion, a philosophical dialogue in the midst of extreme and potentially fatal circumstances.

And so we might legitimately ask: what is the *use* of this scene? Does its thematic function wholly supersede its mimetic function? Why is Greffī part of this novel? Certainly, this exchange doesn’t advance the plot; the specific story of escape would not be in any way modified had Hemingway omitted this scene. Phelan interprets Greffī in terms of his ideational character—the particular gracious and benevolent mode of living he represents. For Phelan,
“Greffì performs the thematic function of indicating how to live with the knowledge of the world. He is an image of what Frederic might become in his old age” (Reading People 186). This mode of interpretation reads Greffi more in terms of what he does for us, as readers, than what he does for Frederic. Insofar as Greffi advances a certain theme—a message of how to live with dignity—Phelan reads the character as more valuable to the reader than to Frederic, who, because he exists on the same ontological plane as Greffi, does not read him representatively. Conversely, Philip Sipiora, emphasizes Greffi’s use to Frederic. And yet, Sipiora also retains Greffi’s thematic dimension, arguing that the value best associated with him is that of Aristotelian “phronesis”:

Count Greffi’s “wisdom” contradicts—and transcends—his denial that he has acquired insight, since his character embodies practical wisdom . . . Greffi’s values center around love, friendship, and a comforting serenity in the knowledge that a full life engages a chain of existential moments without fear. In rejecting sectarian beliefs, Count Greffi accepts human existence as the ultimate transcendental experience, and this understanding is the kind of wisdom—

*phronesis*—that Frederic longs to possess. (69)

Unlike Phelan, Sipiora reads Frederic as “longing to possess” and “passionately seek[ing] to acquire” Greffi’s wisdom (69). In this interpretation, functionality is textually-based rather than recipient-based. In other words, Greffi’s use to Frederic is emphasized over his use to the reader. Although both critics see Greffi, loosely, as a potential model of how to live—of how to incorporate one’s experiences and sufferings into one’s life with dignity and grace—they differ in terms of who they understand the primary receiver of this message to be.
Despite their marked differences, however, these arguments reveal our critical need to interpret characters (especially minor characters) in terms of their twofold use, which is to say their use to us and their use to others. But do some texts, I wonder, anticipate and resist such instrumentalization? How might a text make readers self-conscious about the ways they “use” characters for interpretation? The guiding question of this chapter is how simple characters, such as Greffi, support an aesthetic that interrogates not only the limits our interpretive freedom but also the very parameters of “functionality.” How do thin and simple characters act as cognitive keys, as subtle suggestions upon which we model our own encounter with the larger text? How do use and interpretation blend into one another and subsequently suggest new ways of reading characters? I do not claim that minimalist literature prevents our use of characters; just as ethical reading is not simply a function of restraint and distance, minimalism does not presuppose a naïve, deferential reader who refuses to interrogate the text and insists upon its unimpeachable otherness. Instead, precisely because the reader exists on an alternative ontological level than the characters of texts, and because interpretation will always be at least loosely political, we cannot wholly forgo the idea of characters as means. I am, in this sense, in agreement with Richard Rorty, who abandons Umberto Eco’s distinction between using and interpreting and instead, “just distinguish[es] between different uses by different people for different purposes” (106). At the same time, Rorty retains a certain fidelity to the autonomy of the text: “Things, Kant said, have value, but persons have dignity. Texts are, for this purpose, honorary persons. To merely use them—to treat them merely as means and not also as ends in themselves—is to act immorally” (106). Such a turn back toward mimesis—that is, toward the idea that texts can have

16 In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco keeps the concepts of interpretation and use at arms length from each other. He argues that “To critically interpret a text means to read it in order to discover, along with our reactions to it, something about its nature. To use a text means to start from it in order to get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it from the semantic point of view” (57).
dignity because, in the moment of reading, we share a common reality—challenges us to reconsider the interpretive protocols we bring to bear upon even the most simply and thinly drawn textual elements.

I have chosen to introduce this chapter with a discussion of both a relatively minor scene and a relatively minor character precisely because Greffi’s simplicity interrogates our interpretive boundaries and our capacity to know a text’s otherness. As Elaine Scarry points out, “Literature—even when it enlists us into the greatest imaginative acts and the most expansive compassion—always confesses the limits on the imagination by the structural necessity of major and minor persons, center stage and lateral figures” (286-87). From this point of view, Greffi’s presence in the novel marks the very limits of our ability as humans to imagine otherness; he is testament to the necessity of the structural periphery, to the need for secondary synthetic and thematic characters who cannot be imagined mimaetically—that is, as potentially real persons.

Greffī, like so many other Hemingway characters, is thinly drawn:

Count Greffi was ninety-four years old. He had been a contemporary of Metternich and was an old man with white hair and mustache and beautiful manners. He had been in the diplomatic service of both Austria and Italy and his birthday parties were the great social event of Milan. He was living to be one hundred years old and played a smoothly fluent game of billiards that contrasted with his own ninety-four-year-old brittleness. (254)

But does this spare description, this simplicity of character that Hemingway conveys to us, commit Greffi to a purely synthetic or thematic existence? In other words, is he simply a functional construct, only a means for something greater than himself?
In narrative terms, the question might be phrased as whether the thematic and synthetic dimensions of a minor character must always supplant his or her mimetic dimension. Scarry gestures towards the problem a character like Greffi poses in regards to the very difficulty of imagining him as real. That he is such a minimal presence in the text, not in terms of his thematic function but in terms of the relatively small amount of narrative space Hemingway grants him, challenges our capacity to understand him as a real and potentially complex subject in the world. When compared to a protagonist such as Frederic or Catherine, Count Greffi does not hold our attention for very long. He is a character we encounter along the way. And it is this fleeting presence that makes it easy for us to forget about him, or at least to pass him off as more of a structural necessity than a human actor. Insofar as our attention to him is limited to the space of a few pages, he becomes a sign of a certain sympathetic limit. Such a limit, such a constraint, at least in our world, Scarry argues, is both the symptom and cause of real violence: “The action of injuring occurs precisely because we have trouble believing in the reality of other persons. At the same time, the injury itself makes visible the fact that we cannot see the reality of other persons. It displays our perceptual disability” (Scarry 281). In literature, when we cannot, or refuse to, believe in the reality of other characters, does an analogous violence occur? We appropriate them, perceive them as constructs which contribute to plot or theme, use them to suit our own critical ends. How might we live with and in these interpretive violences without overwhelming the other with our imaginative power but also without sacrificing the positive and creative moments of individuation that come into being through our acts of interpretation?

One of Scarry’s solutions to the problems we have imagining the other is that rather than trying to expend all of our intellectual and empathetic energies on comprehensively imagining someone else—on imagining their complexity—we might instead focus on “dis-imagin[ing]
ourselves” (285). The idea is that equality between self and other is achieved “not by trying to make one’s knowledge of others as weighty as one’s knowledge of oneself, but by making one ignorant about oneself, and therefore as weightless as all others” (292). This notion of disimagining is useful for our purposes. Although Scarry speaks specifically of equality between self and other, and I am more interested in the mechanics and possibilities of understanding the textual other, the process of disimagination is a key component of Hemingway’s narrative strategy. It is not that literary minimalism coerces its readers to disimagine themselves; rather, minimalism, by means of its persistent succession of simply drawn, roughly “two-dimensional” figures (and these do not necessarily need to be minor characters, as I will show) disimagines its own characters. Confronted with these multiple surface figures, the reader gradually becomes aware of a new reading protocol in which deep, interior knowledge of the other is not the point. The simplicity of a character like Count Greffi simultaneously encourages our “use” of him, our instrumentalization of him for thematic and synthetic purposes, and also resists such use insofar as his disimagination points to the inevitable limits of any attempt to know fully the nature and purpose of the other. The thin character, in this case, suggests the terms of the simple text’s recalcitrance. In this microcosmic role, he or she comes to embody the very obstacle of simplicity.

A new term is necessary. Count Greffi, like so many of Hemingway’s creations, is better understood as a thin character, as opposed to merely a minor character. A thin character is, in Scarry’s terms, relatively “weightless.” A thin character is one who is disimagined by the implied author so as to complicate our use of him or her; it is a character who makes us self-aware of our appropriative and instrumental acts. The very simplicity of the thin character, the uncomplicated and direct description of his or her physical attributes and his or her nominal
personal history, establishes a certain flatness as the norm. This is not in the conventional sense of a flat character, but in the sense of being an other who challenges not only the reader’s but other characters’ imaginative capacities. The foremost quality of a thin character is his or her simplicity of depiction, and thus a thin character need not necessarily be peripheral to the text’s narrative progression.

Count Greffi and Frederic are not friends in the conventional sense of really knowing each other. The billiard game is only their second meeting, and when the barman initially notifies Frederic of Greffi’s presence in the hotel, Frederic’s first response is “Who?” (253). Greffi has made a minimal impression on Frederic, and yet despite their lack of shared knowledge of each other, the reader nonetheless intuits a bond between them, founded upon a shared knowledge of the world. Further, what’s striking about this scene is not Greffi’s representation of a potential Hemingwayan “code” but the sincerity and affection embedded in the interactions between two people who hardly know one another. Says Greffi just before the two men part ways:

“And if you ever become devout pray for me if I am dead. I am asking several of my friends to do that. I had expected to become devout myself but it has not come.” I thought he smiled sadly but I could not tell. He was so old and his face was very wrinkled, so that a smile used so many lines that all gradations were lost.

“I might become very devout,” I said. “Anyway, I will pray for you.”

“I had always expected to become devout. All my family died very devout. But somehow it does not come.”

“It’s too early.” (263)
Significantly, Frederic has difficulty *reading* Greffi’s face, and he must admit to himself and to his audience the limits of his inferential capacity. The face, that site of primary engagement with the other, for all its wrinkles, is seen as having no “gradation.” For all its details of lines, it is paradoxically smooth, simple and without shades. And yet the power and emotionality of Frederic and Greffi’s companionship exists in spite of this interpretive lack. We see through their mutual affection that engagement and understanding are not simply functions of knowing the profundity of the other; they are also functions of knowing one’s own imaginative limits. In this sense, Frederic’s interaction with the thin Greffi stages a moment of interpretive responsibility that our own reading might imitate. We witness not only a way of reading but a way of responding—a way that does not “penetrate” the simple obstacle.

It is this quality of relationship that prevents Greffi from being reduced to merely a stock image or caricature of wisdom—what prevents him from simply being “minor.” Whereas a minor character is inevitably functional, a thin character both encourages and frustrates the imaginative energies that go into the reader’s active reconstruction of texts. Moreover, Hemingway posits the possibility of Greffi’s reality—his mimetic dimension—precisely by dramatizing the emotional and philosophical intimacy that is possible between two characters who are largely unreadable to one other. Greffi, in this sense, frames a new mode of interpretation and interaction with the other-as-text. Building upon Phelan, who observes that we respond to Greffi “as an individual with specific traits [mimetic], as representing a set of attitudes that illustrate how to deal with the world’s essential emptiness [thematic], and as a device for instructing Frederic and the reader in those attitudes [synthetic]” (*Narrative* 91), I want to emphasize how the mimetic dimension serves those secondary functions. Again, we still use Greffi for our interpretations, but at the same time his thinness—his “realistic” opacity—
structures that interpretive use. In this view, Greffi becomes not just an instrument through which to see Hemingway’s ideal code-hero, but a disimagined other; through Frederic’s interaction with him, he becomes a real manifestation of the minimalist impulse to engage with a surface, a challenge to our inferential capacity, a person who cannot be known and yet can still be learnt from, engaged with, and respected.

This disparity between intimacy and knowledge in Frederic and Greffi’s relationship is an aspect of *A Farewell to Arms* that has not garnered critical attention. It is, however, a significant dynamic that is reiterated persistently and lends perspective to the reader’s rhetorical relationship to the text. While it is true that the intimacy between Frederic and Greffi bespeaks a certain intersubjective understanding—they both recognize the difficulties of being devout in a world ravaged by war and they come to share a definition of “love” as a type of alternative religion—this understanding is based more upon a shared language than the disclosure of specific experiences. That is, neither really knows the details of the profound and complex personal history of the other man; understanding of the other and knowledge of the other are not wholly commensurate. In that Frederic and Greffi are both intimate companions and strangers to each other, and in that the narrative progression pauses to focus on their philosophical game despite Frederic’s inability to read Greffi, Hemingway gestures towards a parallel dynamic between reader and text that, in fact, extends throughout the entire novel.

At the beginning of any novel, any and all characters will be relatively thin to us as readers. Some novels work immediately to rectify this. Others, such as *A Farewell to Arms*, accentuate the thinness of even a main character when he is newly-introduced. Chapter One is famous for its characteristic Hemingway style—its brevity, simple diction, understatement, paratactic structure, etc. Moreover, in the opening scene, Hemingway frames the reader’s
relationship with Frederic and subtly sets up the terms of our engagement with what James Nagel calls Frederic’s “retrospective narration” (“Retrospective” 171). Hemingway introduces us to a narrator who speaks plainly of his past—a past whose significance he comes to terms with, it seems, only as the narration unfolds. And yet, in spite of this plainness, the reader cannot help but also feel distanced from Frederic, not simply because of a wartime context that may be unfamiliar but because of a potent ambivalence displayed through his diction.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves. (3)

The simplicity of this passage is due not only to the obvious absence of modifiers (save for the most straightforward) and emotional response but also, in large part, to Frederic’s persistent use of the definite article as well as the conspicuous insertion of the demonstrative pronoun, “that.” Critics, however, are divided on the implications of this spare style in regards to the implied reader. Walter J. Ong, for example, argues that such diction compels the reader into a position of a “close companion of the writer” (63), and that even though as “real” readers we don’t have the same experiential knowledge of Hemingway or Frederic, as fictionalized (implied) readers, we “pretend to knowledge, feign it, in order to secure intimacy” (69). Similarly, according to Walker Gibson, the reader “has been placed in a situation where he is expected to assume that he does
know what the speaker is talking about. It is as if, for the assumed reader, a conversation had been going on before he opened the book, a conversation that laid the groundwork for all this assumed intimacy” (38). Ong and Gibson emphasize the companion-like relationship that the reader is called into by the text, though they consequently minimize its potentially more alienating and exclusionary rhetorical effects.

Indeed, Harry Levin, one of Hemingway’s earlier critics, argues that this passage and others do more to disconnect us as readers from the narrator and the action than bring us closer to them: “The adverb is there rather than here, the verb is was rather than is, because we—the readers—are separated from the event in space and time” (157). Bernard Oldsey comes to a comparable conclusion in his analysis of the passage’s pronominal usage insofar as it depends upon “a special ‘we’ [that] is not all inclusive” (64). Phelan, moreover, reads the definitives and demonstratives as evidence of Frederic’s disposition as more a recorder than a reflector, as a “non-self-conscious narrator” (“Distance” 59, 69); for Phelan, the “there” indicates a moment where Frederic observes his former self, a marker of memory in which the reader cannot fully share.

This debate over the effect of the narrative’s diction upon the reader—whether it invites the reader in as a boon companion to Frederic or whether it disconnects the reader by persistently emphasizing unfamiliar specifics—points not only to a fundamental narrational ambivalence but also to a major ethical crux that exists along the hermeneutic axis. That the reader seems to be both included and excluded by Frederic’s voice, that “the river,” “the plain,” “the mountains,” and “that year,” simultaneously point to places and things we as readers ought already to know and places and things we cannot know for lack of experience, places us in a difficult position. In other words, the linguistic simplicity of the passage produces a difficulty—a hesitation—that
exists alongside its cognitive simplicity. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with the epistemological limits of Hemingway’s accessible prose style. And it is in this way that our relationship with Frederic through this opening sequence works recursively with the much later scene involving Count Greffi. Not only does the rhetorical ambivalence of the introduction prepare us for Greffi, but also, the thinness of Greffi forces us to reconsider our relationship to Frederic and his text by cuing us into the potential nuances, complexities, and veritable recalcitrance of such linguistic simplicity. Just as Frederic, despite his intimacy with Greffi, cannot definitively read anything into his face, neither can we definitively read Frederic. His simple words, his proclivity for referentiality rather than reflection, and his penchant for direct observation all help to establish a textual surface—a character-narrator—that can be both read and not read. He is a character about whom we feel we must make inferences but who also frustrates those interpretive attempts.

Phelan’s solution to this interpretive dilemma is to maintain a rigid separation between Frederic-the-narrator and Hemingway-the-implied-author in the first chapter. Insofar as Hemingway’s voice contains Frederic’s and produces a “double-voiced discourse” to the retrospective narrative (“Distance” 54), there are implications in Frederic’s words that he may not realize but of which both Hemingway and the reader are aware. As Phelan explains, “Hemingway is implying a causal relationship between the presence of the troops and the falling of the leaves, but Frederic may not see that causation. As objective recorder, he may just be noting a sequence of events” (“Distance” 55). There is a certain appeal to this reading insofar as it legitimizes the reader’s inferential action based on our higher ontological level. But does it come at the expense of Frederic? By claiming that Frederic may be unaware of the import of his words, of their potential meaning and significance, does Phelan here detract from the emotional
resonance of Frederic’s meiosis by misappropriating his language? Doesn’t it make more sense to at least begin by assuming that Frederic, as a man who has chosen to tell his story, is aware of the ambivalence of his own paratactic speech? How do we account for the fraught relationship between simplicity-as-accessibility and simplicity-as-obstacle? Frederic’s unreliability—that is, his distance from the implied author—is laid bare, according to Phelan, in the final two sentences of the first chapter: “At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army” (4). The world “only” signifies an irony for Phelan, a discrepancy between an implied author who is more sympathetic towards the dirty realities of war and a narrator who “does not understand the war or the larger destruction of the world,” and who, furthermore, possesses an “inadequate view of his own situation” (“Distance” 56). The thrust of Phelan’s argument is that because Frederic is not a self-conscious narrator, he is unaware of the irony of the “only.” The reader fills in the gaps that Frederic naively misses. And yet, the problem with this line of argument is that it cannot fully explain away the possibility that Frederic knows exactly what he is saying, and the implications of his words. Whereas Phelan assumes that Frederic is ignorant, it is in fact Frederic who, through his own understated declaration, demonstrates a potentially ironic awareness of the state of the war—“things went very badly” (4). Though minimal, these words are both evaluative and interpretive; they reveal not a wholly naïve narrator-recorder but a critical teller. Frederic is not an objective recorder insofar as he, along with the reader, judges (and interprets) the sequence he narrates. The “negative judgment about the war” that Phelan says is only implied by Hemingway (“Distance” 55), is in fact made explicitly by Frederic too. He is, in brief, much more aware of his ironic mode than Phelan gives him credit for. To interpret Frederic as unreliable at this point in the narrative, I think, is premature because of the ultimate ambivalence
of the paratactic style. The causative associations that the reader may or may not see in the gaps cannot wholly and clearly be ascribed to either Hemingway or Frederic. There is no clear moment of divergence between the implied author and character-narrator precisely because the thin narrative technique—in this case, understatement—prevents the reader from locating a stable source of the irony. At this stage then, I see Frederic as reliable because although he is possibly callous, he just as possibly is not.

What I would like to add to Phelan’s analysis is a recognition of the rhetorical ambivalence of this opening passage, which is activated by the diction. Phelan’s interpretation hinges on the argument that Frederic progresses through the novel from a position of unreliability to reliability, at which point his values align with those of Hemingway. I am arguing, however, that the case for Frederic’s unreliability in the opening sequence of the novel is impossible to determine because Phelan’s reading of Hemingway’s values hinges on an imperfect inferential act. Though I do not dispute that by the end of the novel, Frederic has developed a pessimistic worldview that is steeped in the recognition that he has misused and misread Catherine, I do believe that Frederic’s narrational reticence prevents the reader from definitively locating the source of the text’s irony. Moreover, this reticence is a form of thinness that, as we will see, echoes Catherine’s characterization. That the narrator’s voice adopts this quality of recalcitrant simplicity reveals to us the possibility that Frederic has already learned something from his ordeal of love and war—that is, he might, from the very beginning, understand his own limits as an interpreting subject.

That the narrative audience is placed in a position where Frederic’s experience is both knowable and unknown, shared and restricted, and that our distance to Frederic fluctuates, implies a certain border to our inferential powers. To label him “naïve” so quickly is to privilege
the evaluative powers of the reader over those of the man who has actually experienced the war and its concomitant suffering. But because we do not completely share this experience—because the reader is imagined also as an outsider, separate from the “we”—the voice here asks us, implicitly, to withhold our judgment of the man. The major difference, then, between Phelan and myself is that whereas Phelan is certain of the temperament and character of Hemingway’s voice—that of the implied author—which proffers a foundation upon which to judge Frederic, I don’t think Hemingway’s voice is nearly as evident. Frederic’s thinness, ironically, resists that cognitive access. Such recalcitrance, I am arguing, asks us to reconsider the text’s narrative ethics. According to Phelan, “Frederic’s voice conveys his beliefs at the time of the action, while our awareness of Hemingway’s voice conveys the distance between narrator and implied author” (Narrative 65). But as Phelan also points out, voice “depends on inferences” that the reader makes regarding the speaker’s tone and values (Narrative 45). In the case of homodiegetic narration such as Frederic’s, moreover, locating the voice of the implied author is an especially imperfect inferential act. Hemingway’s voice is just as much a part of the underwater iceberg as anything else omitted; we may feel we know the source of irony, but the irony is nonetheless only moderately stable because it is a function of interpretive danda, not data. In other words, we must retain the possibility that the diction and the paratactic patterning are Frederic’s too. In this case, rather than trying to infer the ethical standards of the implied author through a reading of what’s not there (those paratactic gaps), I think that one of the best ways to intuit the ethical standards of the text in the case of minimal narration is through our contact with thin characters.

---

17 According to Wayne Booth in Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism, “data” refers to indisputable fact as recorded by observers, whereas “danda” refers to fact but from a given critical perspective which must “inevitably leave out, ignore, or distort the danda revealed by other modes” (247). Perceptively, he remarks that “Too many of our data are danda.” (249).
Granted, such inferences will still be imperfect, but they will be based on the said rather than the unsaid.

When dealing with an aesthetic that persistently questions our inferential powers (and dramatizes it too, as we see in the case of Frederic’s inability to read Count Greffi), we need to be self conscious about the inferences we make in terms of the implied author. The linguistic features of the opening sequence place us in a hesitant, ambivalent relationship to the text, and the paratactic patterning draws our attention to the potential gaps of causation. Just as we are unable to fully appropriate Frederic’s experience—and make it our own—neither are we able to fully appropriate and align ourselves with the implied author’s voice. The “real” message in the gaps (the causative link between the war and the destruction of nature) exists only in a state of potentiality; it is a possible world, but it is not prescribed to the reader. Furthermore, we cannot say with any certainty whose message this might be—that of Frederic, who speaks retrospectively, a teller separated from his former self, or of Hemingway, an implied author whose values are less audible. Voice, here, is oscillatory. The locus of judgment persistently alternates between the two textual figures.

The opening sequence of *A Farewell to Arms*, in this way, introduces the reader to a peculiar case of double-voiced discourse in which the focalization is ambiguous. Phelan is right to point out that Frederic speaks from the time of the action, but it does not necessarily follow that Frederic-the-teller is ignorant of an ethical standard that is only implied by the author. For Phelan, Frederic *must* be ignorant at this moment because he offers no clues that his narration is self-conscious. But does he have to? What makes Frederic’s voice here initially so captivating is its quality of recalcitrant simplicity, and so if he were to disclose himself so early on in the novel—if there were an irruption of self-consciousness—it would severely detract from the
continuity of his mimetic dimension. If in the first chapter, Frederic-the-teller were to reveal himself as the openly reflective type, Frederic-the-reticent-protagonist would appear contrived and unbelievable. Of course, by means of narrative patterning, we still feel the potential presence of Hemingway looking over the shoulder of Frederic and judging; but the implied author’s presence is decidedly minimal. Because the distance between Hemingway and Frederic is uncertain—because the irony of the “only” could be intended by either of them—the focalization is ambiguous. The ideology of the text, therefore, is only fully realized through the reader’s recognition of this limit, framed as it is by means of a rhetorical relationship. We therefore find ourselves confronted with a hermeneutic limit. Our inability to differentiate entirely between the implied author and the narrator points to Hemingway’s larger “reluctance to authorize” (Weimann 444), which finds its parallel in the minimal artist’s attempted erasure of his or her own subjectivity.

In fact, it is precisely because Frederic gradually shows himself to be a self-conscious narrator (and not a recorder) that it becomes so difficult to determine the precise distance between him and Hemingway. If Phelan argues that Frederic’s values eventually fall in line with Hemingway’s by the end of the novel, I claim that we cannot dismiss the possibility that they already are at the beginning, and that Frederic now sees himself for what he once was. His growth then, from this perspective, has already occurred and does not manifest at the time of the telling. Thus, that he shows us as directly as possible, for example, his former self’s unsympathetic misreadings of Catherine—“What the hell, I thought” (27)—is an honest attempt to reveal his former failings and so becomes a marker of his prior growth. At the same time, what Frederic’s reticence at the beginning of the novel prevents us from doing is definitively locating his ethics and thus precisely determining how mimetically accurate his overall narration is. In
other words, the paradox of paralipsis that Phelan argues occurs by having a narrator-with-
knowledge perform as a naïve-narrator is here not necessarily the case. The thin, reticent voice of
the opening chapter is also recalcitrant and thus we retain the possibility that the speaker is not
performing ignorance but, instead, understandably reserved. Frederic is not a mask that
Hemingway wears—they are both tellers. But in the face of Frederic’s (fleeting) evaluations and
interpretations of his experiences, Hemingway remains quiet. And it is this rhetorical relationship
between the “silent” implied author and the reticent narrator that bears the trace of yet another
frame of ethical interpretation. It demonstrates a certain mimetic responsibility, which is to say a
responsibility to the integrity and opacity of the simply-voiced other.

Thus, in the famous passage of Chapter 27, when Frederic claims that he “was always
embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain,” and that
“[t]here were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places
had dignity” (184-85), we are not necessarily witnessing Frederic align himself to some
predetermined authorial norm; instead, it is Frederic himself who is establishing that authorial
norm, “naming” his own narrative ethics, confirming his own dignity as a teller and real person,
as opposed merely to mouthing someone else’s words. According to Robert Weimann, Frederic
is

embarrassed by the collapse of any representational function on the part of some
of his signifiers. But the embarrassment serves more than characterization; it
transcends its fictional emitter, the first person singular instance, the “I” as an
iconic sign and narrative point of view, so as to embrace the discursive practice of
this passage as some strategic economy of writing itself. The crisis in
representation remains attached to the characterizing icon of the first person
singular and yet goes beyond it; in other words, this crisis is both represented and representing at the same time. Since the problem is articulated so self-consciously, on the level of both iconic sign and narrative activity, representational product and process, this text can be read on at least two levels.

Although Frederic’s words transcend his own characterization (and speak to the presence of the implied author), this second level of the text—the tale of the telling—is quite possibly a level of which Frederic is also aware. In fact, there are multiple moments where this self-consciousness is evident, where Frederic emphasizes the “told” nature of his narrative and thus pre-empts the voice of the implied author and makes it difficult to differentiate the two since they rely on the same discursive techniques. We are thus aware of the possibility of Frederic’s synthetic and thematic functions—his status as an instrument of Hemingway’s narrative ethics—but we imagine him first as non-instrumental, as an other facing the difficulty of representing himself “truly.”

These moments of self-consciousness are, indeed, minimal. They are easily missed precisely because they can be glossed over as strategic irruptions of the implied author, but they are moments that nonetheless signal Frederic’s awareness of the disparity between his present and former selves, and more importantly, an awareness of the ramifications of his narrative technique. Phelan argues that the first chapter possesses “no switch to the present tense, no clue of self-conscious narration” (*Narrative* 64), but at several points in the novel Hemingway *does* render Frederic’s voice in the present tense. For example, in Chapter 3, when Frederic and the priest converse in the mess hall, Frederic admits to the very difficulty of telling and relating one’s experiences: “I tried to tell about the night and the difference between the night and the
day and how the night was better unless the day was very clean and cold and I could not tell it; 

*as I cannot tell it now. But if you have had it you know*” (13, my emphasis). Here, very early on in the story, Frederic comes to the limits of his own narrative technique. He admits in no uncertain terms that he cannot tell his story perfectly and that he cannot fully share himself. Because of the disparity between one’s experience and one’s words, Frederic gestures towards the realization that his picture of the world (and of Catherine) will ultimately look unfinished and thin, and because of the disparity of experience between narrator and narrative audience, our full knowledge of the other is impossible. That this disclosure occurs not at the time of the action but at the time of the telling is significant in two major respects: firstly, the present tense complicates what would otherwise be a rigid distance between implied author and narrator; the two come to inhabit the same temporal field. Secondly, insofar as Frederic admits the limits of his capacity as narrator (his failure to fulfill an ideal disclosure-function), he rearticulates and reinscribes the ambivalent relationship between reader and text that is introduced to us in the first chapter. The “you” invokes us as recipients, points at us, as if to imagine us as companions-in-arms, and yet it simultaneously distances us—along with the indefinable concept of “having it,” which appears to point to a specific, identifiable thing but ultimately only begs the question of what “it” is—for the pronoun can just as easily be self-referential and therefore definitely “not us.” We thus observe through this minimal disclosure a narrator who, far from being unaware of the ramifications of his words, consciously repeats and reiterates the anxious rhetorical relationship he initially ascribes for us.

Shortly after Frederic deserts the Italian army by jumping into the Tagliamento, the reader is again confronted by this present-tense, second-person mode of narration: “You do not know how long you are in a river when the current moves swiftly. It seems a long time and it
may be very short” (226, my emphasis). Again, the “you” bespeaks a surface complexity insofar as it gestures towards several referential possibilities. It points towards a general understanding of Frederic’s condition by the narrative audience—the “you” is synonymous with “one,” and thus we are interpellated as sharers of the river experience. It also, however, points back to a specific person, the younger Frederic, and thus reminds us of the integrity and unco-optability of Frederic’s experience. But, what the “you” also accomplishes is a paradoxical shift in tone. While Frederic is, on the one hand, emphasizing the limits of the subject’s knowledge (“you do not know”), the second-person construction also comes into being as an imperative, a voice of authority. The reader here is told what he or she does not know. Thus, the grammatical construction renders the tone of the passage as both unpresumptuous and authoritative. The implied author, the controlling voice, lurks behind the “you.” Moreover, the negative construction is also a judgment, an evaluation of Frederic’s former self and of the reader as well. But who is making the judgment, Frederic or Hemingway? Beatrice Bartlett argues that “within the relations of fictional narrative, negatives are potentially ambiguous as to the source of the second judgment. The judgment may be that of the author, or one imputed to the reader, or to the character; it may be shared by all three, or it may reflect a conflict within the character” (44). Indeed, such a simple construction betrays its own accessibility. As Hemingway’s authority intermingles with Frederic’s, the possibility of fully disentangling the two voices becomes more and more remote. It is a mode of thin narration, a moment of telling whose stylistic simplicity resists straightforward interpretation. Here, the reader cannot wholly imagine the motivations of either Frederic or the implied author and so comes into an awareness of the limitations of his or her subsequent inferences. The simple phrasing, like the minimalist cube, solicits our inferential activity but simultaneously blocks it.
A similar phenomenon occurs after the desertion scene while Frederic and Catherine are still in Mestre, preparing to flee Italy. In the present tense, Frederic offers his world-view, a belief in the world’s malevolent indifference towards man.

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry. (249)

Again, the “you” is multifaceted, referring possibly to Frederic’s imagined reader, possibly to Frederic’s former self (who is not as brave nor as gentle as Catherine), and possibly to Hemingway’s narrative audience. The formal simplicity of the rhetoric exists alongside the referential difficulty of the passage. To infer that this passage represents, in a straightforward way, the thematic foundation of the novel—that is, Hemingway’s message—is to partially miss the discursive effect of Hemingway as having here disimagined himself. His authority, as implied author, is inextricably fused to Frederic’s self-conscious narrating voice. On the surface, it is Frederic who judges his experience, who interprets his former self, and who bears the burden of authority. The understated, paratactic voice that structures the entire narrative of A Farewell to Arms is both Frederic’s and Hemingway’s. Frederic, we recall, is not naïve to narrative technique. When writing home, he sends “a couple of army Zona di Geurra post-cards, crossing out everything except, I am well . . . . Those post-cards would be very fine in America; strange and mysterious” (36). And he reminds Sarah Ferguson not to “write anything that will bother the censor” (25). His heightened awareness of the relationship between writing and not-writing corresponds to Hemingway’s own aesthetic of omission remarkably; the straightforwardness of
“I am well” is both simple and “strange,” revealing a textual other who is both momentarily known and unknowable. That Hemingway and Frederic loosely share this aesthetic suggests, from the very beginning of the novel, a shared voice. Since we cannot so easily divorce Frederic from the effects of his rhetoric, the distinction between narrator and implied author is not easy to perceive, but our inability to fully make that distinction is precisely the point. Frederic is not simply *used* as a mouthpiece for the implied author; rather, insofar as their voice involves a type of *sharing* by means of an oscillatory dynamic, Hemingway complicates our appropriation of the protagonist’s synthetic functions. Hemingway demonstrates his accountability to the mimetic other. Frederic’s rhetoric confronts us with its own simplicity, but it is simultaneously difficult, because it is plural in its suggestion of an unassuming yet underlying authorial voice. What we feel we know without knowing it is that authorizing presence. It is not knowledge but understanding.

In homodiegetic minimalist narration such as this, the text’s narrative ethics become more fully available to us through the discursive effects of thin characters. These characters serve as a way for the implied author to shape and model the rhetorical relationship between reader and text. Thin characters appear as a type of surface presence; like the repeated tonal sequences of minimalist music that are ostensibly “flat” and yet compel us to bear witness to the composition, the thin character is itself a simple and flat repetition, relentlessly prompting us into an anxious relationship with the text. And like the minimalist cube, its simplicity is both suggestive *and* arresting for the beholding subject. As we have seen with Count Greffi, thin characters make us aware of an implied author who patterns our responses by structurally embedding a limit to our interpretive capacity; our ability to “see into” other characters is obscured by the fact of their simplicity.
Catherine Barkley is, in this sense, a thin character insofar as her simple characterization both invites our generous imaginings—our reading into her depths—and challenges the extent of such imaginings by foregrounding her own unreadability. I do not disagree with Phelan’s analysis that to participate in Hemingway’s authorial audience here means to accept a “deficient ethics of sexism” whereby “[t]he woman’s initially more mature vision becomes important largely for its use in our measure of the man” (*Reading People* 184, 181). But what I do think we need to reconsider is how the minimal focalization—how the very difficulty we have distinguishing between Frederic’s voice and Hemingway’s when Frederic is speaking—complicates our reading of Catherine’s “endlessly self-effacing, tirelessly available, and continually sacrificing” mimetic dimension (Phelan, *Reading People* 180). In other words, there is a significant irony to be unpacked: in that the minimal focalization confronts our capacity to *know* a character—to distinguish between Frederic’s and Hemingway’s rhetorical intentions—it seems strange not to apply this same reading protocol to Catherine. To use her ethically, to understand before overstanding, we ought to account for both her simplicity and her opacity. One of the most important realizations, I think, that Frederic comes to as he tells his story, is that he did not know Catherine as well as he thought he did, and as audience we come to see that his former self’s readings of her are fallible at best and utterly mistaken at worst.

Critically, Catherine is generally slotted into one of two categories. She is either viewed as an oversimplified, blunt instrument with which Hemingway promotes his hostilities towards women, or she is viewed as complex, subversive, and paradoxically deep. Judith Fetterley is the most extreme advocate of this first category: “Catherine does not determine her own identity. Her sense of self comes from outside, and her self-image is a result of internalizing male attitudes. This self-image is constantly negative. Catherine is pervaded by a self-contempt that
affects everything she says and does.” (67) A character who possesses no mimetic dimension, Catherine is from this point of view not only a caricature of a woman but an unethical reduction whose only grounds for living is to legitimize the worldview of an external focalizer (both the narrator and implied author). Jamie Barlowe-Kayes, similarly, chastises Hemingway for his instrumentalization of women, both fictional and real, which is manifest through their reduction to simplified roles:

Women are inspiration, muses, sexual temptations and release from sexual tension; they serve as nurturers, solvers of domestic problems, and creators of conditions which allow men to go on accomplishing—and making decisions. Even Hemingway’s ways of holding women in esteem marginalized them—kept them as objects, playthings, nurturers, allotting them the no-power of domestic power. (175)

For Kayes, Catherine’s flatness is simply a reiteration of Hemingway’s propensity both to idealize and objectify women in real life—she is, from this perspective, “an attractive puppet” (179), and her privileged knowledge of the world at war is divorced from her actual experiences. Catherine knows what she cannot possibly know. Likewise, Toni Morrison argues that the figure of the nurse is soothing to the heroic male psyche: “if you are bent on dramatic gestures of self-reliance, eager to prove that you can go it alone (without complaining), a nurse who chooses or is paid to take care of you does not violate your view of yourself as a brave, silent sufferer” (81). What’s significant is that each of these criticisms sees Catherine’s lack of depth—regardless of the fact that she is being presented through a minimalist aesthetic that eschews depth or at least challenges its primacy—wholly as an ethical deficiency.
On the other side of the critical register, Catherine is interpreted as much more complex and difficult character. Phelan, as I have intimated, argues that Catherine’s primary synthetic function is to counterpoint Frederic, but he also argues that her knowledge of the world is genuine and that “her traits of toughness and gentleness, namely, indicat[e] the best responses to the world’s malevolence” (Reading People 179). For Sandra Whipple Spanier, Catherine is “complex and underestimated” precisely because she “knows the world and has devised as best she can a way to live in it” (75, 80); moreover, as in the scene where she compels Frederic to play the role of her former lover—“Say I’ve come back to Catherine in the night” (30)—Catherine demonstrates a proclivity to use Frederic “for purposes of her own” (86). Finally, Daniel Traber argues that Catherine’s tone is especially difficult to locate; her sincerity is oftentimes deceptive, and her submissiveness is often “strategic”:

There is desperation in Catherine’s voice when she proposes to make herself into an object of desire, yet there is also a guarded, self-knowing sarcasm warning the reader to question her commitment to the idea. The sincerity of Catherine’s submissiveness, along with her proclamations of love, becomes questionable when acting feminine is simply a choice . . . . Offering Frederic the fantasized image he desires and saying what he wants to hear reveal her ability to read male desire and treat sexuality as just another game, another series of strategic maneuvers to help her make sense of the world and survive in it. (33)

What’s interesting here is that although these two critical camps differ in their ultimate judgment of Catherine’s character function, they both still interpret her in terms of the question of use—in terms of her being used (as mouthpiece, puppet, model) and in terms of her capacity to use others (to survive, to understand, to cope). But subjectivity is not merely a function of using, and
objectivity is not merely a function of having been used. Minimalist art, we recall, teaches us this. The minimalist cube—an object in the conventional sense—cannot simply be used, either materially or interpretively. It is large and unwieldy and exists for no practical purpose. Likewise, its simple yet opaque surface resists the subject’s inferential gestures—we do not know what it means other than itself, and we cannot see into it, what it may or may not be hiding. Instead, meaning arises from the beholder’s encounter and engagement with the object to the extent that the beholder must imagine some semblance of control (agency, subjectivity) in the otherwise simple object. The subject’s movements around the space are directed by the object, and thus interpretation becomes an interpretive performance.

When in Milan, Catherine tells Frederic, “I am a simple girl. No one ever understood it except you” (153), we are keyed into a narrative encounter whose dilemma is analogous to that of the beholder and the cube. Her simplicity is precisely what prevents us from knowing her. She controls Frederic’s response to her by insisting on her simplicity, and yet insofar as we see her capable of seeing herself and the world ironically—“This is a rotten game we play, isn’t it?” (31)—we bear witness to the possibility of her depth. To wit, Catherine consciously echoes her former self while on her deathbed in Lausanne. When she tells Frederic, “I’ll come and stay with you nights” (331), she ironically reimagines herself not as a nurse—the one who visited the convalescing Frederic in his Milan hospital room at night—but as a specter, someone who will haunt his memories and make the nights difficult. The effect of this repeated utterance is twofold: firstly, it confronts the younger Frederic’s simplified understanding of her as nurse-object. In that Catherine reimagines herself in an alternative and uncanny role, she does nothing to quell the fear and anxiety of Frederic who has just “bent down over the bed and started to cry” (330). There is no sense that her remark mitigates his fear, and thus she frustrates his initial “reading”
of her as a feminine ideal of comfort and sanctuary. Secondly, such rhetorical dexterity suggests that there are deeper levels to Catherine—that she may understand more than she reveals. This knowledge is, of course, never spoken aloud, and so in this way she serves the implied author as a reiteration of a textual ethic: just as on the mimetic level, she will subtly question roles in which she is only “used,” so too on the synthetic and thematic levels does the oscillation between her simplicity and potential depths of understanding challenge our reification of her for our interpretive agendas. Likewise, when Catherine tells Frederic “Don’t touch me,” and moments later, “You can touch me all you want” (330), we witness her controlling Frederic’s engagement with her. She simultaneously plays the role of subject and object, powerless and powerful. Like the beholder’s perception of the minimalist cube, Frederic’s perception of Catherine is a function both of what Frederic takes (and feels) from the encounter and of what Catherine gives (and allows him to feel). Such insistence on Catherine’s part, again, suggests the terms of our own rhetorical relationship to the text: just as Frederic can and cannot touch her, so too is the reader’s capacity to make the text mean (to imagine and know Catherine, for example) both authorized and limited by the persistent structural disimaginations performed by the text. If to touch is to know (at least sensually), then it is through Catherine that Hemingway challenges our interpretive desire to “touch” the text and leave our critical mark.

Immediately after the nurse in the Lausanne hospital informs Frederic of his child’s death, he falls into an internal monologue that turns out to be, unfortunately, prescient: “Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn” (327). Interestingly, the focalization is ambiguous. This could, on the one hand, represent the thoughts of Frederic at the time of the action; on the other hand, it is also a moment of self-conscious reflection. The second-person pronoun marks a potential imperative, a
moment of telling in both senses of the word. Further, the conditional tense of Frederic’s
pronouncement ("would") suggests a prior knowledge of events—a paraleptic intrusion—which
is to say that this pessimistic worldview is coloured by the subsequent event of Catherine’s
death. In other words, this monologue manifests as an instance of Frederic looking back on his
former self and realizing not only that he never knew what “it” was about but that he never knew
Catherine. Here we see Frederic as already narrating (and thus performing) an awareness of his
limited reading of Catherine.

Thus, when in the novel’s final moments, Frederic admits that saying goodbye to Catherine
“was like saying good-by to a statue” (332), he in fact echoes himself in an earlier scene when he
looks at some “bad marbles” that are “all uniformly classical. You could not tell anything about
them” (28). This parallel suggests that in the final analysis, Catherine has always been
unreadable to Frederic—her blank, statuesque corpse reiterates the ways in which he has
misguidedly projected onto her (if not violently imposed) the equally vapid and rigid role of the
nurse-object; moreover, that this realization comes through the voice of the older, retrospective
Frederic suggests a certain admission of his past failures of perception rather than Catherine’s
failure of expression. Such thin characterization foregrounds the text’s persistent interplay of
surface and depth and also instills in us an indispensable critical self-consciousness. On the one
hand, her simplicity solicits our generous imaginings in order that we empathize with her; on the
other hand, by insisting that she is “simple”—only surface—Catherine blocks our empathetic
gesture. Just as her letters to Frederic, in order to disarm the censors, will be “a little confusing”
(155), as a textual other, she too is a little confusing to the implied reader. Whereas in the space
of the entire narrative she is consistently disimagined by Hemingway (interior access is denied
and she is reduced to two dimensions), Frederic’s relationship to her proves to be complex. As a
protagonist, he reimagines her—he represents her as an ideal instrument of his convalescence, and when he hides beneath her beautiful blonde hair she offers him a fantasy of protection and separation from the world, “the feeling of [being] inside a tent or behind a falls” (114). But Frederic’s reticent and retrospective narrative voice is, if not consistently aligned with Hemingway’s, thinned out in such a way that for us to effect a break between the implied author and the narrator would be more of an interpretive imposition than anything else. Furthermore, the text compels us to conceive of Catherine as an object, but not merely an object of use. While I don’t disagree that her synthetic dimension underscores a decidedly sexist worldview in terms of her role as mechanism of male growth, she also serves as a reiteration of a rhetorical relationship between reader and text that foregrounds the limits of our power as interpreting subjects. Such a discursive feature imbues the text with a hermeneutic ethics that pushes against the grain of the novel’s more overt thematic sexism. Indeed, because she is both knowable and unknowable, simple and a little confusing, she makes us anxious as readers and, ideally, self-conscious about the interpretive programs for which we inevitably make use of her.

The minimalist aesthetic involves the reader in an interpretive performance where one’s freedom to interpret the thinly drawn characters, the “easy” diction, and the ostensible gaps in the text, comes up against the paradoxical impenetrability of such simplicity. Because the simple text insists on the interplay between the reader’s active construction of its meaning (our desire to “fill in” the gaps, to know the depths) and the reader’s respect for its otherness (the impossibility of comprehensively knowing those gaps), it both solicits and impedes our use of it. This is not to say that other forms of literature do not also question the terms of the reader’s use, only that the simplicity, because it makes us so acutely self-aware of our creative powers and limits as readers, foregrounds the relationship between ethics and interpretive use.
1.2 Thinning Narrators: The Quiet Witness of *My Ántonia*

If through our discussion of *A Farewell to Arms*, we have observed how thinness in character might work at cross-purposes with itself, which is to say that a character’s thinness and his or her hermeneutic weight may at times operate inversely, then it is important to test this hypothesis elsewhere. With *A Farewell to Arms*, I have argued that thin characters can themselves be iterations of a certain rhetorical relationship between reader and text, and as such, function as minimal frames—that is, cognitive keys, or if not precisely keys, then suggestions, understated, of how to approach, engage, and interpret the text-as-other. Because of their very thinness, because of the meiosis through which the author brings them into being, such characters fall into Werner Wolf’s category of “covert or implicit framing” (“Frames” 19); they are not overtly marked as frames, nor do they speak from an ontological level that is different from the main body of the text, but they do offer us valuable interpretive directions. And despite the fact that these types of characters do not make direct appeals to the reader—they do not wholly command interpretation—their function remains nonetheless “recipient-centred” in that they aid interpretation indirectly through their iterative capacity (“Frames” 31). Insofar as their simplicity produces obstacles to our comprehension and knowledge of the other, these thin characters foreground a sense of inferential limits, and as they confront us with the boundaries of our inferential powers as readers and critics, they also confront us with ethics itself.

A concentrated study of *My Ántonia* both enlarges and nuances the theory of simplicity that I have described in regards to Hemingway’s novel. This section asks whether Cather uses thinness—thin characters, thin narration, thin voices—to the same effect as Hemingway. Does the hermeneutic functionality of such thinness, muted as it is in Hemingway, overpower the mimetic components of the text that are central to the experience of the narrative audience? What
does thinness look like in a Cather text, and how does it indicate certain avenues of interpretation? Or, put another way, in a novel in which the very act of storytelling (narrating) proliferates, do such interdependent qualities of thinness and simplicity lead us closer to an understanding of the ethics implied by Cather’s démeublé aesthetic?

It is my claim that both Hemingway and Cather use thinness as a means of evoking hermeneutic limits and of articulating the impossibility of our full knowledge of the other. Just as they do in Hemingway’s novel, thin characters in *My Ántonia* bespeak the presence of an implied author who, by means of recalcitrant simplicity, solicits us to think self-consciously about how we conscript ostensibly synthetic characters. However, in *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry’s thin style constitutes the main narration, while in Cather’s novel we locate thinness not in the protagonist-narrator Jim Burden but in the voice of the frame narrator and of Ántonia herself. The major difference, then, is that whereas there is a stylistic conjunction between Hemingway and Frederic, there is a marked disjunction between Cather and Jim Burden in terms of their politics of representation. As we have seen, to suppose Frederic an unreliable narrator is to operate upon an inference that is more an interpretive imposition than it is textually-based; conversely, to suppose Jim Burden is ultimately a reliable retrospective narrator is to overlook the ways in which Cather uses thinness to implicitly critique his worldview. This, of course, brings up another ethical layer to Cather’s novel that we do not face with Hemingway: why does she focus so much attention on Jim if only to rebuke him? Indeed, this is a paradox we must confront; if on the one hand thinness refers to a technique that problematizes our instrumentalization of characters by foregrounding their mimetic potential, here we see Cather using Jim as a mechanism of counterpoint, thick and possessive. Still, with full knowledge of what I will go on to say about the shortcomings of Jim’s worldview, I will offer two important
caveats in regards to his treatment: first, Jim’s symbolic pastoral is a beautiful and sensitively written account of his childhood. He is certainly aware of the profound effect that both the Nebraska prairie and its people have had on him, and his recognition of this is a testament to at least the deeply-felt respect he has for others. Respect, though, is not the same as responsibility. Secondly, the essential quality of friendship that exists between Jim and Ántonia, I think, speaks to the implicit value of Jim’s mimetic dimension. That by the end of the novel, after twenty years apart, Jim and Ántonia can resume such an intimate friendship with such ease is evidence of another side to Jim, perhaps not so apparent in his romantic and self-absorbed narration. This is all to say that if my discussion of thinness in My Ántonia leads us to a better understanding of Jim’s limits as a narrator (that is, his unreliability), then it should also serve to remind us of the inevitability of interpretive use. It’s not so much that Cather sets Jim up as the novel’s straw man—she is not nearly so explicit; rather, my reading protocol, in this case, privileges Jim’s narrator-function over his character-function and thus may not fully account for the ways in which Jim’s actions hold our interest except in juxtapositional terms.

Readers who are well-versed in the publishing history of My Ántonia will know that, in fact, two introductions to the novel exist: the original 1918 version, and the one which Cather revised in 1926.18 The introduction of the 1926 Houghton Mifflin edition is significantly edited, pared down, and several key indications of Cather’s poetics are omitted. But the choice to scale down the introduction was, after all, Cather’s, and so I think an initial comparison of the two versions is valuable in that we might approach a better understanding of the rhetorical ethics that

---

18 See Jean Schwind’s “The Benda Illustrations to My Ántonia: Cather’s ‘Silent’ Supplement to Jim Burden’s Narrative.” Not only does Schwind offer a useful summary of the novel’s publishing history, but she also speaks convincingly in regards to the interaction between the frame-as-introduction and the visual frames proffered by the Benda illustrations. Indeed, the drawings do seem to function as a type of “thin frame,” and thus contradict the thickness of Jim Burden’s pastoral narrative voice. But the illustrations—insofar as they are visual and not written—are still a technique of overt framing. My own supplement to this critical thread is to determine how such thinness may or may not work covertly.
Cather, either consciously or not, wanted the novel to engender. Do the two introductions differ significantly in their role as cognitive frames? Do they suggest different hermeneutic approaches or different relationships between the reader and text? Most importantly, what does a close reading allow us to say about the qualities of thinness and simplicity in Cather’s writing?

Certainly, the 1926 introduction, over a page shorter in length, is a “minimized” text. And we can also assume that Cather thought it to be a better frame than the original. But what are the effects of this minimization, given what I have said about thinness as a cognitive key?

Initially, we need look no further than the first sentence. In 1918, Cather begins *My Ántonia* in this way: “Last summer I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa in a season of intense heat, and it was my good fortune to have for a traveling companion James Quayle Burden—Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West” (47). In 1926, Cather writes much more simply: “Last summer, in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train” (245). From just this sentence we can mark three major types of changes between the two versions. Firstly, Jim is “thinned out.” Already, with the omission of his middle name, and the subsequent symbolic resonances of such a name as “Quayle,” we have less concrete information about him. He is not as fully imagined as before—our breadth of knowledge about him is reduced. Secondly, Cather has simplified her frame narrator’s voice as well. In the second version, there are fewer dependent, qualifying clauses and fewer rhetorical flourishes. In other words, through the very grammar of the sentence, Cather makes us pay less attention to the enunciating subject. We hear less of her and thus see less of her, and, significantly, the second version’s omission of the pronoun “we” emphasizes this point: without the “we,” the frame narrator is no longer part of the community she is in the 1918 introduction.

---

19 Both versions of the introduction are published in the Broadview edition of *My Ántonia*, and so for simplicity’s sake, all of my references will use that edition.
We perceive her as lacking a sense of place, of people, of belonging—of identity. Thirdly, Cather has thinned out “Cather,” her frame narrator. No longer is it the frame narrator’s “good fortune” to travel with Jim, thereby suggesting that Cather has minimized her evaluative disposition. The frame narrator’s narrative function thus appears to shift more towards an observational axis and away from an axis of judgment.

These three features of the revision—the thinning of character, voice, and narrator—are not anomalous as they are reiterated throughout the 1926 introduction through various means. Cather simplifies Jim’s character in an especially significant way: both versions of the introduction associate Jim symbolically with the railroad, but the second version relegates this association to a mere two sentences. The original, on the other hand, waxes at length and develops a much stronger ideological valence between Jim’s “naturally romantic and ardent disposition” and the American myth of progress that the railroad has come to represent (48). In the 1918 edition, the narrator recalls that Jim

is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil . . . . Jim is still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams. Though he is over forty now, he meets new people and new enterprises with the impulsiveness by which his boyhood friends remember him. He never seems to me to grow older. His fresh color and sandy hair and quick-changing blue eyes are those of a young man, and his sympathetic, solicitous interest in women is as youthful as it is Western and American. (48)

But in the 1926 edition, the above passage is wholly omitted, and the reader is left with what were, in 1918, the paragraph’s introductory sentences: “He loves with a personal passion the
great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it
have played an important part in its development” (246). If in the first introduction, Jim’s
employment with the railroad suggests his profound faith in capitalist westward expansion,
rugged frontier masculinism, as well as an unimpeachable allegiance to the American dream of
individual triumph (which all come at the expense of what erasures such a westward thrust
inevitably entails), Jim’s embodiment of a romantic, national myth—his function as symbol of
the new modern—becomes much less clear in the revised introduction. In 1926, Cather draws
Jim more simply, makes his layers less obvious, and reduces our capacity to “figure” him. In
fact, the very act of figuration (that is, the attenuation of a character’s mimetic function in favour
of his or her synthetic or thematic function) is implicitly challenged. In the wake of such a line as
“this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our
childhood” (246), we see how Cather’s thinning out of Jim conflicts with Jim’s symbolic
“thickening” of Ántonia. In fact, this suggests a discrepancy between the narrative ethics of the
implied author, initially represented by the frame narrator, and those of Jim, who throughout his
narrative imbues Ántonia with an often heavy-handed symbolism to the point that he loses focus
on her as subject.

The major way in which Cather has thinned out the voice of her frame narrator in the
1926 introduction and has reduced our attention to it as enunciating subject, is not only by

20 For more on Jim as a “new modern,” see Love, Glen A. “Jim Burden: A Rare Modern” Approaches to Teaching
21 In “‘It Ain’t My Prairie’: Gender, Power, and Narrative in My Ántonia,” Marilee Lindemann discusses the issue of
figuration in Cather’s novel at great length. For her, figures are even further removed from reality than characters,
and are “psychologically less substantial” (115). Moreover, that the introduction describes Ántonia only as “a
central figure” (using the indefinite as opposed to definite article), shows us “that Ántonia is at least a figure of a
figure: Jim figures her, but ‘Cather’ figures Jim—while somewhere off in the distance Cather figures ‘Cather’ as a
writer, in the 1918 Introduction, who could not write the story of Ántonia” (116). Lindemann is correct to observe
that the introduction makes figure-making a central concern of the novel, but I see simplicity itself as an iterative
frame that produces an ethical challenge to the modes of figuration Jim insists upon throughout his narrative.
22 This line appears in both versions of the introduction.
reducing the actual size of the introduction (making it smaller both visually and in duration) but also by minimizing (though not wholly deleting) a certain moralistic strain. Without the extended discussion of Jim’s wife’s moral failures—without the implied criticism of the citified, New Woman that appears in the 1918 version—the frame narrator’s voice brings less attention to itself as an ideologically-inflected, morally righteous person. It is true that the frame narrator in 1926 still criticizes Mrs. Burden for “play[ing] the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability” (245), but gone is the extended description of her social and political activities—her Suffrage meetings, her productions at the Princess Theatre, her picketing for the garment makers (47-48). Cather also deletes the more scathing criticism put forward by her narrator that “I am never able to believe that she has much feeling for the causes to which she lends her name and her fleeting interest” (48). What we are left with in the 1926 introduction is a frame narrator whose narrator-function comes to supersede her character-function. We see less of the frame narrator’s personality; we hear less of her own beliefs, biases, and motivations. The phrase, “I do not like his wife” thus remains, in 1926, something of an enigma (245), a recalcitrant simplicity, transforming the narrator into both a figure of sincerity and concealment. Her thinness makes her a simple obstacle, and serves, at least in part, to frame our rhetorical relationship to the larger text by confronting us with a sense of our own epistemological limits. In spite of the easy cognitive access that her simple phrase engenders, we remain preoccupied by the possibilities of the unsaid. The phrase stimulates our interpretive impulse—we want to know why the narrator doesn’t like his wife—and yet it simultaneously resists our inferences. By refusing to expand upon her simple statement, by leaving her reasons unarticulated, the frame narrator triggers in us a self-reflexive moment and prepares us for further encounters with the text’s recalcitrance.
Furthermore, the most conspicuous instance of Cather’s thinning out of her frame narrator’s character is the reduction of her evaluative function, which can be observed in the minimization of her role as editor. In the 1926 introduction, the narrator does not even attempt to write a story of Ántonia. Whereas in 1918, she agrees to “set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if [Jim] would do the same” (49), and then presents Jim’s narrative only “substantially as he brought it to me” (50, my emphasis), in 1926 she offers no supplement to Jim’s story. At least not overtly. The body of *My Ántonia* seems to be more fully Jim’s story than anyone else’s, according to this later edition. In other words, if in 1918 Cather represents her frame narrator as both an editor and a *second writer*, in 1926 she is simply a *first reader*, someone who has offered no clear revisions, no evaluations as to the veracity of the narrative, and no explicitly competing perspective. Cather makes her frame narrator’s voice less audible, but she also minimizes her presence as a critical reader. What are the effects of framing the frame narrator as a “quieter” reader than her 1918 version? Because we see less of her, we see a changed disposition—what I would call a new reading protocol—towards Jim’s narrative.

Some might claim that the 1926 revision is flawed because it de-emphasizes the issue of “versions” (of historicity, of authenticity, of subjectivity) that is persistently reiterated through the novel’s patterning of hypodiegetic (inset) narratives. This is, in some ways, true. If the purpose of the introduction is only to foreground the relativity of story—the very tenuousness and fragility of authoritative, monoglossic telling—by means of an actively revisionary frame narrator who represents the *potential* and paradigm-shifting *possibility* of polyphony, then the second edition is indeed weaker. But what the 1926 introduction achieves—and does better than the first—is a way to challenge that same monoglossic authority (Jim’s) *by means of simplicity*. Rather than layering and thickening her introduction with the explicit proposition of “other”
Ántonias—“Now, what about yours?” “don’t let it influence your own story” (49)—Cather underscores the fragility of Jim’s text by simplifying the ending. My Ántonia, the title of Cather’s novel and of Jim’s manuscript, stands there at the end of the 1926 introduction like a free-standing object. In the space of such a phrase, we realize that we are reading two stories at once, two simultaneous yet divergent texts. The complex issue of versions still lingers despite Cather’s simplification of the introduction. “My Ántonia” is at once the simplest of grammatical constructions, and yet because Cather places it at the end of the introduction, it bears an especially heavy interpretive and emotional weight. Like the minimalist cube, this two-word phrase both invites us in and confronts us. It is accessible, comprehensible, and yet opaque, soliciting our constant attention and detailed listening. We understand it—we know Jim’s meaning—and yet we don’t know just how much is meant by it. How far into this phrase can we get? How deeply ought we to penetrate? The word “Ántonia” here represents both a story and a person. Does Jim mean to possess both? The “My,” so simple, stands as Jim’s authoritative, possessive utterance, and yet because Cather has thinned out Jim and problematized our figuration of him, because embedded in the frame narrator’s proclivity for simple judgments is a cautionary flag which signals the inevitable deficiency of storytellers, and because the newer introduction concludes on a point of personal satisfaction for the writer and not the reader—“That seemed to satisfy him” (50)—we, as readers in arms with the frame narrator, are confronted with the possibility of a second, competing narrative ethics. The challenge lies precisely in the hermeneutic limit such a simple phrase imposes upon us.

For if Jim is satisfied with his title “My Ántonia,” surely so is Cather, if for different reasons: the minimized, thinned-out frame narrator, in her new 1926 guise as reader, represents a
cognitive key to Cather’s ethics. If to be a teller of stories is to shape the other, to mold him or
her for certain ideological and aesthetic purposes, to be a reader is to perform a prolonged
attention to the text-as-other. The frame narrator both tells us a story and dramatizes the process
of her own reading of Jim. It is a simplified reading insofar as we no longer witness her
supplementing, layering, and thickening Jim’s narrative. She becomes a model of sorts, subtly
invoking us to forgo momentarily our creative and actively imaginative inclinations and let the
text work upon us. Although the 1926 introduction no longer overtly challenges the authority of
Jim’s narration, it less intrusively and more simply ekes out an alternative ethics of narration—
one which more fully intertwines the processes of telling and reading—that is founded upon
qualities of attention and witness rather than possession and figuration. In fact, this alternative
ethics, we will soon see, firmly aligns with the narrative technique Ántonia herself adopts.

I am proposing here that the thinness we discover in the 1926 introduction is reiterated
within the novel by means of several narrative vehicles. *My Ántonia* contains several thin
characters, and these characters—either disimagined or partially-imagined—work against the
dominant ideological thrust of Jim’s narration, a mode of telling which seeks to forever re-
imagine and possess his subject. Jim’s addition of “My” to “Ántonia” bespeaks his desire to add,
improve, and thicken stories. And yet, the hypodiegetic texts that make up Cather’s larger text all
invariably use thin characters who generally move quickly in and then out of the novel—so
quickly, in fact, that their thematic significance, in relation to the whole, is oftentimes difficult to
grasp. And, furthermore, their thinness—their surface simplicity—is more often than not

---

23 On the contrary, Lindemann argues that “by 1926 ‘Cather’ [the frame narrator] had been ‘stripped bare’ of the
power or authority necessary to challenge the larger claim Jim makes to Ántonia. Unwilling or unable to offer a
glimpse of ‘her’ Ántonia, ‘Cather’ stands as a sign of Cather’s deep skepticism about women’s ability to compete in
the contest to figure themselves in a culturally powerful way” (119). But for a writer like Cather who valued art’s
capacity to simplify—who even argued that it *ought* to simplify—it seems to me that her simplification of the frame
narrator in 1926 can be read as something more than an allegory for the suppression of female voices, even though it
certainly is that too. Instead, the narratological effects of such simplification seem to launch the reader into a more
positive understanding of Ántonia’s own “quiet” narrative ethics, which I hope to show.
generated and protected by Ántonia’s mode of telling in the face of Jim’s desire to explain them. Richard Millington, in a similar vein, finds that Book One of the novel, by means of its multiple inset stories, frames Cather’s particular hermeneutic position “as a model of meaning and matrix of ethical value” (“Storyteller” 693). These simple and small stories work iteratively and become “a crucial and recurring experience . . . an encounter with a meaning that we feel as present precisely because it defies containment by our customary strategies of explanation” (694). What I would like to add to Millington’s observation is a closer reading of the thin quality of some of these stories and how it comes into being by means of its difference from Jim’s thick narrative mode. It is the gesture towards the simple, the thin, and the un(der)explained that proffers an ideological affinity between Ántonia and the implied author.

The story of the tramp is one of the few instances in the novel in which Ántonia—who is known by family and friends as a storyteller—tells a story that is directly quoted (as opposed to paraphrased) by Jim. It is a simple story, recounted almost anecdotally, of a tramp who ends his life by jumping unexpectedly into a threshing machine. The tramp seems to come out of nowhere: “The sun was so hot like it was going to burn the world up. After a while I see a man coming across the stubble, and when he got close I see it was a tramp” (145). And when Mrs. Harling asks if anyone knew where he came from, Ántonia makes this lack of origins clear: “He hadn’t been seen nowhere except in a little town they call Conway” (146). Further, we learn very little about the tramp save for an explicit nativist sentiment—“so it’s Norwegians now is it? I thought this was Americky” (145)—and a few objects that he leaves behind: a penknife, a wishbone, and a copy of “The Old Oaken Bucket” by Samuel Woodworth. On the one hand, the tramp approaches the level of stereotype, and he can be seen as an allegory for the self-destructive, nation-spoiling consequences of nativist ideology. But the way in which Ántonia so
simply renders him bespeaks nuances that stretch beyond allegory. His thinness also reiterates how little we can know about him and how little Ántonia will ever know about him. He is Ántonia’s narrative object, but he is an object that, like the minimalist cube, cannot be fully grasped, whose presence suggests mysteries and depth and tempts our critical/explanatory drive, and yet whose straightforward depiction also frustrates such desires. It is Ántonia’s reaction to the tramp, the way she forgoes closure of her own story that leads us to this conclusion. She ends her story with a question: “What would anyone want to kill themselves in summer for? In thrashing time, too! It’s nice everywhere then” (146). And it is precisely this question that lifts the tramp from the associated realms of stereotype and allegory. For, positioned as it is, Ántonia’s story of the tramp comes to mirror the story of Mr. Shimerda, whose wintertime suicide is told of in much more detail by Jim. We sense that Ántonia must recognize this parallel—that she must feel something for the man—and it is this quality of narratorial affect that not only establishes the tramp’s mimetic dimension but also pays respect to his unreadability. We sense in Ántonia’s telling a recognition of an “emotional aura,” and though she touches the scene lightly (questioning its significance rather than authoritatively pronouncing it), she makes her listeners bear witness in order to strengthen the ties of their shared culture—a culture that comes into being with the telling of story.²⁴ Mrs. Harling’s response to the story is emblematic of exactly this: “Maybe I’ll go home and help you thrash next summer” (146-7). The bonds of community are reinforced through such acts of witnessing. Significantly, Ántonia does not step beyond her role as witness-narrator—she does not “write” the tramp, and she does not thicken him. As Michael Peterman argues, “The few details—the tramp’s expression of disgust with

²⁴ For a related analysis of the ways in which Ántonia establishes a counter-narrative to Jim’s through oral storytelling, see: Funda, Evelyn I. “‘The Breath Vibrating Beneath It’: Intimacy in the Storytelling of Antonia Shimerda.” Western American Literature 29.3 (1994): 195-216. Funda stresses the capacity for Ántonia’s storytelling to establish human connections, which I am suggesting is foundational not only to Ántonia’s narrative ethics but to Cather’s as well.
immigrants . . . his wave, the fact that the machine never worked right thereafter, and the contents of his pockets—provide apparent clues to his action but allow for no coherent explanation” (161). His poem goes unread, and his objects are touched upon, but not interpreted. They are “plausibly emblematic . . . but not conclusively explicable” (Millington, “Storyteller” 696). Some might argue that Cather places those objects there for the reader to excavate deeper and fuller meanings, but to excavate is to miss the point here; the meaning resides in the lightness of Ántonia’s touch, the opaque thinness of the other that is still good enough to produce real emotions in its listeners, as to which the crying of Nina attests. These things exist more fully in the realm of minimalist objects than symbols, more material reminders of the man than metaphysical stepping stones for the audience.25 Unlike Jim, who transcribes the story, but doesn’t seem to pay attention to the tragedy of the tramp—he is instead affixed by Ántonia’s “hearty joviality [and] relish for life” (147)26—Ántonia practices the same “thinning” techniques of the frame narrator, and as such, is herself a reiteration of a narrative ethics that takes shape in its difference from Jim’s.

Indeed, directly following the story of the tramp, Cather places Jim’s story of Blind d’Arnault. “the negro pianist” (148), and this patterning evokes an important contrast of narrative techniques. Juxtaposed against Ántonia’s thin recollection of the tramp is Jim’s perceptibly thick and problematic recollection of the pianist who occasionally passes through Black Hawk, and whose history Jim inexplicably knows. Jim describes d’Arnault through a process of accretion;

---

25 This discussion, I hope, builds upon the work of Anne E. Goldman who argues that “Readers often attack each novel’s images the same way that Jim pins the head of the rattler Ántonia sees on the prairie. We triumphantly fix their symbolic registers, that is, like so many critical snakes we have to subdue, dragging their skins behind us like the puffed-up boy Cather affectionately teases in his ‘mock adventure’. Instead, we might approach such representations more watchfully and respectfully, appraising the way their contours and colors shift with changes in position and different lights” (163). Such a rhetorical relationship between reader and text—that is, one based on watchfulness and respect—I think is exactly what Cather is dramatizing through Ántonia’s simple narrative mode.

26 Paula Wooley similarly claims that Jim “thinks of her oral tales as interesting diversions rather than as an art form involving craft and skill” (157).
he layers the musician with adjectives and hyperbole so that, at least initially, he appears a much fuller character than the tramp. “His yellow face,” Jim says, “was lifted in the light, with a show of white teeth, all grinning, and his shrunken papery eyelids lay motionless over his blind eyes” (149). Moreover, “[h]e had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool. He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy. It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia” (149). Even here we can note a significant difference in the narrative modes of Jim and Frederic Henry. Frederic, we recall, acknowledges the paradoxically unreadable quality of Count Greffi’s face as a countenance both furrowed and smooth, thus implying the narrator’s own interpretive limits. Jim, however, purports to know the depths of Blind d’Arnault through a patchwork stereotyping of his face. Later, Jim speaks about the young d’Arnault’s musical prowess in terms of “animal desires” (151), and that when he plays he looks “like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood” (153). Not only is Jim’s description of d’Arnault tainted with an overt racism that misreads African-Americans as always already docile, pre-rational, and subhuman, but it is also a description that is, from a narrative perspective, purely emblematic. Despite the depths of character that Jim plumbs, despite the supposed dimensionality that the tale of d’Arnault’s plantation upbringing and discovery of the piano—“the Thing” (151)—provides, Jim confines d’Arnault to a wholly thematic existence. Jim robs d’Arnault of any mimetic dimension. The quantity of attention that he pays to the musician does not make up for the ironically myopic quality of attention—a quality that is radically counterpointed by Nina’s affective, weeping response to Ántonia’s simple tale of the tramp. Whereas Ántonia refuses to appropriate the tramp’s story (she clearly resists drawing any unequivocal lines between his story
and her father’s), Jim’s reimagination of d’Arnault is decidedly possessive and irresponsible to
the mimetic integrity of the other. As Blanche H. Gelfant argues,

Soft, amiable, docile, subservient, kindly, happy—Jim’s image, as usual, projects
his wish-fulfillment; his diction suggests an unconscious assuagement of anxiety,
also. His phrase of astounding insult and innocence—“almost no head at all”—
assures him that the black man should not frighten, being an incomplete creature,
possessed, as we would like to believe, of instinct and rhythm, but deprived of
intellect. (“Reaping-Hook” 80)

Jim thickens d’Arnault, it seems, only in order to register, rationalize, and subsequently
minimize his own fears of otherness. D’Arnault, from this perspective, is a minor character—
superficial, thematic, and simple—but not a thin character. Jim’s mediation makes him known
and knowable, a figure of otherness whose otherness has been discarded. The problematics of
this narrative mode are made especially emphatic when we juxtapose it against Ántonia’s
propensity for thinness and simplicity. That is, when we see Ántonia’s narrative mode as a
hermeneutic frame, we recognize the ways in which Cather redirects our interpretive protocols in
the face of Jim’s dominant and dominating voice.

We observe then, loosely, two narrative techniques—the thickening and thinning of
meaning as represented by Jim and Ántonia respectively. Ántonia continually reappears in
Cather’s novel as a re-instantiation of the mode of telling modeled for us by the frame narrator in
the 1926 introduction, whereas Jim’s thickness of character- and narrator-functions serves as a
sort of penetrating persona. It is a persona that persistently refigures the unknowable depths into
the knowable, imbuing scenes and characters with personal symbolic significance at the expense
of their otherness. The circumstances surrounding the death of Mr. Shimerda, for example, are
nowhere near as straightforward as Jim would have us believe. In fact, the hermeneutic crux of this narrative episode is the way in which the reader must negotiate the ambiguities regarding how Mr. Shimerda has died in the face of Jim’s certainty over the matter. Jake, after finding Krajiek’s axe beneath the manger and Krajiek himself lurking nervously around the barn declares that “There’s something mighty queer about it” (102); the coroner, similarly, believes that “The way [Krajiek] acted, and the way his axe fit the wound, was enough to convict any man” (110). Jim, however, proclaims that he “knew it was homesickness that killed Mr. Shimerda” (104). To be sure, Jim pays no heed to the possibility of Mr. Shimerda’s murder: he pays no heed to the validity of alternative narratives nor to the potential reliability of other narrators. To wit,

> Although it was perfectly clear that Mr. Shimerda had killed himself, Jake and the coroner thought something ought to be done to Krajiek because he behaved like a guilty man. He was badly frightened, certainly, and perhaps he even felt some stirrings of remorse for his indifference to the old man’s misery and loneliness.

(110)

Although Jake—one of the first to see Mr. Shimerda’s body—and the coroner—a professional—have credible grounds with which to question the dominant suicide narrative, Jim quickly and decisively purges their explanatory and interpretive agency from his text. The reader thus recognizes through this elision of ambiguity not only Jim’s proclivity to pass judgment on the hypodiegetic texts that make up the larger narrative but his predominant desire to bear the voice of interpretive authority. We learn, here, that Jim cannot accept any state of mystery, of non-knowledge, and when Jim is confronted with such an interpretive predicament, rather than acknowledge his own interpretive limits, he strategically re-imagines the scene to suit his own
romantic purposes. When Ántonia tells a story of suicide, she ends it with a question, opening up its meaning and affect to her audience. But when Jim finds himself in a similar narrational position, he infuses the text with a symbolic weight that is not wholly legitimized by the text-as-other. For to claim that Mr. Shimerda has died because of “homesickness” and that “his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was resting now in this quiet house” (104), Jim must elide the very real possibility of violence on the American prairie. The symbol of Mr. Shimerda’s peaceful, resting spirit serves to thicken Jim’s governing image of America as “the great country through which his railway runs and branches” (246). While alive, Mr. Shimerda is “so unhappy” (106), but when dead he is a “sleeper” whose grave, “with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island” (114). It seems, then, that in order for Jim to substantiate his imagined America, all memories of violence must be reimagined as instantiations of peace. Whereas Mr. Shimerda’s death represents a real imperfection in the American project—a lingering reminder of the human toll of nation-building—Jim transforms him into a symbol of perfection, which is to say that the image of his grave effects a perfect and peaceful union of man with the land. Thus, Jim reimagines (and thickens) Mr. Shimerda into something he does not fully represent. To admit the very real ambiguity surrounding his death would be to detract from his representativeness—the specific thematic function to which Jim ascribes him. (Somewhat counter-intuitively, I am suggesting that to admit the ambiguity of Mr. Shimerda’s circumstance would be to retain his quality of thinness because it would, in a sense, deflate his representative function.) Simply, Mr. Shimerda is more useful to Jim as a victim of suicide, for to imagine the possibility of murder on the prairie is to imagine the possibility of murder in the “great country” of America.
If we see that Jim displays a propensity to thicken images by synthesizing their presence into symbols, we can also observe the way in which Cather problematizes such narrational acts by means of patterning. In Book One, Jim encounters an image inscribed in the land:

[T]here was, faintly marked in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride. Jake and Otto were sure that when they galloped round that ring the Indians tortured prisoners, bound to a stake in the center; but grandfather thought they merely ran races or trained horses there. Whenever one looked at this slope against the setting sun, the circle showed like a pattern in the grass and this morning, when the first light spray of snow lay over it, it came out with wonderful distinctness, like strokes of Chinese white on canvas. The old figure stirred me as it had never done before and seemed a good omen for the winter. (83)

That he describes the circle as both a “figure” and a “good omen” is not insignificant—already we see that Jim finds value in this image for its quality of representation; furthermore, just as in the story of Mr. Shimerda’s death, Cather here also reveals narratives that compete for interpretive authority. And yet, Jim is less concerned with the history of the image (less concerned with the reality of its original purpose and function) than he is with its symbolic utility. Even stylistically, this passage is thick. The sibilance of the third sentence, which is also the most figurative, brings attention to Jim’s artifice, to the complexity of his imaginings, but it also, ironically, brings attention to its own distance from the simple fact of a circle in the grass.

But even more obvious than that is the way Cather’s novelistic pattern implicitly critiques Jim’s penchant for seeing patterns in the grass. Cather places this scene in between the tragic inset stories of Pavel and Peter and of Mr. Shimerda’s death. Simply put, the circle is in no way whatsoever “a good omen.” Such placement demonstrates the problems of Jim’s mode of
symbolic thickening: despite Jim’s moving prose, his reimagining of images for synthetic and thematic functions comes at the expense of their simple realities—as objects, images, and as people too.

If we look at the way in which Jim recounts the story of Pavel and Peter, we might note yet another element of his thick narrative style. The story is not simply told; rather, it is supplemented by means of an interpretive framework that emphasizes its thematic dimension. According to John L. Selzer, Jim “adds to the narrative a rather detailed account of the consequences of the brothers’ action—sterility, isolation, wandering, and guilt: the same consequences that Jim has suffered himself on account of his own renunciation of Ántonia and the other ‘hired girls’” (57). But above and beyond that, Jim’s reception of the tale—and how it mixes with his narration of it—is quite telling:

We did not tell Pavel’s secret to any one, but guarded it jealously—as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure. At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia. (82-3)

What does it mean to “guard a story jealously” and simultaneously tell it? How is the reader to evaluate the degree of sincerity that Jim here brings to the text—a text which we should note is a retelling (a paraphrase) of Ántonia’s translation. It seems, in fact, that what Jim guards jealously is the reality that the story was never actually meant for his ears, and thus his reimagination of it in terms of Nebraska and Virginia—a personal topography—problematically negates the very otherness of the story. Jim’s pronominal use, furthermore, is somewhat disingenuous, because
Ántonia, we learn, does not guard stories, does not possess them, but tells and retells them freely. In Book Five, we discover that Ántonia is, simply, generous with story. She has many times over told her children the story of how Wick Cutter murdered his wife (238). They know about Jake and Otto and the building of Mr. Shimerda’s coffin (233). They know of Jim’s encounter with the rattlesnake—“sometimes mother says six feet and sometimes she says five” (233). And we know, more generally, that the children “look to her for stories” (233). Thus, for Jim to say that “we guarded the story jealously” means that he is perhaps imagining a more perfect union between him and Ántonia than is actually the fact. When, for example, he tells Ántonia’s children that he was once “very much in love” with their mother, Anton remarks, “She never told us that” (230). In other words, by means of paraphrase, Jim has not only thickened Pavel’s story thematically but in terms of its reception history as well. Jim imagines the story as having created a closed community—a closed circle, if you will—consisting of only him and Ántonia, who tell and retell it only to each other, for whom the story “was never at an end” (82). But it is, of course, Pavel’s story, not his. And Mr. Shimerda also bears witness to the telling. What this suggests is that rather than attending to the story’s alterity—to its disjunctive quality as a hypodiegetic text that bears little relation to Jim’s own life—Jim uses it as an instrument to reimagine Ántonia on his terms. The story, in this way, becomes a focal point for his thickening of Ántonia into a symbol. In the space of a paraphrase, Jim disimagines her as a narrator, as a subject with a voice of her own, and reimagines her as a part of himself, as an identity that only comes into being through him.

The “we” bespeaks a full knowledge of the other and intimates that Jim and Ántonia have an identical rhetorical relationship to Pavel’s story, but as we see time and again, Ántonia is a very different type of teller and a very different type of listener than Jim. It is this very
discrepancy that allows us to reconceive Cather’s novel not only as a series of competing stories but as a pattern of hermeneutic frames that take shape through Cather’s juxtapositional method. These frames come into being precisely because they dramatize the process of interpretation—the synthesis that arises out of the encounter between telling and listening, writing and reading. In spite of Jim’s narrational thickening, each hypodiegetic text—the story of the tramp, of Mr. Shimerda, of the circle in the grass, of Pavel and Peter, of the rattler, of Wick Cutter, etc.—retains a certain imagistic simplicity. They are, as Jim finally admits, like a “succession of . . . pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one’s first primer” (234). The stories imprint upon our mind not morals, not messages, not metaphor, but something more akin to three-dimensional objects. This accretion of simplicity through the mutuality of story and image moves us to ask how one might make and find meaning responsibly—that is, without transforming the simple, object-like presence of the text-as-other into something else.

According to Eric Berlatsky, “it is the juxtaposition of two cognitive frames that makes a single one evident . . . . Any element of a ‘well-made’ text will, of course, direct interpretation, but frames must, in addition, shift the direction of our interpretation, asking us to operate in a different register than the one in which we were already operating” (172). The problem that arises with My Ántonia, however, is that despite the presence of multiple hypodiegetic texts within the larger novel, each text, is—because of the homodiegetic mode of narration—focalized primarily through Jim. This means that while Ántonia may in fact represent a second, alternative narrator—and thus a different cognitive frame—her presence is only ever implicit. Even when she apparently speaks directly, her voice is mediated, quoted by Jim. As Lindemann observes, Jim’s voice overpowers every woman’s voice in Cather’s novel except for that of the frame narrator:
[F]or when women do speak in his narrative they do so in quotation marks, and that is perhaps the clearest sign of the deep-seated gender trouble being examined in the novel. Women may seem at times to speak for themselves and actively to resist the meanings Jim would impose on their stories, but even the most resistant, subversive voices are already his, not theirs. Their speech is always marked, framed, claimed, and circumscribed, and theirs are the muted voices of alien others contained within a larger voice—unmarked because it is the illusion of absolute presence, power, and authority. (120) 27

But what is apparent, not in spite of Jim’s mediation but precisely because of it, is Ántonia’s thin narrative technique. Just as Berlatsky claims that cognitive frames can only be seen by means of their difference from each other, Ántonia’s predilection to disimagine herself and to thin out her stories is only ever perceptible when we notice Jim’s persistent and overarching desire to thicken them. Hence, the simple-yet-cryptic statement, “It’s wolves, Jimmy” (79), is eventually transformed and appropriated by Jim so that Pavel’s story becomes a story about him, about Nebraska and Virginia. Whereas Ántonia appears to respect the integrity of things-as-things, content with their own objecthood, Jim is quick to overstand and over-explain them. Hence, Ántonia leaves the tramp’s belongings “untouched.” Jim, conversely, reads the circles in the grass as omens. In other words, there is an interplay in My Ántonia between thinner and thicker types of cognitive framing.

When Jim, Ántonia, and the other hired girls see the image of the plough against the sun, it is Jim’s thickening of the image that initially attunes us to its symbolic weight. It is a symbol

27 Lindemann does not believe that the frame narrator is as hermeneutically significant as I do. She claims that Cather is “barely present in her own brief narrative, receding away from the reader as she swerves continually away from herself and toward Jim” (118-119). The crux, as I see it, is not who speaks most, but how such minimal utterances and such disimagined figures in fact reposition our mode of interpretation from one of possession (Jim) to one of witness (Ántonia).
that comes into being through contrast: “it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun” (181, my emphasis). For Jim, the image gains significance from its inscribed quality; it is a symbol of writing itself—the plough is etched onto the sun. It is also, indirectly, a metaphoric key to Jim’s thick narrative method, his layering of artifice and craftsmanship over top of the natural image. But by this time in the novel, the reader has also become attuned to the discrepancy between Jim and Ántonia’s modes of storytelling and observation. And so another contrast lingers. Ántonia’s silence here bespeaks her own mode of witness. We do not know what Ántonia thinks of this shadow, but her presence, here diminished by the largeness of the symbol, still proffers a reminder to the reader that there are other ways of looking, other ways of knowing, ways that bear witness to the simple yet mysterious existence of that which is other. Because Jim here momentarily elides Ántonia’s presence, because the “we” revokes from her the integrity and independence of a viewing-subject who potentially sees things differently than Jim, Ántonia becomes in this passage a reiteration of thinness itself. Her interpretive silence links her to the thinning voice of the frame narrator. In the space of this paragraph, we tune in not only to Jim’s beautiful and moving language, but to the possibility that his perspective is flawed, that he is in a word, unreliable. No doubt Jim’s perspective here is colorfully panoramic, but Ántonia’s act of quiet witness suggests that perhaps he speaks too much. Ántonia, like Frederic Henry, mobilizes simple rhetoric as a mode of recalcitrance. Their thinness indicates that any attempt to understand the other ought to depend upon our self-conscious negotiation of our imaginative impulse (what we, as readers, actively infer) and our sustained attention (what the text-as-other willingly reveals about itself). In the
case of Cather’s text, the reader bears witness to the possibility that writing—that narrative itself—need not be “heroic in size,” but that it can be small and simple and just as moving.

The cognitive frame that Ántonia iterates through both her minimal presence and voice therefore suggests a particularly interdependent relationship between mimetic and synthetic character dimensions. We cannot understand Ántonia’s synthetic function—her presence as frame—without first recognizing the possibility of her reality, as a subject who speaks independently of Jim. Whereas Jim’s narration proscribes her mimetic dimension by predominantly focusing upon her symbolic utility, as someone “who lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true” (234), the small, simple moments in which we hear her “husky, breathy voice” (223), with its “peculiarly engaging quality” (145), allow us to read Ántonia as embodied and as someone who is much more than a mere textual figure. This is to say that her mimetic dimension serves her synthetic function. She can only change the direction of our interpretation—that is, cause us to question the ethical foundations of Jim’s writing and reading of her—if we believe in her reality despite its thinness. Yet, again, we must reconsider our earlier question on somewhat different terms: how does Cather retain Ántonia’s mimetic dimension when she is a persistently mediated character? How are we to believe in her autonomy, and thus in the radical interpretive alternatives her thin mode of narration solicits, when the very perspectival structure of the novel seems to inhibit such autonomy? Is it really possible to see Ántonia as framing new, alternative responses to the text, or is she merely a sign of Jim’s imaginative failures when it comes to representing the other honestly and realistically?

28 For an eloquent argument outlining Jim’s romantic disposition as narrator, see Rosowski, Susan J. The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986. 75-91. “Jim’s allegiance,” says Rosowski, “is consistently to his ideas; and when they conflict with reality, he denies the reality” (89).
There is an analogy, I believe, which Cather embeds into Book Five that speaks to the ways in which Ántonia’s narrative mode resists Jim’s mediation. “The big boxful of photographs” that Ántonia shows to Jim, “she and Anton in their wedding clothes, holding hands; her brother Ambrosch and his very fat wife, who had a farm of her own, and who bossed her husband . . . the three Bohemian Marys and their large families” (232), these photographs come to stand for a thin mode of storytelling that is as of yet untouched and thus unmediated by Jim. They are simple, framed shots that in succession reproduce a story and history that Jim cannot pretend to know fully. Moreover, by means of their reception, they come to signify a narrative mode of witness (the children crowd around Ántonia in order to observe, to see), humble response (when she shows a photograph of Lena, Ántonia asks, “Does she still look like that?” [232]), and sharing (passing around) that dramatically contrasts the jealous guarding of story that Jim has come to embody. Ántonia says very little in this scene, and yet despite such minimization, she nonetheless affirms a sense of shared culture and community amongst those who look intently upon her photographs:

As Ántonia turned over the pictures the young Cuzaks stood behind her chair, looking over her shoulder with interested faces. Nina and Jan, after trying to see round the taller ones, quietly brought a chair, climbed up on it, and stood close together, looking. The little boy forgot his shyness and grinned delightedly when familiar faces came into view. In the group about Ántonia I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other. They contemplated the photographs with pleased recognition; looked at some admiringly, as if these characters in their mother’s girlhood had been remarkable people. (232)
Two features dominate this passage. The first is the perceptible silence. Ántonia does not speak, and Nina and Jan make sure to bring the chair over “quietly.” Instead, the recognition of others—is communicated through sight and touch, rather muted forms of witness. That the children sit as closely to Ántonia as possible and that they are not afraid to touch each other suggests not only the intimacy of Ántonia’s audience but their trust in the teller as well. Secondly, that in the final sentences the “characters” in the photographs are “contemplated” by the children is itself an interpretive cue for Cather’s reader. It suggests a mode of reading and relating that is, on the one hand, less intrusive than Jim’s possessive inclinations, and on the other hand, more responsible to the integrity of the simple-yet-opaque textual other who still commands our detailed and attentive listening.

When we put this scene together, we encounter an unmistakably positive vision of narrative experience. The trust and intimacy to which Ántonia is accorded radically counterpoint the suspicion that the reader gradually brings to bear upon Jim as his possession of Ántonia, along with his appropriation of character and story for their personal symbolic resonances, come to appear more and more self-serving and unreliable. And this brings us to another major difference between Hemingway and Cather in terms of the function of thinness as an ethical iteration. As we have seen, by the end of his narration Frederic Henry reveals that he has never been able to read Catherine easily—that is, he recognizes Catherine’s recalcitrant simplicity and thus recognizes his own limits as an interpreting subject. We view him as reliable because his thin narrative mode implicitly acknowledges the impenetrability of Catherine-as-surface. Jim, however, never articulates such a realization in regards to Ántonia. Whereas Frederic’s voice has, in a sense, taken on the qualities of Catherine’s recalcitrant simplicity, Jim’s voice is decidedly antithetical to Ántonia’s, even in the final moments of Cather’s novel. “Whatever we
had missed,” says Jim, “we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past” (244). To conclude his narrative on such a custodial note hearkens back to his jealous guarding of story, an ethic which Ántonia surely does not share. More importantly, what Ántonia’s quiet and thin narration reveals is not a belief in the incommunicability of history but in its inexplicability: the past confronts us with the limits of our explanatory powers. And yet, Ántonia’s storytelling conveys a profound belief in the value of sincere communication despite its imperfections. Thus Cather maintains Jim’s unreliability at the end of the novel—his growth is stunted because, unlike Frederic, he cannot put into words (into voice, perhaps?) the values embodied by the centrally thin character.

The photographs—both literally and figuratively—are thin; they represent a mode of storytelling in which the simple image is, in a sense, enough. Through them, Ántonia generates emotion, curiosity, fellow-feeling, all without imposing upon her audience strict meanings and thick interpretations. Like the novel’s slightly larger hypodiegetic instantiations, the box of photographs “precludes explanation but invites thought” (Millington 694). The photographs thus come to represent a more direct recording of her focalization than do Jim’s quotations and paraphrases. Moreover, the scene represents a mode of narration analogous to that of the frame narrator. If we can see the photographs here as embedded, hypodiegetic texts-in-miniature, we can comprehend Ántonia as another version of the narrator-compiler who we encounter in the introduction. Unlike Jim, who reimagines texts, Ántonia is in this view more of an organizer of texts and a narrator-reader who decenters and disimagines herself in order that the social power of the narrative community be more emphatic. Furthermore, as Woolley avers, “Ántonia does not insist on solitary authorship, but allows others to tell ‘her’ stories. She encourages her eldest son to tell the story of Wick Cutter’s suicide-murder . . . . And, of course, she offers no resistance to
Jim when he sees (and writes about) her as ‘anything that a woman can be to a man’” (158). The simple box of photographs, itself full of framed stories, is therefore an indispensable cognitive key; it represents a mode of telling that deprivileges one’s full and comprehensive knowledge of the other and a mode of reading that attends, through detailed listening, to the exteriority of the other. Although it is opened, although its interior is made plain for the world to see, its depths—its stories—are still left, if not unexplained, underexplained. Despite Ántonia’s and her children’s familiarity with the stories, they still ask questions about them. The simple box is at once familiar and unknowable. It is an object that confronts us all with the very limits of our interpretive power. Its simplicity, along with Ántonia’s thin and quiet narrative mode, coalesce to dramatize the ethical values of witnessing, observation, and sustained attention that are imperative to both the narrator- and reader-roles. Much like the frame narrator, Ántonia never overtly challenges the ideologies of possession and figuration that structure Jim’s narrative mode; rather, her alternative ethics of narration comes into being through its thinness, through its intertwining with a “quieter” reading protocol. I think, moreover, that this becomes the implicit basis of our sympathies with Ántonia. Like her, we are filled more with questions than explanations when confronted with the stories and characters that make up My Ántonia. And like her, we come to realize that the point of listening and of reading may not be to know the other comprehensively in all of his or her complexity, but to begin to understand our own imaginative limits in the process of responding to, engaging, and even resisting that other. Thinness, in this sense, begins to suggest the hermeneutic ethics that lie beneath a theory of simplicity. In gesturing towards a vocabulary with which to describe the phenomenon of simple recalcitrance found within elements of characterization and narration, this analysis has sought to demonstrate the ways in which texts can solicit accountability from their readers. That is, thinness promotes a
mode of interpretation that is aware of itself—aware of its inevitable uses of the text and aware of how “easy” it is to mobilize people and their stories. Simplicity does not ask us to forgo our imaginings of otherness, but it does indicate the ways in which narrative might prevent us from grasping those imaginings too tightly.
Chapter Two: Smooth Structures

In the previous chapter I have shown how thinness operates as a dimension of simplicity and how that thinness can work to key readers into new understandings of both the text and of themselves as agents of interpretation. In this chapter, I observe another facet of the simple text—that of “smoothness.” I define smoothness as a mode of structural parataxis—a predictable rhetorical rhythm—and I ask how such genres may beckon the reader into a more self-conscious understanding of his or her interpretive role. That is to say, how do smooth texts condition our responses to their own otherness, and how does that conditioning implicitly speak to the concept of “good” interpretation? With Hemingway’s In Our Time, I examine how the paratactic patterning of stories and vignettes posits a pluralistic vision of the world that contradicts a certain interpretive desire for thematic cohesion—for a world in which we can easily move from the particularities of experience to universalizing interpretations of it. The short story cycle finds its ethics through a structure that preserves the integrity of specific narrative experiences and contains in it an interpretive protocol that asks us to be self-conscious about the inevitable distortions involved in our generalizations. With Death Comes for the Archbishop, I am not so much concerned with the ethics of connecting disparate narrative events as I am with Cather’s conception of her narrative as a type of “light touch.” By examining the relationship between her particular version of smooth narrative and the smooth material “things” within that narrative, I locate a hermeneutic ethics that interrogates the power and potential of the reader to “mark” the other—that is to inscribe him or herself upon the simple text through interpretation.
2.1 Smooth and Violent: Structural Parataxis and *In Our Time*

Smoothness is a recurring motif in “Big Two-Hearted River,” the final story of Hemingway’s *In Our Time* cycle. The river is invariably smooth—“smoothly fast,” “smooth and deep,” “smooth and dark” (145, 149); logs are “smooth to sit on” (151), and trout are “smooth and clean” (155). This persistent qualification, focalized as it is through Nick Adams, takes on an ethical dimension that ultimately percolates into our understanding of the cycle’s structure. Not only does Nick’s version of a satisfying life seem directly related to how smooth it is, but the reiterated quality of smoothness transforms into a value statement about simple narrative itself. In an especially poignant scene, Nick Adams pauses and watches trout from a bridge. He is alone in the Michigan backcountry, and with no distractions, Nick’s attention upon the stream is as focused as it is passionate:

> He watched them holding themselves with their noses into the current, many trout in deep, fast moving water, slightly distorted as he watched far down through the glassy convex surface of the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. At the bottom of the pool were the big trout. Nick did not see them at first. Then he saw them at the bottom of the pool, big trout looking to hold themselves on the gravel bottom in a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised in spurts by the current. (133)

This moment of intense attention, represented by Hemingway as a moment of *seeing into* and *seeing through* (or at least trying to), is also a moment of reading. Or, rather, it is a moment where we can choose to see an analogy in the text to the mode of imagistic witnessing that the reader of *In Our Time* performs. From this perspective, the passage contemplates reading as a dynamic process of both seeing and not seeing. The smoothness of the water does not necessarily
beget transparency (visual access), and, in fact, the smooth water surface later blinds Nick, “as a mirror in the sun” (153). That Nick’s visions of the trout are also “distorted” and occluded by the “mist of gravel and sand” is significant because it signals a limit. Nick knows that the trout are at the bottom of the pool, beneath the smooth surface, and yet this knowledge is a product of reasonable inference rather than direct observation. The next paragraph recounts Nick seeing not trout but shadows which “seem . . . to float upstream” and “mark . . . the angle” of the trout’s movement (134). All of this is to say that knowledge of the text (of the pool, of the passage) is inevitably imperfect, constituted as it is by a causal connection that is only ever intuited by the beholder. Indeed, the smoothness of the water is what allows Nick both to see into the pool and, also, what distorts his vision.

And so we arrive at something of a paradox: on the one hand, smoothness signifies a knowable simplicity—it connotes a sensual predictability or a progressive familiarity where that which comes after is the same as that which comes before; on the other hand, embedded in the concept there is also difficulty. Like a “smooth-talker,” for example, who withholds knowledge, distorts information, and in the process refuses to disclose himself fully (though he may appear to), the river also distorts the shape and location of Nick’s trout. In this sense, smoothness becomes another version of what we have elsewhere called recalcitrant simplicity. Like thin characters, smooth things permit a type of easy access (they reveal themselves), but they also simultaneously deflect our gestures of illumination and bear that light back upon us. However, as I will show, smoothness also describes a specific paratactic strategy employed by Hemingway that both echoes the text’s smooth images and nuances our understandings of the hermeneutic effects of simplicity.
The attraction to smoothness in *In Our Time* is not particular to Nick. Harold Krebs, the protagonist of “Soldier’s Home,” also “wants . . . his life to go smoothly” (77). More explicitly than Nick’s, Krebs’s desire for the smooth life is coupled with the notion of simplicity. Krebs has “tried so to keep his life from being complicated” (76), and he yearns for the simplicity of relationships with foreign girls with whom he does not have to talk (72). For both men, to locate the smooth and simple moments in life is to cope with loss. Nick, after losing a big trout, finds a warm log that is “smooth to sit on” and “slowly the feeling of disappointment [leaves] him” (151). Krebs, similarly, tries to focus on (and read) the predictable “patterns” of girls in modern clothes in order to suppress the feeling that he has “lost everything” (71, 70). Similarly Hemingway’s audience must cope with a type of loss: whereas Krebs, a veteran of the Great War, must somehow find a way to negotiate his psychological losses (of cultural belonging, of manhood, etc.) and Nick must cope more immediately with the loss of a great fish (and all its potential symbolic resonances), readers, confronted as we are by Hemingway’s twin strategies of parataxis and omission, must face the loss of words. Indeed, minimalist aesthetics reproduce loss as a conscious reduction. To wit, the free indirect discourse that Hemingway uses to gesture towards Krebs’s utter alienation hinges upon a certain unreadability:

> All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality, and then were lost themselves. (70)

This “one thing,” this “only thing,” represents a way of acting that is omitted by the author. And yet the act is still concrete due to its characterization as a “thing.” The reader may, of course,
infer as to what this thing might be, but its tangibility—its thingness—is still paradoxically lost to us, as it is to Krebs. The simplicity of such a phrase as “the only thing” makes both ours and Krebs’s loss more ironic. For if the tangible is supposed to be graspable, here the thing, much like the “smooth and clean” trout (155), is especially slippery. This thing that was once “easy” for Krebs, Hemingway represents to the reader in such a way that is both accessible (easy, because it is reified, sensual) and inaccessible (lost, because it is omitted, never fully explained). Still, it is not just that the reader experiences on the formal level what Krebs does thematically; instead, what’s going on, I think, is a more intricate investigation of the ethical toll of simplicity in life and in narrative. For as Krebs mourns for a time in which there was no difficulty of choice—that is, as he mourns the loss of the simplicity—the reader is immersed in a prose whose smooth and simple textures problematize Krebs’s oftentimes myopic and misogynistic nostalgia. The unimpeachable certainty and comfort that Krebs finds in his “patterns” is nowhere to be found in the predictable yet recalcitrant patterning of Hemingway’s sentences.

The linguistically simple stories and vignettes that make up In Our Time thus broaden our understanding of simplicity’s hermeneutic functionality because they are the source of our own sense of loss but they also constitute the tools by which we recognize the limitations of Krebs’s interpretive mode. That is, smoothness (as a simple mode of living) works differently for Krebs than smoothness (as a simultaneously simple and recalcitrant paratactic strategy) works for the reader. A close examination of the way in which Hemingway represents Krebs’s consciousness reveals how such a smooth style works at cross-purposes with the character’s intense desire for simplicity:

When he was in town their appeal to him was not very strong. He did not like them when he saw them in the Greek’s ice cream parlor. He did not want them
themselves really. They were too complicated. There was something else.

Vaguely he wanted a girl but he did not want to have to work to get her. He would have liked to have a girl but he did not want to have to spend a long time getting her. He did not want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn’t worth it.

(71)

We immediately note two salient technical qualities of this passage; first, there is the cadenced, rhythmically predictable progression of sentences. Save for the last, each simple sentence is approximately the same length as the ones surrounding it. Likewise, the anaphora—“He did not”—contributes to the aural and tonal regularity of the discourse. Secondly, there is the accretion of negatives—of non-images, really—that not only typifies Krebs’s version of simplicity as one of reduction but also characterizes him as someone who can no longer expend the constructive effort that goes into imagining the other. And insofar as Krebs here has forsaken the very possibility of imagining the other, which is also the possibility of being an imagining and interpreting subject in the world, he has lost himself.29

And yet, in the midst of his angst, there is a subtle interjection. “There was something else” is something of a bump in the smoothness of the passage. Whereas the rest of the passage is clearly focalized through Krebs, this line, a deictic pause amidst the patterned consistency, is more readily aware of an audience than the self-consuming prose surrounding it. Here, the focalization is ambiguous; Krebs’s and Hemingway’s perspectives intermix to the point which

29 There is, I think, an important difference here between Krebs’s refusal to imagine the other and, say, Hemingway’s disimagination of Catherine in A Farewell to Arms or Ántonia’s thin mode of narration in My Antonia. Whereas in the latter cases, the act of disimagination operates as a cognitive key with which to counterpoint thicker narrative modes that tend to impose and objectify, Krebs reduction of women through the accretion of negatives is an assertion of his subjectivity at the expense of theirs. In his mind, the patterns work metonymically, replacing the women themselves. If disimagination works as a means of paying tribute to the recalcitrant simplicity of the other, then Kreb’s reductive representation of women as patterns reads as an attempt to make them wholly transparent, an accessible nothing.
they cannot be fully separated from each other. While Hemingway directs us and lets us know that there is something more, something unsaid, amidst the parataxis, Krebs refuses to say exactly what that “something else” is. In other words, the ambiguity arises precisely because there is here a contest of narrative ethics: the implied author supplements the scene and tries to materialize Krebs’s anxiety but Krebs does not trust the authority of words—the “something else” must remain unnarrated or else it will turn into another one of his lies. And it is this fear of lying that ethically re-engages the reader with Krebs. To refuse to lie (about the war and about himself) is to refuse to recreate a tired and outdated masculinist fiction of heroic individuation; it is also a potential sign of Krebs’s desire to engage in an honest relationship with women. Still, because Krebs does not want to make the effort to talk to women—that is, he does not want even to attempt to narrate his story to them—he’s vision of the simple life is at odds with the simplicity of the text, a simplicity that solicits our close reading of and attention to otherness but whose recalcitrance prevents us from wholly reducing that other to a synthetic and easily-imagined figure. Hemingway shows us that there are complications—that there are intricacies and potential depths to Krebs—but he reveals it using such simple language. And that it is “something” makes it all the more ironic, for what ought to be the most easily perceptible and concrete is, in fact, the most difficult and obscure thing about the passage. It is thus, simultaneously, an omission and an addition: an omission because it signals all that we cannot and do not know about Krebs’s interior life; an addition because it is itself a sign of a tangible reality.

What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that the paratactic structure of this passage is itself a formal instantiation of the paradox of smoothness. I cannot deny the linguistic simplicity of the passage, nor that the succession of straightforward, repetitive sentences is, from Krebs’s
perspective, an attempt to order the world according to a principle of simple reduction. At the same time, from the perspective of the implied author, the parataxis also contains bumps, occluding and disjointing our experience of the narrative. Inborn to the predictability—that is, the smoothness—of the structure, there is also fragmentation and difference. Hemingway thus problematizes Krebs’s vision of smoothness because the latter does not fully account for the consequences of reduction, which is to say the consequences of reducing the other to a non-entity. Krebs, ideally, “want[s] to live along without consequences” (71), but what our formal reading reveals is that even with a simple and smooth life (i.e. a simple and smooth text), consequences cannot be wholly omitted. While Krebs’s way of smoothing out complications is certainly preferable to the lies that he refuses to tell, it is a means of dealing with the world that leads one down a path of incommunicability and social isolation. To tell the truth, moreover, is not even an option according to Krebs: he believes that “It was all a lie both ways” (72). And this is the real social trauma of Krebs’s postwar life: he cannot speak for fear of lying, but his silence similarly jeopardizes his ethical relation to the world. If parataxis is the formal minimization of causation and connection—mirroring, perhaps, a similar attempt in “life”—then we have seen how even a simple shift in focalization can testify to the inescapability of consequence, as it gestures towards style itself as a type of psychological effect. I am not arguing that the formal features of the passage wholly undermine Krebs’s misogyny; rather, insofar as Krebs’s misogyny is predicated upon a desire to eliminate consequence, and thus the subject’s responsibility towards the other, the text’s repeated and predictable insistence upon Krebs compels the reader

---

30 Hemingway’s subtle insistence on the “thingness” embedded within Krebs’s consciousness, reminds me of Bill Brown’s interpretation of Henry James’s The Golden Bowl. He argues that the crack in the bowl “calls into question the boundary between surface and interior, as between absence and presence, a crack through which the Thing might slowly seep” (172). In the case of “Soldier’s Home,” it appears that the thing—the “something”—operates like a crack. It is both a physical presence and an ambiguous absence, a potential locus of significance and a simple, inconsequential utterance that is smoothed over by the surrounding text.

31 It is possible that there is a misprint in this sentence, that “along” should read as “alone.”
to actively attend to the protagonist in a way that he refuses to the girls whose patterns he so passively enjoys. The “something else” is an invitation to fill in the paratactic gaps, to rethink the value of a smooth life, and to try to intuit the other’s dimensionality at the very moment that Krebs sees none. What we gain, more broadly, by attending to this “something”—by paying close attention to voice and struggling to understand the character’s motivations—is that such work achieves a separation between us and Krebs. The performance of such readings demonstrates an accountability to the other that is notably absent from Krebs’s interpretation of his world.

And still, the unreadable “something” produces a hermeneutic limit. The causal relationship between the “something else” and Krebs’s psychological alienation is both there and not there. Hemingway’s repetitive language seems to invite closer, more actively synthetic (and even symbolic readings), and yet those images also stand alone and remain autonomous, separated as they are from each other by the insistence of the periods. We are simultaneously invited into this text, invited to see inside the other, but also confronted with limits of such an interior view. When Hemingway switches to dialogue, the reader realizes the extent of Krebs’s reticence. His proclivity for one-word answers—“Sure,” “Maybe,” “No” (74-75)—allows us to observe the corollary of his decision to live a smooth life. He can hardly speak to his sister, the one person in the text who he seems to care about. What’s more, such dialogue exists in such sharp contrast to the free indirect discourse of the rest of the text that it serves to highlight the constructed and fictive nature of our interior view of Krebs. It is a view that must be consistently tempered by our encounter with the simple and recalcitrant verbal surfaces that Krebs presents to the world. Much like Nick for whom the smooth river is both transparent and “a mirror” (153),
we become more self-aware, cognizant of our role as active, if not also imposing, readers who must at times actively imagine causes for the textual effects that we encounter.

Thus, to imagine Hemingway’s narrative technique itself as smooth is to imagine it as a form of simplicity that both complements and contradicts the drive of such characters as Krebs and Nick towards the putatively good life. This strategy is enacted both on the micro (linguistic) level and on the macro (generic, structural) level; in other words, such smoothness occurs not only in and between sentences but also as an organizing principle of the entire short-story cycle. This may, on the one hand, seem counterintuitive, for the sequencing of short stories and interchapters that comprise *In Our Time*, when compared to traditional novelistic approaches to narrative, appears radically disjunctive and fragmentary—veritab ly unsmooth. But if we have established through our analysis that smoothness itself can be paradoxical—that it can both proffer cognitive access to the other and also withhold that access—then we can see how the textual pieces of the short story cycle are patterned upon the interdependent principles of predictability and fragmentation. In short, it makes sense to speak about *In Our Time* as possessing, what I would call, a *structural parataxis*. There is no clear causative line between each story, nor do the interchapters explicitly illuminate the subject matter of the longer stories. As such, the generic structure emphasizes not only the particularity of each narrative experience but it also implicitly resists the conflation of events into a generalized (and generalizing) interpretive matrix. The cycle situates itself ethically by challenging its readers to observe the details of specific events without forestalling their integrity by falling into universalist assumptions. And yet, the interchapters still serve a connective function. Each story is bordered by these vignettes, and as we read through the collection, we encounter a generic texture (story-interchapter-story-interchapter) that quickly becomes predictable, despite the topical and
thematic variation that emanates from any individual narrative. Much like Nick’s log that is “smooth to sit on,” the generic predictability offers us a modicum of comfort amidst the fast-moving and violent world of the text. The interchapters in this formulation come to resemble the “and” of the paratactic utterance. They connect the stories to one another without imposing causation—without losing their integrity as events in and of themselves—and testify to the potential relationship amongst characters, images, and story without ever overreaching into a monistic certainty. And despite their simplicity—that imagistic quality that materializes in each of them—the illumination they provide, implicit as it is, is only ever partial. Like the partially submerged log that makes the water smooth (where Nick catches his big fish), the interchapters are “partly in the shadow” (153). These “ands,” conjunctive and disjunctive, confront the reader with an opaque simplicity. They push us, excite our interpretive drives, but also block us from seeing, from knowing, and from connecting.

Hemingway’s narrative strategy suggests a potential affiliation with a particularly modernist conception of pluralism. Insofar as the technique of smoothness obliges readers to question the ways in which textual elements connect to each other—to question the ways in which our need to generalize might sacrifice the integrity of the particular—the text appears to echo William James’s philosophical project in A Pluralistic Universe. James foregrounds the “notion of some,” a concept that insists “each part of the world is in some ways connected, in some other ways not connected with its other parts, and the ways can be discriminated, for many of them are obvious, and their differences are obvious to view” (79). To understand In Our Time itself in Jamesian terms, as a multiverse, in which texts do not necessarily connect to one another and where causal relationships are at best temporary is to recognize the pluralistic impulse that undergirds the operation of smoothness as a narrative device. It also points to the significant
ethical limits of a reading strategy that would impose an absolute unity upon this collection of stories by moving too quickly from the particularity of a narrative event to a more universal symbolic truth.\(^3\) In *Fiction and Repetition*, J. Hillis Miller describes two modes of repetition: the first, which is “grounded,” is built upon a “genuine participative similarity” between narrative elements (6). Such repetition is a sort of connective tissue for the text, a means of positing a unified world out of similarity. The second mode, according to Miller, is ungrounded and “arises out of the interplay of the opaquely similar things” (8); it is a mode that emphasizes the differences of the world, but it does not negate the first mode. It is, instead, “the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out” (9). Rightly, I think, Miller contends that meaning is a function of the way the second mode incorporates the first, yielding a productive uncertainty in the reader who recognizes that he or she cannot always resolve iteration into a universalized whole. This does not, however, mean that the text never suggests its potential unities, only that we must simultaneously attend to the differences between each iteration.

Similarly, the smooth, repetitive structure of Hemingway’s chosen genre produces simple echoes (of image, style, theme) that gesture towards the text’s unknowability precisely because they challenge our capacity, as interpreters, to universalize particular occurrences. *In Our Time*

\(^3\) Ernest Hemingway thought *In Our Time* possessed “a pretty good unity” (*Selected Letters* 128). Numerous critics have used this seemingly innocuous remark, found in a 1924 letter to Edmund Wilson, to lay the interpretive groundwork for extended discussions of the collection’s larger, generally thematic, unity. But to take the author at his word—especially an author so famous for his aesthetic of omission—is to neglect those conspicuous modifiers: “pretty good” is not an acknowledgment of complete, comprehensive connection between all the texts that structure *In Our Time*; rather, it suggests that the unity is incomplete, not quite there, and that there may in fact remain unresolved tensions. Indeed, what Hemingway’s comment ironically expresses is not an unequivocal faith in the unity of the collection but, instead, a pluralistic hesitation.

Peter Donahue suggests that Hemingway’s claim is “not so much an assertion of unity for the work as a retrospective and self-assuring comment on his decision to collect the stories and vignettes into a single book” (164). See, also, Winn, Harbour. “Hemingway’s *In Our Time*: ‘Pretty good unity.’” *Hemingway Review* 9 (1990): 124-41.
resists absolute inclusivity (the notion that each text-as-other *must* connect to others) at the same time it suggests the possibility of connection, and thus it promotes moments of interpretive self-consciousness where we recognize that one experience *may* not, no matter how much we desire, ever perfectly map onto another. Such conceptual imperfection is foundational to modernity’s pluralistic project:

> Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism, or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related* . . . . Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word “and” trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. ‘Ever not quite’ has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness . . . However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity. (James 321-22)

That James describes pluralism in terms of parataxis—the “and”—is significant as it elucidates the ideological underpinnings of Hemingway’s generic experiment. The author’s penchant for parataxis, in this regard, can be seen as more than merely a repudiation of narrative causation. It is also an insistence of the irreducibility of words, of images, of characters, into putatively definitive and universalist metaphors. Confronted by such a structure, the interpreter hesitates to universalize the moment and thus produce a unified reading of the larger text. The “and” smoothly and simply insists on the incompletion of what surrounds it.

But if Jamesian pluralism rejects the formation of a unified all-ness, and instead suggests that any conceptual connections we make are inevitably temporary and qualified by the “and,”
Hemingway’s *In Our Time* more fully engages with this as a failure; just as Hemingway’s omissions analogize Krebs’s personal losses, so is the failure of ideals in this text evoked by the smooth genre itself. Furthermore, the disjunctive violence employed by and within the interchapters—dying mothers and children, executed politicians, gored bullfighters—speaks in tandem with their connective function—the pervasiveness of tragedy in our time—and thus indicates the ethical limits of a pluralism in which even the most modest of conceptual unions has the power to efface real and physical difference.

Chapter VII, which Hemingway places immediately before “Soldier’s Home,” briefly recounts the utter fear and panic one soldier endures during a bombardment at Fossalta. Its form of interior monologue is upsetting not only because of the desperation it so simply represents but also because of the sense of anonymity it preserves. It is as if this soldier is already lost to the reader; like many unnamed and unknown soldiers, he disappears from the text, never to speak and never to be spoken of again:

Dear Jesus please get me out. Christ please please please Christ. If you’ll only keep me from getting killed I’ll do anything you say. I believe in you and I’ll tell every one in the world that you are the only one that matters. Please please dear Jesus . . . . The next night back at the Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody. (67)

Juxtaposed as it is against Krebs’s story, it is difficult not to trace the continuities between the two narratives. Indeed, this narrative seems to prepare us conceptually for “Soldier’s Home.” The soldier’s refusal to tell anybody about his fear or his fleeting religious turn parallels Krebs’s own reticence. His desperate invocation and subsequent repudiation of Jesus resonates in Krebs’s inability to pray with his mother; both soldiers reject faith for more immediate comforts that
allow them, at least temporarily, to escape their trauma. Further, if Hemingway subtly keys us in to the “something else” of Krebs’s existence, then it seems reasonable to look towards this interchapter as a means to sift and see through Krebs’s “lies.” If the “something” signifies a war experience that Krebs is unwilling to access—unwilling to tell his parents or potential girlfriends about for fear that it will turn into lies—here in this interchapter it is unmasked. The terror is visible and audible. It is accessible.

Does chapter VII thus make the “something” of Krebs’s narrative more tangible? Does it make the object—the sentence—less recalcitrant? Does it, in a word, smooth out our entry into Krebs’s world? Envisaging the interchapter as a connective text is, as I have suggested, only half of the answer. Although both soldiers exhibit a significant mistrust of language—Krebs, on the one hand, feels “the need to talk” but also realizes “[i]t wasn’t any good” (69, 76), while the praying soldier consigns himself to silence (67)—their wartime experiences are not the same. Krebs has fought in “Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Michel and . . . the Argonne” (69), whereas the praying soldier faces a bombardment at Fossalta (67). Between these two texts then, exists an uncertain and unstable space where the reader cannot fully reconcile the historical circumstances of the two soldiers. Their silences reflect the larger narrative silences that Hemingway produces between each text, and they intimate the irony of the shared possessive, “Our” in the title of the cycle; that is, we cannot assimilate these soldiers into a single experience of “War.” Accordingly, Lisa Narbeshuber sees in the text “a positive stress on the unavailable, the absent, and the quality of time before objects become objects at all . . . Hemingway wants to allow the other to remain other; not yet possessed or mastered by the human will to power. But he also wants to preserve some semblance of self and its own immanent viewpoints” (22). The disjunction of the two texts makes the “something” impossible for the reader completely
articulate. The anonymity of the soldier speaks not necessarily to the universality of a soldier’s experience but to the irretrievability of individual consciousness. Though we are momentarily privy to his thoughts, we are also faced with the fact that he never tells his story. It is thus an experience both narrated and unnarrated: our moment of access is tempered by the realization that such access is fictive, an imagined moment that underscores just how little the non-combatant can know about the real face of war. So too do we face then the disjunctive function of the interchapter. Its final paratactic line—“And he never told anybody”—reiterates the ambivalence of the “and,” the very recalcitrance embedded in the technique of smoothness. Such a phrase operates loosely under the logic of what Robyn Warhol calls “the antinarratable,” a form of unnarratability that foregrounds what should not be told according to social convention (224). The difficulty of revisiting the site of his trauma and ensuing vulnerability prevents the soldier from ever telling about it. To do so would work against the masculinist convention of the brave and battle-hardened soldier; it would crack the collective myth of his power. And yet because Hemingway does revisit this trauma, because he challenges the ethical impulse of the character’s silence, and because he exposes the soldier’s cravenness, his broken promises, and his shame, the text communicates to us the pain—the consequence—of experience as much as it does the very impossibility of communication.

Such twinning of narratability and unnarratability—between inclusion and omission—indicates the potential unavailability of the other, and we can observe the cycle’s most conspicuous instantiation of this formal phenomenon when we think of the title itself as an image. That the title consolidates and delimits the events of the cycle as “our time” initially suggests that the universe of the text can be harnessed—that everything can be categorized and reduced to a moment, a period, a generation. But the title is incomplete; it is only part of a larger
passage from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, “Give peace in our time Oh Lord.” The omission marks an important node of understanding regarding the text’s recalcitrant simplicity: the title undoes itself. Just as the text’s smooth structure implicitly questions the legitimacy of our interpretive connections between texts, so does the paratext instantiate the ethical problem of smoothness by simultaneously operating as an autonomous, titular phrase, as well as a part of a larger grammatical whole. The title operates as both a metaphor of containment and excess. It bespeaks the collection’s unity underneath a temporal umbrella, and yet is itself a fragment, broken off from its original sentence. Similarly, any conceptual unity we impose upon the text emphatically reveals itself as just that—an imposition. According to Charlene Siegfried, “Our interests in practical, aesthetic, and moral organizations of experience lead us to pick patterns out of the overabundance of disorderly arrangements. The disorder and order which result are purely human inventions” (216). Words that Hemingway leaves out indicate the ultimate failure of any metaphor we, as critics, grasp too tightly; to imagine “our time” as the connective (the thing which holds all of the other texts together) of the collection forgets the fact that it also represents a history of disconnection.

In 1983, C.G. and A.C Hoffman argued that “[a]ny one time and place . . . is a reverberation of all the other inter-related times and places that make up the complex but unified sense of ‘in our time’. . . . Hemingway sought with words to transcend the reported reality of an event so that it becomes a timeless, visual object evoking all the related moments of past, present and future” (100). According to this logic, the word becomes a metaphor for all time. But to make such a claim, one must first be willing to elide the integrity—the difference—of each moment and each word. The smooth interpretive step from paratext to text is complicated by the omission implied by the paratext. Interpretations such as the Hoffmans’ are thus exposed as
impositions, for the moment we inscribe the text with a categorical unity, we efface that which resists containment and doesn’t fit into our particular interpretive paradigm—the excess, the omitted, the other. “The doctrine on which the absolutists lay most stress is the absolute’s ‘timeless’ character,” says James, “For pluralists, on the other hand, time remains as real as anything, and nothing in the universe is great or static or eternal enough not to have some history” (49, my emphasis). Our interpretations are only stable until we consider, ironically, the “peace” and the “Lord” that are left out—simple paratextual omissions that challenge absolutist interpretations such as those of the Hoffmans’ by offering meaning as much as they take it away. The omissions oblige us to contemplate what has been lost (from the phrase), but it does not follow that they necessarily restore those terms. Instead, the meaning that is gained is the loss itself—the sense that the whole is ultimately irrecoverable. This is a fundamental ethical problem that pluralist philosophy poses, and to speak of an aesthetics of simplicity is to speak about the ways access to the other is simultaneously solicited and deferred. Similar to James, who criticizes the very stability of conceptual thinking when he says “[a] concept means a that-and-no-other” (253), Hemingway performs his mistrust of abstraction right at the level of narrative technique. Knowledge of the other is consistently interrogated by the collection’s parataxis, a technique whose texture and rhythm is predictable and yet whose causative gaps make us feel, at the same time, uncertain. In *In Our Time*, absence qualifies presence, forcing the reader to come to terms with the incompleteness of the word and the world. Hemingway’s aesthetic undermines any totality—any greater abstract concept—we may think a word references.

---

33 In *Narrative Causalities*, Emma Kafalenos argues that “meaning . . . is an interpretation of the causal relations between an event and the other events and situations one thinks of as related” (23). She goes on to suggest that if readers cannot locate causal relations between events in a narrative, they will lose interest (24). Though I agree that the finding of causation is an exciting mode of meaning-making, I would contend that meaning is more a function of the search rather than the precise location of causation. Hemingway’s narrative is not “less interesting” for its paratactic structures; rather, in the way that its simplicity makes me feel self-conscious about the imposition involved in “filling-in” those causative gaps, it is especially interesting, relevant, and meaningful.
Further, the interchapters eke out a certain space between the texts. Situated as they are, as narratives between narratives, they maintain a separation of stories that is at once visual and rhetorical. While the white space between chapter VII and “Soldier’s Home”—a space which is made all the more conspicuous by the brevity of the interchapter—is literally a space where nothing is written, it also operates figuratively as a hermeneutic boundary that prevents the two narratives from touching each other. Such space is simple; there is no ink spilled and no story told. It is a narrative no-man’s land, a borderland that protects and preserves the autonomy of the surrounding texts. To an extent the margins of every text operate in this way, but the brevity of Hemingway’s interchapters, combined with their liminal status as texts-between, serves to emphasize both the size and amount of negative space; there is, simply, much more of it here than there is in a conventional novel. In this way, the interchapters operate in much the same way as the minimalist sculpture within the gallery. Just as the cube, by means of its simple, imposing presence, forces the subject to negotiate the gallery space in new ways—to move physically around the gallery in an attempt to temper his expectations of the ideal shape with the contingencies of the real one—the interchapter also changes the way in which we negotiate the pause between stories. It changes our interpretive expectations by gesturing to the oscillation that inevitably occurs between our desire to connect the texts imaginatively and the reality of their separation from one another.

I am not suggesting that the texts of *In Our Time* cannot be read together, cannot inform each other in some ways some of the time; rather, because the structural parataxis embeds a hermeneutic limit, any reader attempting to connect these stories and interchapters through the vehicle of a unifying figure—the reappearance of Nick Adams, for example—needs to be self-
conscious of how he or she is called upon to recognize the impossibility of providing a clean, immutable thread throughout the texts. This is why Peter Donahue can thoughtfully assert that Nick Adams in the final story is not necessarily the Nick of the other stories; he is not a copy, but “always in the process of becoming” (167). Furthermore, “Only momentary stability is available when language, and thereby character, is so processional. Hemingway’s restraint, his penchant for parataxis over hypotaxis, testifies to his careful negotiation of narrative’s attempts to represent the world” (169). The multiplicity of voices in this text resists containment—resists assimilation, in a word. The propensity of critics to interpret the Nick Adams persona as the cycle’s central figure (the hero) tends to result in some unsustainable conclusions. In this regard, Robert M. Slabey’s claim for a certain, unifying heroic code appears incomplete: “The code requires that one be self-reliant, adhere to the ‘rules’ and play the ‘game’ skillfully. The capital sin is cowardice; the greatest fear is fear itself. The code provides an image of what a man can achieve, of how he can be defeated, but only on his own terms. . . . Those not living by the code—the ‘herd’—are easily identified by their lack of discipline, fortitude, and honor; they are ‘outsiders,’ unacquainted with the tragic nature of existence” (71). One might wonder, then, whether the “[w]omen and kids” of Chapter II, who are “in the carts crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles” and “herded” by the Greek cavalry know nothing of the tragic nature of existence (Hemingway 21). This rhetoric of a “code” violently enforces a type of

indicates that the information presented about Nick Adams and the modern world in the previous stories is part of the interpretive matrix of “Big Two-Hearted River” (“Unknown Genre” 95). By seeing Nick in the other texts as fundamental to the interpretation of the final story, Nagel not only unifies the cycle but unifies Nick Adams as the central figure. For another noteworthy example of this type of Nick-centred criticism, see: Moddelmog, Debra A. “The Unifying Consciousness of a Divided Conscience: Nick Adams as Author of In Our Time.” American Literature 60 (1988): 591-610.

There are, of course, numerous examples of non-continuous characters in modernist fiction: Mrs. Dalloway in The Voyage Out and Mrs. Dalloway, Ursula in The Rainbow and Women in Love, and Quentin in The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom. To define the short story cycle based on the presence of such characters is to overlook their manifestations in the genre of the novel.
narrative amnesia and obscures the various manifestations of tragedy within the text by reifying a single heroic prototype. The problem with codes is that they neglect experiences that don’t fit under their particular rubric. They cast anomalies as undesirable and others as forgettable. On the contrary, the imagistic simplicity we encounter in virtually every interchapter makes even the most “marginal” of experiences unforgettable.

And this, I think, is precisely the point. There is, of course, no mention of Nick (or Nick Adams) in “On the Quai at Smyrna,” the introductory text of *In Our Time.* In fact, there is no way of telling who the frame narrator is. The story begins with a conspicuous shift of narrative subject positions that makes the focalization ambiguous: “The strange thing was, he said, how they screamed every night at midnight. I do not know why they screamed at that time. We were in the harbor and they were all on the pier and at midnight they started screaming” (11, my emphasis). The switch from a third-person narrative voice to a first-person indicates the possibility of two narrators. One narrator, a British officer whose diction—“topping,” “chap” (11)—exposes him, recounts his story of the evacuation of Greek refugees to another, anonymous frame narrator. That Hemingway reveals no biographical information of this second narrator is significant because it prevents the reader from locating him within the rest of the cycle. Such thinness foregrounds the absence of connection so pivotal to the cycle, illustrating the incapacity of any figure to stand for the whole. The second narrator’s inscrutability does not produce a universal quality; on the contrary, his obscurity foregrounds a particular quality of negation whereby his omitted personality forces us to come to terms with the very limits of our interpretive ventures. Tellingly, the introduction also employs the second-person narrative voice:

---

35 Peter A. Smith argues that the addition of “On the Quai at Smyrna” in 1930 “seems to disrupt the unified pattern of the 1925 edition” (159). Still, he extends this line of reasoning to claim that “[l]earning, particularly Nick’s learning through experience, is the central theme of the collection” (160, my emphasis). This emphasis on Nick, I think, comes at the cost of recognizing the poignant range of others’ suffering in both this story and the larger cycle.
You remember the harbor. There were plenty of nice things floating around in it.

That was the only time in my life I got so I dreamed about things. You didn’t mind the women who were having babies as you did those with the dead ones. They had them all right. Surprising how few of them died. You just covered them over with something and let them go to it. (12, my emphasis)

The first sentence appears to indicate an interlocutor from the previous paragraph who is questioned by the officer—“You remember when they ordered us not to come in to take off anymore?” (12)—but the subsequent omission of the question mark ambiguates both the speaker and the antecedent. In the fourth sentence, the change to the past-tense signifies a more general state-of-mind given the context; the second-person pronoun operates as a stand-in for “one.” And yet, the very fact that “you” is used rather than “one” connotes a degree of specificity, as if to say that an individual “you” can never wholly translate into a universal “one.” In this way, the final sentence points toward a specific act that would have to be done by a specific person, indicating the particularity of the narrated experience. In other words, in this brief passage, Hemingway’s iteration of the second-person pronoun works to deconstruct the universality of which it is also a sign. The “you” resists its own totalization and retains the personal quality of the scene at hand even as it suggests the possibility of an experience that could be more largely shared.

Milton A. Cohen has shown that many critics have interpreted the British voices in the text as all belonging to one speaker, while, roughly, all the unidentified American voices as belonging to either Nick Adams or “the Nick Adams experience.” Cohen goes on to argue that “By this logic of conflation, the differences among these voices in In Our Time are a sham, and the voices really become nothing more than the monolithic projections of Hemingway’s ventriloquism” (24). In actual fact, in “Quai,” the smooth and subtle perspectival shifts,
understood broadly, do not signal a unified and encompassing voice, but rather the opposite. They key us into the recalcitrance of a simply wrought textual world because, although we have access to a particularly gruesome and concrete experience, that access is distorted—the smooth, colloquial shifts in focalization alter our distance to the represented events and thus affect our capacity to sustain a focused vision upon them. The simple pronominal changes suggest the very difficulty of viewing the narrative event at once in its entirety; just as the beholder of the minimalist cube can only ever conceive of the gestalt as a theoretical possibility, here the reader must attend to the possibility that the perspectives do not cohere into a knowable whole. The events of *In Our Time* which take place, which have taken place, and which are to take place, are rhetorically separate from each other. Through these disjunctive voices, “Quai” beckons the reader to move in and out of the experience, enacting moments of commensurability and incommensurability, shifting perspectives in order to illustrate the tenuousness of cohesion and community. The violence of the evacuation, in this sense, reveals a darker side of the pluralist project, where multiple voices produce not only harmony, but also a “screaming” cacophony. In this way, “Quai” introduces the reader to a text in which perspectives simultaneously supplement and resist one another; it suggests the inevitable recalcitrance of simplicity in the way that it proffers access to the event but also emphasizes the fact of disjunction.

On the thematic level, as well, the interchapters reproduce this violent disjunction. In “Quai,” the officer uses a “searchlight on [the screaming people] to quiet them” (11), but the relationship of lightness, darkness, and silence, is somewhat more obscure in Chapter I. The narrator recalls, “We went along the road all night in the dark and the adjutant kept riding up alongside my kitchen and saying, ‘You must put it out. It is dangerous. It will be observed.’ We were fifty kilometers from the front but the adjutant worried about the fire in my kitchen” (13).
It is certainly possible to trace the similarities between this chapter and “Quai,” insofar as light is not “enlightening” so much as it is potentially violent; observation—and fear of its deadly consequences—is something that Hemingway emphasizes in both of these texts. But this visual metaphor does not trace perfectly between the two narratives. There is a marked difference between, what Lisa Narbeshuber calls the “violent clarity” of the introduction (9), and the strangely comforting fire of the kitchen corporal. Whereas in the introduction light imposes silence (the searchlight itself being a mode of violent imposition upon the refugees) in Chapter I the kitchen fire and the drunken, talkative lieutenant exist concurrently; silence is no longer a function of light. Despite the adjutant’s belief that the fire is dangerous, neither the narrator nor the reader in this case can be sure. The paratactic declaration by the narrator that the battery is “fifty kilometers” away from the front exposes a certain indecisiveness in regards to the adjutant’s logic—that the fire will cause the danger.

In fact, the physical space between the battery and the front comes to mirror the ambiguous space which exists between the two texts; moreover, the contrast between dark and light, speech and silence, and their different metaphorical manifestations in the two texts signals an important moment of difference. This is not to say that the introduction and Chapter I exist in an oxymoronic relationship with each other; rather, it is their thematic similarities—their recruitment of comparable imageries—that paradoxically produce an irreconcilable moment in the space between them. If Robert E. Gajdusek is correct when he says Hemingway, when using oxymorons, “is fastidiously studying the attempt by one thing to take over the identity of or become one with the identity of its opposite so that the two become one and inseparably the same” (“Oxymoronic Compound,” 307), such assimilation never fully occurs within the narrative lacunae of In Our Time. Because Hemingway depicts space as a site of anxiety where
the movement from particular to general is problematic, where perfect metaphoric connection is never available, and where contrast itself is brought into sharp relief, ethical interpretation becomes a function of the reader’s momentary withholding of his or her imaginative powers of connection. It is important to view the interchapters not merely as positive moments of transition—connectives which inform our reading through a process of “mapping on similarities”—but as spaces of friction, where interpretation is halted in the moment, where we are made hyperaware of the difference between figures we would assume to be compatible, and where our own critical attempts to shed “light” upon the text are reflected back upon us, thus forcing us to perform the very difficulty of understanding difference.36

Nick and Krebs rival each other precisely because they are so similar. And it is the test of the critic not to assimilate them into a single heroic figure but to recognize the physical (Michigan/Oklahoma) and rhetorical space between them. As Narbeshuber states, “Hemingway values the pause before the movement . . . In the face of unprecedented power to destroy, Hemingway looks for hesitation” (19). The blank spaces between the stories and interchapters are, likewise, a type of pause; they are moments of resistance where the reader’s narrative desire for continuation—a desire to which we bear witness in interpretations such as Slabey’s—is disrupted and where the figures of the text cannot be completely assimilated. The gaps convey an ethical hesitation; they make us unsure of whether unity ever fully exists or if we are enforcing it upon the texts.

To enforce a unity upon the text where it does not explicitly exist comes at the price of creating a reductive whole, a whole which effaces the experiential differences performed

36 “Pluralistic empiricism,” says William James, “knows that everything is in an environment, a surrounding world of other things, and that if you leave it to work there it will inevitably meet with friction and opposition from its neighbors. Its rivals and enemies will destroy it unless it can buy them off by compromising some part of its original pretensions” (90-91).
between chapter and story and chapter. Gajdusek, for instance, observes that “all three of these introductory stories focus on overt or latent violence, questionable origins, and . . . the birth process itself” (“False Fathers,” 55). He concludes that the Caesarian of “Indian Camp” is a metaphor for “the violences of art and the occasionally almost fatal meaning of art’s surrogate role” (61). In each of these stories Gajdusek sees surrogate fathers—the officer in “Quai,” Dr. Adams in “Indian Camp,” etc.—as violent creators who are able to separate life and death with a sense of “detachment” (59). This is, on the one hand, quite a valuable metaphor: to understand the evacuation of Greek refugees at Smyrna as a type of violent and unnatural removal is to proffer an historical interpretation that foregrounds the issue of trespass. From this perspective, Dr. Adams’s jackknife in “Indian Camp” invokes the thrust of westward expansion, internal colonialism, and a history of violent indigenous removal. The afterbirth—which Nick tellingly refuses to look at (17)—reminds the reader that the process of removal is never clean, pure, or peaceable. Still, by situating the artist as the “remover”—as the agent responsible for such violent obstetrics—Gajdusek intimates a connection between artist and authority that is not fully congruous. To suggest that Dr. Adams is the figure of the artist, the creator, is to elide the presence of the Ojibway woman; she is the mother and she deserves recognition for her creative labours. Moreover, to suggest that In Our Time is unified by the figure of the artist is to imbue the cycle with a singularity of vision and self that Hemingway’s linguistic and structural parataxis challenges:

[T]he complex sentence structure with its central reliance on ordering experience into the independent and subordinate evaporates in favour of serial, simple sentences asserting the integrity of each thing that happens. Things happen one by one, linked by whatever similarity may accumulate rather than by a causal
scheme. Moreover, no one thing at the moment it is occurring can possibly be seen as subordinate to some other thing not occurring. (Ziff 151, first my emphasis).

The plurality and autonomy of experiences in the text thus force the reader to come to terms with the limits of an overarching and hypotactic self. In other words, Gajdusek’s metaphor comes at the cost of displacement. Those creative bodies that don’t fit in its structure are excluded from it.

The artist-caesarian metaphor is imperfect because, like Krebs, it seeks to smooth out the text by means of negation—by a strategic “forgetting” of the collection’s dimensionality. In Chapter II, an unknown narrator recounts yet another image of birth:

Minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople across the mud flats. The carts were jammed for thirty miles along the Karagatch road. Water buffalo and cattle were hauling carts through the mud. No end and no beginning. Just carts loaded with everything they owned . . . . There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation. (21, my emphasis)

Although this birth resonates thematically with “Quai” and “Indian Camp” by means of its emphasis upon both the victimized mothers and the terrible conditions they must suffer through, these mothers are never complete echoes of each other. The babies in “Quai” are “dead” (12); the baby in “Indian Camp” is a boy who breathes and is very much alive (17); the state of the “kid” in Chapter II, however, is ambiguous—not only does Hemingway purposefully obscure who is scared sick, but he also refuses to tell us whether the “it” is the labour or the child itself (21).37

37 For an excellent examination of Hemingway’s careful production of ambiguous antecedents, see Robert Paul Lamb’s, “Hemingway and the Creation of Twentieth-Century Dialogue.” Speaking specifically about “Hills Like
The simplification of the grammar in this sentence, which arises through the omission of the pronoun’s antecedent, produces a recalcitrance that causes the reader to hesitate over a straightforward reading that would interpret the girl as the one who is scared sick and the “it” as the child. Furthermore, the period that separates “crying” and “Scared” serves to ambiguate the subject of the penultimate sentence. Had the author used a comma instead, we could more clearly attribute the sickness to the young girl. Hemingway’s style here solicits from the reader a hermeneutics of indeterminacy where the simple text simultaneously proffers us access to the other but also withholding itself, not allowing us to fully witness the terrible scene. My larger point, however, is that to approach these mothers as interchangeable or as representations of a single figure is made problematic by the simple fact of their divergent experiences. To impose, for example, a straightforward connection between the Indian mother and the woman of Chapter II, the reader must willfully forget the very fact of their difference—the historical and geographical differences between Adrianople and Michigan, the Karagatch road and Ojibway woodlands. Such diversity of historical experience implicitly resists the gestures of symbolic assimilation or, rather, assimilation-by-symbol.

Whereas upon first consideration, “no end and no beginning” seems to imply an erasure of spatial and temporal distinctions, and thus a universal suffering, such continuity of experience disintegrates when we consider the space itself—the road, the chapter—as a disordered space which resists linearity and progression. If “no end” signals continuance, “no beginning” signals preclusion and obstruction. The space of Chapter II is a space cut off, one which the reader cannot penetrate, or occupy with any sustained empathy. By this I mean that the recalcitrance of the simple sentence—“Scared sick looking at it”—instantiates the way in which the implied

White Elephants,” Lamb argues that “[b]y subsuming such radically incompatible antecedents within one pronoun [“it”], Hemingway demonstrates the process by which, in dialogue, all hope of communication may become impossible” (472).
author limits the reach of our interpretive gestures. Without affecting the rhythm or tone of the passage, Hemingway momentarily blocks the reader’s vision. The experience thus retains its autonomy; it is something other and never fully known to us. While “scared sick,” with its lack of subject may refer for some readers to a universal sickness—a disease of our time—this interpretation must be tempered by the fact that we never see the woman having her baby. We only ever see the blanket which covers her. This is not to say that such indeterminacy serves to detach the reader from the scene; there is certainly a powerful emotionality here that exists independently of any metaphors of visual access. In fact, the sickness that many flesh-and-blood readers will derive from this scene will be ethically productive, presumably a result of their capacity to sympathize with the woman who must endure the terrifying reality of an unassisted birth during wartime. The text, in other words, does not merely prevent us from making imaginative connections (either between characters or with characters) through the instantiation of difference; rather, the effect of such indeterminacy is to make us more self-conscious of the ethical reach of our metaphorical mappings of similarity. I can’t be totally sure what “it” is, and for me to share in the sickness, I must make total what is only partially available to me. There is, therefore, in this inferential act the potential for trespass, and I think what Hemingway’s simple style is doing here is deflecting the reader’s attention back onto this interpretive mode. Thus, this chapter, situated as a text between texts which solicits our generous and empathetic imaginings of others, also ironically exposes the hazards that such connection may entail. To interpret the suffering mother of this chapter as a copy of other suffering mothers in In Our Time is to generalize suffering and make trauma ambiguous. When we universalize domination—which is to say when we do not locate the specific historical and geographical contingencies of the characters’ suffering—we leave the structures of power untouched; the agents responsible for
such trespasses remain unspecified, obscure, and unaccountable. Doctors, for example, become artists.

To understand Chapter II as one of many “ands” of *In Our Time* compels us recognize a particular violence inherent to the smoothness of the pluralist text; whereas James privileges the “and” as a moment of supplement, where difference may at least temporarily be reduced through the activation of a modest union, Hemingway shows us the potential for a very different type of “and”: though the interchapters may promise temporary connection between texts, themes, characters, etc., they also demonstrate that the “and” is often a violent moment where differences are imperfectly mapped onto one another. “The vignettes and stories,” observes Narbeshuber, “exist as separate perspectives that one cannot inhabit simultaneously” (21). When we, as critics, neglect the integrity of these experiences—these autonomous narratives—we perform a sort of “improper touch” in which the texts are reduced to lifeless figurations (Narbeshuber 23). In this way, Hemingway’s text stages a hermeneutic model which surely bears relevance to the world beyond art. It is a model constituted through a critical hesitation; that is, it produces a moment of self-awareness in which we see ourselves, as interpreters, struggle to find a balance between our responsibility to the irreducibility of the other and our need to conceptualize relations so as to better understand our world.

Most attempts to define *In Our Time* generically rely upon an imperfect process of figuration. According to Donahue, it is routine for critics to rely on figurative language to describe the short story cycle. He cites Forrest L. Ingram’s comparison of the genre “to tapestries, wheels, and finally mobiles” and the talk of “bubbles within a ‘thematic current’” by Robert M. Luscher. “Such a use of figurative language to conceptualize the genre,” concludes Donahue, “suggests its un-fixed nature, that it can be *like* something, like a short-story
collection—but apparently not something definite unto itself” (161). The irony of these metaphoric endeavours, in the context of Hemingway’s cycle, is that the author consciously eliminates such imaginative wordplay from the narratives. These omissions, coupled with the lacunae produced by the juxtaposition of stories and interchapters, illustrate In Our Time’s basic mistrust of the generalizing effects of language: “words, treacherous words, are not to be trusted, are subject to loss, are likely to betray you” (Mansell 6). Again, this marks an important divergence between James and Hemingway insofar as the “and”—a potentially treacherous word—for the former indicates only supplementation, while for the latter it is just as much a marker of absence (the tip of the iceberg). My own language of smoothness is, of course, just as metaphoric. But it is also, unlike these other examples, inborn to the text itself. It is a bottom-up phenomenon, a formal property meant not to circumscribe the genre but to account for the very limits of generic conceptualization. The “and” is a figure of smoothness, simple but slippery. Thus, if the structural parataxis of In Our Time demonstrates an oscillatory rhythm between connection and disconnection, it also undermines any interpretation that hinges on unequivocal figures of cohesion: Narbeshuber comments that the fragmentary texts of In Our Time “stress the destruction of the object rather than greater unity” (14), but from the perspective of smoothness, it’s not that the object is destroyed, rather, that it is never wholly available. Like the minimalist cube, the beholder cannot possibly see it all at once.

If the iterations of “and” are a marker of the text’s smoothness, then the recurrence of Nick Adams throughout the cycle offers us an opportunity to observe another instantiation of simplicity’s hermeneutic protocol. I move here from a consideration of structural parataxis to an observation of how that parataxis influences our interpretations of character. The proclivity of readers and critics to focus on Nick Adams as the cohesive figure of the cycle—the character
who in a sense ties all the loose “ands” together and makes the text thematically “visible” to us—is problematic, because such readings efface not only the plurality of voices in the texts but also violently assimilate “Nick” into a single character. In a revealing scene in “The Three-Day Blow,” Nick and Bill discuss a book, *Forest Lovers*:

“That’s a good book, Wemedge.”

“It’s a swell book. What I couldn’t ever understand was what good the sword would do. It would have to stay edge up all the time because if it went over flat you could roll right over it and it wouldn’t make any trouble.”

“It’s a symbol,” Bill said.

“Sure,” said Nick, “but it isn’t practical.” (42)

Here we have a moment of reading that speaks to a desire for narrative thinness much like I have shown in the previous chapter. Nick wants imagistic simplicity above metaphysical resonance and thematic depths. Accordingly, the reader of *In Our Time* might note the impracticality of reading Nick in purely symbolic or code-driven terms, since to do so requires one to force all difference to coalesce under one name. Even Nick’s name is not stable. Even here in this passage an oscillation occurs, disrupting a certain desire for a stable, unified self: Nick is both Nick and Wemedge. That the *nick* name marks Nick, that he chooses to answer to it, suggests a layer of difference; in other words, “Nick” is not enough to encapsulate him, and the name becomes one figuration among many. As Cohen avers:

Even those named “Nick” should not be fused too hastily into a consistent character. The Nick who is wounded in the spin in Chapter VI cannot quite be the same Nick who walks so easily in “Big Two-Hearted River” and whose unmentioned wounding is presumably psychological. And both of these Nicks
differ slightly from the Nick with a bum leg (which we infer as a war wound) in “Cross-Country Snow. These variations on a theme of wounding challenge critics seeking a unified Nick Adams in In Our Time. (26)

This is not to say, however, that Nick cannot or should not be understood as a symbol of a larger generational experience; rather, any symbolism we infer from one Nick must be tempered by the disparity with which the other Nicks present us. Such diversity, both in the types of wounds and also his “feelings about his war experience” in each text (Cohen 26), produces a resistance to a mode of symbolic reading that would be impractical in the context of such a pluralistic text—impractical precisely because such an interpretive gesture would gloss over the potential inaccessibility and autonomy of the other. Thus, Nick is not an all-encompassing figure, but he is a frame. His synthetic function is iterative. His disparate selves contribute to the pluralism undergirding the cycle and thus remind us of the ethical limits of an interpretive drive to unify. Moreover, the structural lacunae offer a practical response to the totalizing impulse implicit in such nominally cohesive figures as Nick Adams. As an instantiation of absence, the blank space (which is constituted by the structural parataxis) challenges hermeneutic co-optation because it maintains the possibility of otherness (in spite of the many thematic connections possible) and asserts that wholeness itself can be just as much a product of aggressive trespass as it is innocuous interpretation.

Emerging from this discussion of Hemingway’s paratactic and associative devices is the sense that, as interpreters, we bear responsibility for the ways in which we mobilize texts for our particular purposes. Smoothness does not force us to abandon moments of figurative and imaginative interpretation, but it does ask that we become aware of how such gestures might place too much ideological pressure upon the text. Thus, as I attend to the note of muted,
inauspicious violence that percolates through the final moments of *In Our Time*, I become intensely aware at how the text has exposed my own capacity for violence as a reader in the world. According to Gilbert Muller, “Big Two-Hearted River” and “L’Envoi” reinforce “the idea that the Eternal Garden . . . is the greatest of all unreal systems in a world where harmonious and peaceful existence is an impossibility” (191). Although Nick’s tentative decision to fish the swamp another day seems to be a glance towards a more stable and secure future, the conditional tense of his comment that “the fishing would be tragic” points to the inevitability of violence in the Garden (155). The swamp, in this sense, may be an image of James’s “ever-not-quite.” It supplements the river (it is literally an extension) but also disjoints the whole as a manifestation of flux and unknowability. It is a space “smooth and deep” where “[i]t would not be possible to walk through” (155). Where smoothness and deepness exist side by side in simple yet uneasy parataxis, there is only a “half light” (155). The tragedy of the swamp also marks the very limits of interpretation. To imagine the swamp—never fully accessible to Nick—as a text is to acknowledge that the availability of the other is partial. The “half light” allows us to recognize the fact of interiority but not to see it or hold onto it. In the swamp, the trout are “impossible to land” (155), and similarly in the smooth text the other is difficult to co-opt. If for Nick this lack of knowledge—of confidence, of certainty—is a tragedy, it is for the reader more of a separate peace. For if the half-light occludes our vision of the text’s depths, it at least illuminates “patches” of the surface (155). These illumined patches, smooth and reflective, show us ourselves—show us that to read the smooth text is to also read and recognize ourselves as agents of interpretation, limited but free.
2.2 Interpretive Marking: Smooth Things in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

My treatment of *In Our Time* has suggested that to call a genre smooth is to call attention to the ways in which the structural design of a text asks the reader to be self-conscious about the ways in which various connections he or she makes between textual elements have ethical consequences. Smoothness, we have seen, operates as a dimension of simplicity insofar as it identifies a certain textural predictability—the paratactic regularity of Hemingway’s short story cycle, with its alternating sequence of stories and vignettes, is one such example. The episodic patterning of Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* proffers another vision of generic smoothness, different in degree if not in kind from Hemingway. Cather’s reluctance to categorize *Archbishop* as a novel is telling; in a letter to *The Commonweal* she says that she “prefer[s] to call it a narrative” (*OW* 12), and she draws aesthetic parallels between her text and the frescoes detailing the life of St. Geneviève by Puvis de Chavannes and the martyrdoms in the Golden Legend in which “all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual existence, were of about the same importance” (*OW* 9). Indeed, *Archbishop* appears much less like the modernist *bildungs* of Joyce or Fitzgerald, in which the narrative arc and growth of the protagonist are relatively traceable, and more like a series of independently juxtaposed vignettes. Of course, the nine episodes plus the prologue that make up Cather’s narrative centre upon the experience of Archbishop Latour and, to a lesser extent, his intimate companion and colleague Father Vaillant in the newly established diocese of New Mexico; thus, the reader is perhaps less stymied by *what* or *who* this story is about than he or she is in regards to Hemingway’s cycle. Compared to *In Our Time*, I would suggest that Cather’s text applies less pressure on the reader
to connect these episodes not only because of the consistency of character and place but because the smoothness of the genre asks of us different hermeneutic and ethical questions.

So what is the nature of Cather’s smooth text? In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach demonstrates what he sees as the essentially paratactic quality of Medieval storytelling. Using the *Chanson de Rolande* and the *Chanson D’Alexis* as his prototypes, he argues that the way in which dramatic episodes in these texts are patterned bespeaks an ultimate faith in Divine Providence. Events need not be linked horizontally (temporally, by means of cause and effect) because their relation is justified by means of a vertical connection (to God). Things that happen “are posited without argument as pure theses; these are the facts. No argument, no explanatory discussion whatever is called for” (101). 38 And in this way, according to Auerbach, the independent episodes which are strung together “like beads” come to take on an especially figurative—that is, symbolic—auro even when such symbolism is not specifically traceable:

The figures—as on the sarcophagi of late antiquity—are placed side by side paratactically. They no longer have any reality, they have only signification. With respect to the events of this world, a similar tendency prevails: to remove them from their horizontal context, to isolate the individual fragments, to force them into a fixed frame, and, within it, to make them impressive gesturally, so that they appear as exemplary, as models, as significant, and to leave all “the rest” in abeyance. (116)

But if Cather borrows this mode of structural parataxis, it is not to proselytize nor reaffirm providence but to draw attention to the rhetorical relationship between the work of art and its audience. In other words, insofar as Cather attempts to write a narrative “without accent” that

38 As David Stouck clarifies, “Because divine order informed earthly activity and made all events self-explanatory, interest in telling a story centred not on why or how something happened, but on its religious value and significance” (131).
refuses to “use an incident for all there is in it— but to touch and pass on” (*OW* 9), she portrays the very form of the book as a type of surface which may be felt and handled but never possessed, never pierced. Her notion of form, in this view, is also a protocol for ethical reading. The multiple juxtaposed episodes of *Archbishop* manifest as multiple points of encounter— points of contact— between the reader and text-as-other. As we move forward through each episode, we do not sense so much Latour’s growth as we do the concrete reality of his character; the genre in one sense prevents him from becoming a figural presence (a signifier of sainthood) precisely because it asks us how we are to touch and how we are touched by this textual other. In Cather’s hands, the genre does not renounce the material world, as David Stouck argues (142), but instead interrogates how the material world is “marked” by human interpretation and imagination. Cather’s narrative is a site of contact, a smooth surface upon which we can lightly run our fingers, but which firmly resists the pressures of interpretive imposition.

To attend to the dimension of smoothness in a text is to attend to the way in which that text challenges how we leave our interpretive mark upon both it and the world. If interpretation is the means by which we leave traces of our selves upon the text, the smooth narrative, insofar as it is something without accent, unmarked and yet accessible, questions how we are to honour our existence as subjects in the world without inscribing ourselves upon the other. This is an especially pertinent ethical question in regards to a narrative that treats so directly the contact between the Catholic Church and the Indigenous peoples of the Southwestern United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. The history is complex and although restrictions in length prevent me from offering a detailed interrogation of it, I do believe that my narratological intervention can add to the political conversation that revolves around Cather’s somewhat crude binary of “the Indian mind” (92) and the white, Euro-American mind represented by Latour. I
would like to suggest, for the time being, that we can come to read smoothness itself as a rhetorical mechanism of intercultural exchange, a place where the known and unknown productively mingle.

To be smooth, Cather shows us, is not necessarily to be straightforward. Padre Gallegos of Albuquerque is described as having “something smooth and twinkling in his countenance [that] suggested an underhanded mode of life” (84). Here there is the potential recalcitrance of such simplicity; despite the devious connotations linked to this particular character, smoothness is again associated with the partial unknowability of the other. Just as in the Hemingway text, smoothness in the Cather text involves a certain withholding of information, a distorted and unknowable depth. And yet, whereas for someone like Krebs a “smooth life” poses the question of how a life without complications and with minimal social interaction might be a potentially ethical response to a wartime experience, in *Archbishop* smoothness is almost always associated with human contact—we see again and again smoothness as an indication of human activity, of trace, and of the aestheticization of the world. This is not to say that Cather’s text retreats from ethics and social responsibility, rather it persistently asks how the artistic impulse—to create and recreate otherness—must negotiate the fact of imposition. If the paratactic patterning of *In Our Time* suggests to the reader the potential violences of generalizing human experience, the marriage of structural parataxis and thematic smoothness in *Archbishop* reveals a world permeated by humanity’s creative attempts to interconnect. The question we grapple with, then, is not how to preserve the integrity of the simultaneously conjunctive and disjunctive text but how to remain responsible to Cather’s protocol of the “light touch” without wholly effacing ourselves as imaginative and interpreting subjects.
Deborah Lindsay Williams claims that Cather teaches us how to read “beyond written language” through the text’s aural and visual imagery (80). My sense is that Cather teaches us to read by means of smooth objects as well, and so I more fully align myself with Sarah Wilson who argues that “materiality triggers a sensory empathy that acts as the first step toward even broader forms of cultural understanding” (“Material Objects” 173). If Wilson gestures towards a political ideal in the mobility of objects—their accessibility and capacity to be shared—I find that in the very texture of objects (and in their correspondence to the text’s overall structure) the reader locates narrative ethics.

Visiting the pueblo of Isleta, Latour meets with the kindly and generous Father Jesus. Upon entering the older priest’s house, Latour discovers a wooden parrot, “the sole ornament in the Padre’s poor, bare little sala” (86). The attention that Latour expends upon this mere ornament is remarkable. It is, in fact, his touching of it which informs and directs his interpretation:

[T]he bishop took this carving down from its perch to examine it. It was cut from a single stick of wood, exactly the size of a living bird, body and tail rigid and straight, the head a little turned. The wings and tail and neck feathers were just indicated by the tool, and thinly painted. He was surprised to feel how light it was; the surface had the whiteness and velvety smoothness of very old wood.

Though scarcely carved at all, merely smoothed into shape, it was strangely lifelike; a wooden pattern of parrots as it were. (86, my emphasis)

This is such a simple parrot and yet it makes such a strong impression upon Latour. We might recall that when Nick Adams watches trout in the smooth water, Hemingway dramatizes this moment of seeing as also one of reading. But Nick watches from a bridge; there is distance
involved. Here, Cather dramatizes a close encounter, and thus it might more properly be thought of as a moment of audience engagement; subject and object, reader and text touch and are touched.

There are three elements, I think, that are integral to the object lesson of this episode: first, as I have already suggested, there is the importance of touch. That Latour is drawn to the parrot is in fact just as much a function of his desire to hold it and feel it as it is a function of the parrot’s smoothness. The smooth sculpture draws him in—the texture beckons the subject. Secondly, we recognize through this parrot the potentiality of mimesis by means of smooth structures. That the parrot is “strangely lifelike” suggests that surface itself can be substantive, which is to say it is not something for the interpreting subject to move beyond but is itself an other with which to negotiate. Thirdly, there is the element of surprise. Despite the simplicity of the sculpture, it is still novel and it still challenges Latour’s expectations. That he is surprised something so minimally rendered can elicit such an affective response in him—indeed, that it is a response analogous to the “wonder and desire” that real parrots had sparked in the pueblo Indians (86)—is a testament to the power of the smooth object to translate emotionality from one subject to another. Moreover, such affect shows that attention to formal structure and style in a narrative such as Cather’s does not, as Stouck would claim, “ha[ve] the effect of making us emotionally detached in our esthetic response” (134). On the contrary, Latour’s response to the parrot dramatizes the inextricability of emotion and aesthetic appreciation in regards to the minimalist text.

39 Similarly, in “Valuing Surface,” A. Carl Bredahl maintains that “Focusing on surface means that the world and people who live in that world have intrinsic value; they are not signifiers, not carriers of meaning, an attitude which denies substance” (117). I like this formulation, despite its imperfections. We can’t escape signification, but we can be self-aware of how signification may lead us too far away from substance. Surfaces are first points of encounter, “those places where living organisms establish contact” (119), but they are also physical and ethical limits.
But I would also like to complicate this reading. As it is, the wooden parrot generates our narratological interest because it is also a smooth text. Its physical presence and especially its very literal texture operate as a cognitive key for the reader. In Latour’s handling of the parrot, we see, potentially, an interpretive model inborn to Cather’s text in which touch is a first step to understanding. But to touch is not to know. Importantly, the sculpture produces in Latour a moment of irresolvable hermeneutic uncertainty. Latour understands the object as both “lifelike” and as “a wooden pattern of parrots” (86), that is, as simultaneously a character and a figure. This inability to decide whether the simple sculpture is something potentially real, autonomous and original or whether it is, effectively, a type (and thus representative of all parrots) parallels our own difficulty in negotiating the mimetic and thematic dimensions of Latour—a difficulty that is made manifest through Cather’s smooth structural parataxis. In other words, it is the quality of simple surface (the smoothness of the parrot, or the episodic predictability of Cather’s genre) that makes our interpretation oscillate between these two poles and thus destabilizes our knowledge of the other.

If it is true that smoothness helps to produce an aesthetic object that is both accessible and impenetrable, then it is also true that the smooth object proffers a modest challenge to the conventional terms of subject/object relations. If the object is typically defined only in relation to the subject—as something acted upon or something which passively accepts the subject’s empowered gestures—in the parrot we detect not only a resistance to the hermeneutic pressures of the subject but also a resistance to objecthood itself. In fact, the parrot’s smoothness gestures towards its status as an unco-optable artifact, which is to say its thingness. According to Bill Brown, we are able to overlook the potential integrity of objects (and thus to instrumentalize them) “because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful,
because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts” (4). But things are
tired of being useful and exhausted by the power of the subject: “Things is a word that tends,
especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold
between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and
unidentifiable” (Brown 4-5). That said, the wooden parrot is not so simply a thing, and while its
smooth surface marks its quality of recalcitrant simplicity, the very fact that it is a source of
wonder and desire for Latour, Jesus, and the pueblo Indians means that it cannot so easily escape
its own objecthood. Rather, it is that smoothness that marks a site of liminality between objects
and things. Because the parrot’s surface is something that is simultaneously unmarked
(uninscribed) and marked (carved and manipulated into the shape of a parrot), it speaks to the
inevitability of the subject/object relations in which the self leaves traces upon the other and also
the ethical imperative to let the other exist independent of the self. We note, moreover, that the
bird functions to remind Father Jesus of devotional and ceremonial processions wholly different
from his own. He “fondly believed that it was a portrait, done from life, of one of those rare birds
that in ancient times were carried up alive, all the long trail of the tropics” (87). The interpreting
subject is not effaced by the smooth aesthetic object but confronted with the self’s limits. The
parrot that for Latour is an “ornament” (86) is for the pueblo people a sign of something which
received “divine honours” (87). Latour is here reminded that his interpretive “mark” is
potentially insufficient, and that to call it either “lifelike” or a “pattern” misses the types of
emotional and devotional resonance that the object occasions in people other than himself.
Wilson states that in Archbishop cross-cultural understanding can only occur if the individual is
willing to “lose his identity on the otherness encompassed by a shared object” (“Material
Objects” 176), but it is also the case that the smooth object confronts the threshold and thus the
political idealism of such sharing precisely because of its recalcitrance. Though accessible and inviting to touch, as a potential “thing” it is not useful; it refuses to acknowledge the subject, and thus it stymies intercultural communication at the same time that it fulfills its function as a shareable, mobile, and transferable object.\(^{40}\) That the meaning of the parrot cannot be wholly translated from one culture to another—much like the paradoxical “something” which haunts Krebs and cannot be communicated to the reader—reveals an important facet of Cather’s own pluralism, insofar as the desirability of intercultural comprehension must be tempered with the inevitable reality of disjunction.

To claim the wooden parrot as a smooth text is to claim it as a simple other. As a sign of Cather’s narrative ethics, it suggests that to read Archbishop is to come to terms not only with the limits of the interpreting self—that is, to reject the idea of the self as the principal maker and discoverer of meaning—but also to reconceive otherness in terms of its potential rather than only kinetic energies. For if the parrot is marked by its status as both an object and a thing (as both a concrete reality and a concrete ambiguity), then Cather’s paratactic form also presents us with a structure of otherness that relieves the subject of the burden of imposing a hypotactic pattern upon the text, while at the same time craving our interpretive touch. It’s not so much that Cather asks her readers to wholly forget themselves and refuse to leave their marks on the smooth surface. Latour’s light touching of the parrot’s surface is also inevitably an emulation of the

\(^{40}\) The threshold status of the wooden parrot—its manifestation as both object and thing—suggests a certain ethical incommensurability between the text’s hermeneutic protocol (which withholds the reader from grasping meaning too tightly) and that of the Pueblo people (whose devotion to the object indicates a fixed and direct religious meaning). This discrepancy, I think, actually testifies to Cather’s sense of the imaginative limits that inevitably confront the interpreting subject. Cather, interestingly, does not give the same sort of attention to texture and surface when she describes the devotional objects of the Catholic Mexicans. Her strategy is instead to proffer lists: “the tapers, the image of the Virgin, the figures of the saints, the Cross that took away indignity” (217). And when Latour gives to Sada “a little silver medal, with a figure of the Virgin” (218), there is no question of whether she will be able to share in the religious power and meaning of the object. Its meaning, for Latour, is easily translated, for it is “the Image, the physical form of Love!” (218). In other words, such objects do not possess the same threshold status as the indigenous artifacts precisely because of the limited attention given to their materiality by either the implied author or the Catholic Church.
artist’s minimal, creative, and “smoothing” touch, and in this performance we detect an ethical imperative that asks the reader to try to understand otherness through a process of interpretive reiteration. For Latour to sense, by means of the artifact’s formal simplicity, the whole history of human artistry and work that has gone into the production and transmission of the artifact is to see otherness itself as a drive towards creation. His is an empathetic touch that recreates the artist’s work and it is also a type of touch that is solicited by the formal texture of the work. It is an encounter with substance just as real as oneself. Similarly, to encounter the “series of pictures” that make up Cather’s text is to be immediately confronted with a fictive reality that craves our interpretive marking but only on its own, delicate terms.

Similar to *In Our Time*, the stylistic technique of *Archbishop* appears to reiterate the generic patterning. Thus, on both the linguistic and the structural levels, Cather presents us with a type of smooth text. But unlike Hemingway’s mode of parataxis which confronts the reader with, what we might call, a *de-centered* world—that is a fictive world in which the connection of parts is never a given but only ever a potentiality—Cather’s parataxis posits a *centred* world, in which, as I have already suggested, the burden of connection is less the reader’s burden than it is already posited by the potential thingness of the text. In other words, if we are to think of the text’s smoothness as suggesting a liminal state between its status as object and thing, then we also conceive of the text as being characterized by a certain substantiality—not as possessing holes or gaps into which we must fill ourselves but as an already solid text that does not need, as Brown would say, our continual rebuilding of it as an “object of our desire and our affection” (15). It is significant that in this sense Cather’s parataxis seems unconventional; the disjunction that, with Hemingway, is geared toward a more active reader appears, with Cather, as a more finished style. Towards the beginning of Book Seven, “The Great Diocese,” we encounter a
seemingly innocuous descriptive passage, and like the wooden parrot, its simplicity is the thing; easy to touch, easy to read, its smooth style beckons our attention and also urges us to move on, not to linger:

It was the month of Mary and the month of May. Father Vaillant was lying on an army cot, covered with blankets, under the grape arbour in the garden, watching the Bishop and his gardener at work in the vegetable plots. The apple trees were in blossom, the cherry blooms had gone by. The air and the earth interpenetrated in the warm gusts of spring; the soil was full of sunlight, and the sunlight full of red dust. The air one breathed was saturated with earthy smells, and the grass under foot had a reflection of blue sky in it. (200)

We note, firstly, that this passage on the grammatical level contains no causative links between any of its elements. Cather’s reduction of hypotaxis is important because it de-emphasizes the presence of an authoritative voice. Just as the wooden parrot appears to Latour as if it has hardly been touched (the artist’s marking of the sculpture appears paradoxically as a non-marking), so does Cather minimize her own rhetorical control in order that the scene itself appear substantive and self-contained. Furthermore, the smoothness of the passage is constituted not by parataxis alone but through a certain chiastic blending. The soft alliteration of the first sentence and the chiastic pattern of the fifth and sixth sentences ultimately complement the rhythmic predictability of the paratactic style. Whereas in Hemingway, the “and” serves as a type of pluralistic supplement reminding us of the imperfect, unfinished nature of the surrounding text, in this passage we observe how the “and” frequently operates as the center to the chiastic utterance. The effect of such a rhetorical maneuver is that sentences come to echo themselves and repeat their terms even as they move beyond themselves. We observe, for example, how the chiasmus in “the
“the apple trees,” “the cherry blooms,” “the air,” “the earth,” etc.—along with the utter absence of any non-deictic markers, suggests not only another form of echo but also a paradoxical insistence on the specificity and autonomy of each individual image. They are self-contained things in the world that surely bear relations to other things but do not depend them for their existence. Each image—each thing—is as deserving of our attention as the next.

And yet the parataxis, I think, accounts for the ways in which the text beckons us to “pass on.” That is, Cather’s twinning of chiasmus and parataxis offers a rhetorical basis to the interpretive ideal of the “light touch.” If the chiastic echoes solicit a certain interpretive pressure upon the reader—to re-emphasize those key moments, images, and ideas—then the parataxis petitions that the reader keep reading and resist dwelling on anything for too long because each...
grammatical element possesses the same hermeneutic weight. Our reading thus comes to resemble Latour’s encounter with the wooden parrot with the light pressure of his hand that moves along its smooth surface. While I have, perhaps, broken the rules here and lingered too long on this simple passage, I think that the hermeneutic lesson is nonetheless valuable. We see here, how the text-as-other can beckon the reader into reading it in a certain way, how smoothness can simultaneously suggest the text’s status as an object of our interpretation and its status as a simple and coherent thing that resists being conscripted into our interpretation.

As far as narrative ethics are concerned, there is an unmistakable association between Cather’s description of *Archbishop* as a narrative in which she has tried “not to hold the note . . . but to touch and pass on” and what she calls 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” (233). Is Cather’s text then an attempt to play Indian?\(^42\) Does the smoothness of her structure act in contradistinction to her European subject? Why lavish so much attention on the humble proselytizing of a French-born archbishop if only to condemn him as an agent of religious and cultural imposition? Or does Cather, in spite of her somewhat romantically-tinged conception of Indigenous peoples that informs the European/Indian binary she injects into her narrative,\(^43\) attempt to illustrate the very real ambivalences of intercultural contact? To conceive of contact as ambivalent is to articulate the relationship between self and other as diffusive rather than osmotic; if the smooth text marks a point of contact where interpretive energies between the self and other intermingle—where the other beckons to the self to be read on its own terms (the

\(^42\) For a full study of this phenomenon, especially in American literature, see: Deloria, Philip J. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998.

\(^43\) Readers might notice, for example, in Book Seven, in the vignette entitled “Eusabio,” the ambiguously focalized comment that “these Indians disliked novelty and change” (233). Such representation of the Native subject as ahistorical—the idea that these are figures happily trapped in time—instills a dualism into the text that ought not to be glossed over.
object exerts influence over the subject) and the self is confronted with the limits of its will to impose—then we can also see how in Cather’s text the relationships between Latour and his Native companions is similarly diffusive.

This rhetorical attention to smoothness helps us reconsider how intercultural contact is performed within and by the text. When Jacinto and Latour make camp on their way to Laguna, Cather describes them as “each thinking their own thoughts” (92). The discourse of difference that engulfs this scene is significant, but so is this idea of cultural diffusion through contact. Latour confesses to himself that “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). Not only does Latour express a sense of his own imaginative limits, he also begins to recognize the possibility of Jacinto’s unknowable depths. Similarly, when the two men share their differing interpretations of the stars—Latour defers to “the wise men [who] tell us they are worlds” whereas Jacinto thinks “they are leaders—great spirits” (92-3)—Latour ambivalently accepts the challenge to his interpretive authority. “Perhaps,” he responds, “with a sigh” (93).

What I’m suggesting is that in this scene we see a resemblance to our own contact with the smooth text. As meaning is generated through the mutually-informing rhetorical relationship between the reader and the text, Cather also dramatizes the possibilities of intercultural understanding between Jacinto and Latour. Although Latour’s “sigh” perhaps signals that he does not agree with Jacinto’s culturally-inflected interpretation, his momentary ambivalence and his decision not to respond with a precise corrective offers a glimpse of the mutuality of contact. For if Jacinto is impenetrable to Latour, he is also the one who invites contact. Jacinto speaks “without being addressed” and is the one who pulls Latour into the conversation by asking him
what he thinks about the stars (92). Like the smooth text which resists interpretation at the same time it invites it, Jacinto is marked by a quality of recalcitrant simplicity that compels Latour, if only momentarily, to acknowledge the limits of his interpretive drive and thus the limits of his influence.

Such a smooth quality, I think, accounts for the very difficulty that cultural critics have in categorizing both this moment and the larger narrative, what is inevitably in Leona Sevick’s analysis “an anxious, ambivalent commentary on the Catholic Church’s role in America’s development as a modern nation” (13). Similarly, Blythe Tellefsen, understands Cather as postulating in this scene both “an unbridgeable gulf” where the reader can witness “domestic Orientalism at work” and also an ethically commendable inaction in “Latour’s refusal to ‘convert’ Jacinto, and to explain and impose his own ideas on him . . . . Such a refusal could be interpreted as an unusual recognition of difference not as racially based, but as the result of ‘experience’ and ‘tradition,’ each one deserving of respect” (9). Such ambivalence stems, on the one hand, from Jacinto’s thinness—the ways in which he is simultaneously readable and unreadable to Latour; on the other hand, as I have already suggested, it is a product of Cather’s choice of genre. Since she refuses to linger on this scene, moving quickly on to the next, it is left unaccented—a type of episodic understatement that seems to evade political responsibility. And yet, this drama of contact does not disappear from the text. It is in fact echoed, and much in the same way the chiasmus works on the linguistic level to substantiate the text, the episodic echo keys us into Cather’s ethics. Travelling home to Santa Fe, Latour observes the way in which Eusabio, his Navajo companion, interacts with his surroundings: “When they left the rock or tree

44 It should be noted that Latour’s role in New Mexico at this time is not as a missionary. He is there to tend more to the already-converted than to convert non-Catholics. Tellefsen nonetheless brings up the significant point of Latour’s willingness to listen to Jacinto and respect his perspective. The scene itself, I think, gestures at the specter of conversion that has shaped the relationship between Euro-American and Indigenous peoples long before Latour’s arrival.
or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every 
trace of their temporary occupation. He buried the embers of the fire and the remnants of food, 
unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand” (232). 
Such delicate treatment of one’s (con)text Latour contrasts with 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 
memorial of his sojourn)” (232-33). What I would like to suggest, however, is that Eusabio’s 
light touch of the land is not, as Latour would have it, simply a matter of “vanish[ing] into the 
landscape” (233); rather, it is a performance of smoothing over. To fill up holes is not to erase 
the evidence of one’s existence, it is to minimize one’s presence. Just as in the previous scene 
Jacinto has left a trace of himself upon Latour’s consciousness (signaled by the “perhaps”), 
Eusabio also manages to leave his mark that is not a mark upon the land. Such modes of 
ecological self-minimization practiced by characters within this text both echo Cather’s own 
smooth aesthetic strategy and also, more important, indicate a non-appropriative and life-
sustaining hermeneutic protocol. At the same time, Eusabio’s light ecological touch is what 
Latour latches onto in order to assert his fundamental difference from the Navajo. Eusabio’s 
smooth aesthetic, in this sense, is Hemingwayesque in the way it resists imaginative figuration 
but also inevitably mobilizes it.

The value of smoothness as an aesthetic technique in Cather’s text rests in its subtle 
critique of the rhetoric of invisibility. The Southwest at the end of the nineteenth century was 
home to a culturally diverse population, and as Caroline Woidat points out, its Native American 
heritage “was itself a considerable drawing card for Cather” (23). To infer from Eusabio’s and 
Jacinto’s forms of delicate touch that they crave invisibility—non-presence—is, on the one hand, 
to elide the subtle but very real moments of cultural influence that they enact upon the Euro-
American subject and, on the other, to forget how Cather’s genre in fact speaks to the ethics of cultural marking through the hermeneutic protocols that are inherent to it. According to Judith Fryer, the Hogan and the Pueblo “reflect the Indian manner of vanishing into the landscape rather than standing out against it” (Felicitous 316). While it is true that Cather’s generic technique seems to align her more fully with Native American aesthetics (or at least with what she imagines them to be), it is also true that she cannot fully divorce herself from the need to leave her mark. As much as she covets the idea that objects may speak for themselves and that “it is a foolish convention that we must have everything interpreted for us in written language” (OW 6), Archbishop is a testament to her need to inscribe, to mark the page and leave traces of oneself. This is not to say that her narrative enacts a perfect marriage between “Indian” and “White,” or that it performs a dialectical synthesis of the two, only that it proffers a supplement to both stereotypes: hers is not a monumental structure, nor is its architecture invisible.

But it is smooth, and what this dimension of simplicity suggests is that right at the level of genre, Cather is modeling contact as a diffusive phenomenon. We recall—both through Cather’s own admission (that she has borrowed from the form of the martyrdoms) and through Auerbach’s analysis of the paratactic style—that Archbishop expresses through its narrative structure the traces of a particularly European and Christian perspective. Of course, at the same time, in her imperative to “touch and pass on,” Cather imagines a type of Native American ethic inborn to her text. The meeting of these two vaguely identifiable cultures in the structure of Archbishop on the one hand signals Cather’s commitment to cultural pluralism in America; on the other, it signals a moment of contact in which the dominant European form is both changed and challenged by the other.
If the Puvis De Chavannes frescoes conceive the text as a series of paratactically arranged pictures—to be gazed upon from a distance—then Eusabio and Jacinto remind us of the metaphorically embodied nature of the text-as-other: it is a substantial surface that craves touch at the same time that it defers it, and it is susceptible to interpretive violence but also influential in its own right. Such an ethical supplement reminds the critical reader that visuality is not the only way to speak about presence and that Cather’s emphasis on the texture of things is in fact a testament to the existence of human trace, as we see in the case of the wooden parrot. Indigenous culture has not vanished from this text nor is it necessarily vanishing; the twin rhetorics of invisibility and erasure operate only insofar as we overlook the physical and sensual forms of contact in which Eusabio and Jacinto participate.

Thus, when we read that Jacinto’s pueblo home is “smoothly whitewashed, and clean, to the eye, at least, because of its very bareness” (121), we are confronted not with invisibility but with a physical, textural presence. The simplicity of Jacinto’s home—its absence of visual flourishes—is what in fact occasions Latour’s detailed attention to his surroundings upon entering the pueblo. More important, it is the simplicity of the architecture that puts Jacinto’s child into stark relief, who seems to add the only dimensionality to the scene as he lays swathed in “a cradle of deerskin which hung by thongs from the roof poles” (121). The child recalls, all too tragically, the violences of contact—of “infant mortality” and of the “[s]mallpox and measles

45 Such ideological challenges were not rare when Cather wrote *Archbishop*. In *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era*, Tom Holm focuses on how Indigenous peoples in America sought to revise the ideologies of the “vanishing Indian” that undergirded much of the Federal assimilationist policy. Holm argues that indigenous communities were not merely reactive cultural and political bodies but also resilient and innovative.

46 For an intelligent review of how the myth of the vanishing Indian has persisted through twentieth-century representations of Native culture, see Mick Gidley’s “The Repeated Return of the Vanishing Indian.” Gidley emphasizes the ways in which the repetition of artistic memorializations to historic Indigenous loss (through disease, warfare, famine, genocides, etc) comes to elide the very real presence of the Native subject in America. For a consideration, specifically, of the American Southwest, see Joseph Owen Weixelman’s *Hidden heritage: Pueblo Indians, National parks, and the Myth of the "Vanishing Anasazi."*
[that] had taken heavy toll here time and again” (122). And yet the pueblo is still a site of comfort not only for Jacinto and his family but also for Latour, who is “warmed to the bone” by his companion’s fire (124). This is to say that the smooth space works ambivalently upon Latour; he is comforted by the access it provides, but his anxiety regarding the “white men” who are “the real cause of the shrinkage of the tribe” is constituted through the minimal presence of the Native American subject of which the simple architecture is a signifier. And so in this domestic space, where cultures not only see but touch one another, Cather dramatizes both the potential rewards and impositions of contact. From the perspective of narrative, we find a significant analogy between the simplicity of this home with its smooth and bare walls and Cather’s larger episodic technique: the simplicity of Jacinto’s pueblo solicits in Latour a detailed meditation upon his companion and his misfortunes. Smoothness in art simultaneously testifies to the reality of human presence47 while also producing anxiety in the interpreting subject who must come to terms with the potential violences of his or her hermeneutic touch upon the other-as-text. Furthermore such an emphasis on minimal presence—as opposed to absence—I think complicates the myth of the vanishing Indian that critics such as Fryer locate in Cather’s text because it reimagines characters such as Jacinto and Eusabio not as always already self-effaced but rather as leaving different types of marks upon their texts—traces that are subtle but substantial.

That Latour demonstrates a certain type of imaginative growth suggests that Cather’s attention to her protagonist is not only ironic—the light touch of her genre does more than

47 According to Kevin Synnott, Jacinto’s home “with its fox pelts, strings of gourds and red peppers, and rich colored Indian blankets, is a scene of great domesticity, elaborated with a delight in the visual and palpable qualities, and the arrangement, of the things which define that space. The Episcopal residence of Latour is drawn with the same care for detail, emphasizing the aesthetic pleasure derived from the rough beams and uneven adobe walls. Such details assure us of the human touch, of the realness of the place” (14, my emphasis). Although I agree wholeheartedly with Synnott’s analysis of how the scene bears the sensual traces of human presence, I believe that the discrepancy between Jacinto’s smooth walls and the rough beams of the bishop’s house indicates a key aesthetic—and thus potentially ethical—difference between the two characters at this point in the narrative.
contest the bishop’s interpretive mode. If in the first scene of the narrative proper, Latour discovers in the “naked, twisted trunk” of a juniper tree “the form of the Cross” (18), then in other scenes we do not see him so resolutely inscribe his desires upon the thing. It is as if he finally draws together his Catholic belief that miracles are “human vision corrected by divine love” (50)—that there are limits to human agency—with the ethical practice of self-effacement that he learns through his observation of Indigenous ecological relationships. Latour fears the desert’s predictability—its simplicity. Its “monotonous red sand-hills” are a “geographical nightmare” for the wandering priest who is searching for some sort of relief, not only water but some mark or human trace (17). Upon discovering this thing that is the tree, Latour imagines it as an object. It is “cruciform.” It is nature consecrated; its meaning has been imposed upon it. The tree, deprived of its otherness, offers no challenge to Latour. It is no-thing except that which the interpreter needs it to be. The priest’s faith constrains his reading of it. J. Gerard Dollar finds that this will to impose meaning upon the land and upon the other is consistent throughout Cather’s text. “[T]he sometimes beautiful but virtually meaningless ‘text’ of the desert,” he argues, “can only be read and understood in terms of an authoritative text—The New Testament—by which Cather’s central character, Archbishop Latour, lives—and dies. The pattern—especially the pattern of Christ’s life—precedes and gives meaning to Latour’s story” (24). Although this mode of hermeneutic imposition, in which the self dominates the other, is for the most part consistent with the scene of the cruciform tree, I also think that Latour adapts this posture ever so subtly, and this adaptation is a function of the diffusive nature of contact.

48 In Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey observes the potential for simplicity to be also recalcitrant. “Despite its clarity and simplicity, however, the desert wears at the same time, paradoxically, a veil of mystery. Motionless and silent it evokes in us an elusive hint of something unknown, unknowable, about to be revealed. Since the desert does not act it seems to be waiting—but waiting for what?” (270-71). Much like the smooth surface whose appearance of passivity obscures the ways in which it beckons the subject to touch and also solicits his or her self-awareness, Abbey’s vision of the desert is as something which craves the subject’s interpretation but also unsettles it.
Nonetheless, Dollar asks a fundamental question, one which I do think is central to any discussion of hermeneutic ethics in *Archbishop*. “How then,” Dollar wonders, “to construct a ‘desert narrative’ which honors both the spare, clean reality of the desert—the ‘thisness’ of rock and juniper, snake and eagle—while at the same time dramatizing the human need to find symbolic and spiritual meaning in the desert world” (21).

If Cather’s solution to this ethical dilemma is embedded in the very structure of her text, Latour’s response might also be found in an architectural object. Latour’s cathedral in Santa Fe can certainly be read as yet another inscription in a long series of violent marks made by the Euro-American subject upon the Southwest. Its Midi-Romanesque style is certainly an imported style; it is not inborn to the region, although it is also not as alien to it as the Northern architecture Latour was familiar with in Ohio. That said, the bishop does not forgo his desire to leave his religious mark. Nor is that really the point. Just as the reader, faced with the simple text, does not wholly forgo interpretation, neither can we expect Latour to wholly efface himself and leave no trace of the spirituality he has found (and created) in the Southwest. Although the cathedral appears in relief to the smoothness of the desert, the relief is in fact modest. Not only is it “[n]othing sensational, simply honest building and good stone-cutting” but it also seems inborn to the landscape itself: “the tawny church seemed to start directly out of those rose-coloured hills—with a purpose so strong it was like action” (269). Unlike the cruciform tree upon which Latour imaginatively enforces a religious structure, here the religious and the natural—the object and the thing—cohabit the space. Here there is “kinship” in the setting (270), whereas in the prior scene there is only imaginative imposition.

It is not unreasonable, moreover, to infer Jacinto and Eusabio, with their comparable aesthetics of minimal presence, have influenced the bishop. As we see even at the earliest stages
of his plan for the Cathedral, Latour has changed the way he understands the use-value of the materials of the Southwest:

He stood regarding the chip of yellow rock that lay in his palm. As he had a very special way of handling objects that were sacred, he extended that manner to things which he considered beautiful. After a moment of silence he looked up at the rugged wall, gleaming gold above them. “That hill, Blanchet, is my Cathedral” . . . . The Bishop smoothed the piece of rock with his thumb. (239)

Latour has not wholly effaced himself when “confronted” by the rocky hill that “stood up high and quite alone” (240, 239); he still asserts possession over the thing—that is, he still conceives of it in terms of a relationship between subject and object. Confronted with a natural world much larger and much more mysterious than himself, the bishop still seeks to leave his mark, a visible trace of his personhood upon the landscape. But to smooth the rock in his hand suggests a revision upon his previous imaginative structures and a new responsibility to things. The delicate touch that such smooth objects signify reminds us that there are ways to testify to one’s presence without overwhelming the integrity—the “thisness”—of things. In an action so simple as smoothing out a rock, Cather dramatizes the possibilities of interpretation without writing and also the ethical ideal of assertion without complete imposition: to etch without etching, to inscribe oneself upon the thing without inscribing, this is the paradox and the value of smoothness.

In this sense, Latour’s “special way of handling objects” is actually not so special, or rather, not so unique. In the wooden parrot, in the bare and simple walls of Jacinto’s home, in the way Eusabio fills in holes in the land, we see variations of this smooth aesthetic and thus we see moments of influence that have diffused into Latour’s consciousness. And in spite of the fact
that Latour believes the “Indian mind” to be unknowable, in his treatment of the rock we detect at least some commensurability—some cultural translation. Similar to Wilson who observes that the insights of the other become available primarily “through the medium of sacred objects” (“Material Objects” 180), I am suggesting that those insights come into being largely through the interpretation of the objects’ aesthetics. That even in the narrative’s final moments the Navajo people are “inscrutable” to Latour shows that Cather stages cultural translation not as a process of verbal explanation but as one of aesthetic participation (290). In other words, even if Latour cannot profess to “know” Eusabio fully, he is still able to demonstrate empathy in the sense that he has employed a minimalist aesthetic previously alien to him. Nevertheless, that a sharing of cultures occurs through these objects does not mean that a perfectly harmonious dialectic is achieved. If Latour’s smooth touch demonstrates an acknowledgment and responsibility to modes of creation and interpretation that are different from his own, his actual cathedral is still a large mark upon the landscape. It still iterates a Catholic structure and asserts a relatively new symbolic hierarchy upon the Southwest.

In this way, Latour’s final act of creation (his smooth and substantial architectonics) brings him more closely in line with Cather’s ethics as implied author. Insofar as the genre of Archbishop is simultaneously a testament to Cather’s artistic impulse—to her need to interpret through story—and her desire not to impose herself upon the text-as-other, Latour’s cathedral resonates in its liminality between object and thing. As the reader comes to realize both the beauty and the violence inborn to Latour’s aestheticization of the land, he or she also comes to terms with the ways the text’s structural parataxis forms a simple and recalcitrant surface that

49 Cather does draw our attention to another towering sacred structure—that of the Navajo’s “Shiprock,” which is “a slender crag rising to a dizzy height, all alone out on a flat desert” (293). The difference, I think, between this sacred object and Latour’s cathedral is that the latter privileges the subject’s role in the generation of meaning whereas the former privileges the object—“bearing upon its summit the parents of the Navajo race” (293)—as that which solicits one’s encounter with narrative.
solicits an interpretive mark at the same time that it (precisely because of its substantiality) encourages an awareness of the violence implicit in such imaginative action. In other words, if Cather shows us the ethical desirability of smoothness in that it beckons a light, fleeting touch from the subject, she also shows us that such a touch (literal or figurative) is nonetheless a moment of contact between self and other, reader and text that is both diffusive and potentially damaging and thus is deserving of our close attention.

What do we gain by this ethical opportunity? Williams comes to the conclusion that *Archbishop* teaches us to read with the same perspective that Latour brings to his context, and according to her analysis—based on aural and visual models—this perspective is “no perspective, in which everything, Old World and New, Catholic and pagan, youth and age, is layered together” (80). Cather offers us a way of reading that “loses nothing” and “comprehends everything” (96). But this notion that the reader can wholly comprehend the text-as-other, I think, misses the very recalcitrance that is embedded within Cather’s smooth genre. Whereas Williams comes to interpret Latour’s cathedral in terms of its perfect union of cultural forms—“both southwestern and French, organic and constructed . . . unify[ing] seeming opposites” (95)—I am arguing that the edifice is also the site of an important cultural loss. The smooth yellow stone taken from the isolated Southwestern hill loses part of its integrity as a thing, as something autonomous and free of the matrix of subject/object relations, when it is transformed into aesthetic material by Latour. He does not comprehend everything about the rock, but what he does comprehend is a function of his particular architectural needs and desires at the time.

Cather’s point, I think, is not to comprehend everything—not to know the other comprehensively—but to come to the realization that knowledge of the other is also a function of our interpretive needs and desires. Like Hemingway, Cather depends on structural parataxis in
order to generate interpretive anxiety: the episodic form beckons the reader to infer some larger universal frame for the narrative, while at the same time its tightly woven pattern of chiastic echoes insists that such autonomy is inborn to the thing itself. Such generic ambivalence catches the reader; confronted by the smooth text, we become uncertain of our interpretive role. But whereas Hemingway’s short-story cycle figures the stories and interchapters themselves as potentially autonomous things in and of themselves, there is more obvious continuity between the elements that make up Cather’s narrative. The hermeneutic effect, I think, is that while the reader of *In Our Time* struggles with the simple possibilities of connection (and thus the possibility of there being such a thing as a “coherent” world), the reader of *Archbishop* struggles more deeply with the inevitable violence of one’s interpretive touch. The metaphor of smoothness that in Hemingway pertains largely to the absence of consequence in Cather refers to a substantial yet vulnerable surface; it constitutes the first point of contact between self and other. This simple and smooth surface asks us a most difficult ethical question: how do we honour our own existence without inscribing too much of ourselves upon the other?
Chapter Three: Spacious Settings

In this section, I look closely at the way in which the simple text often foregrounds representations of vast space and how this narratological movement from background to foreground can reveal the connection between a text’s ecocritical and hermeneutic ethics. To call a text spacious is to acknowledge, on the one hand, how images of open space—simply described, visually accessible—are related to the freedom of interpretive “movement” proffered to the reader by means of narrative uncertainty; it is also, however, a thematic cue, which in conjunction with the other dimensions of simplicity, confronts the reader with the notion of one’s imaginative boundaries. Vast space solicits the subject’s free movement and unconstrained navigation while simultaneously calling attention to itself as a simple-yet-omnipresent other, worthy of contemplation and obligation. In my analysis of The Old Man and the Sea, I examine how the consideration of vast and simple space occasions Santiago’s transition from an anthropocentric to a biocentric ethic, how that ethic comes into being for both Santiago and the reader through an interpretive process that exposes the inevitability of appropriation in the text and the world beyond, and how simplicity might begin to help us negotiate that inevitability through moments of self-consciousness. With Cather’s The Professor’s House, I observe how the spacious Southwest inspires in Tom Outland a mode of lyric narration—a moment of pause in which homodiegetic narrator and implied author align and when, according to James Phelan, the audience transitions from observer and judge into a more participatory role (“Rhetorical Literary Ethics” 635). In the way that these lyric irruptions expose the recalcitrance of simple space as it resists being mobilized as a subject, they underscore a practice of accountable freedom towards both the human and nonhuman other.
3.1 The Spacious Foreground: Interpreting Ecocritical Ethics in *The Old Man and the Sea*

When a small warbler comes to rest upon the stern of Santiago’s skiff in *The Old Man and the Sea*, there is something provocative about the way this meeting between man and bird serves as a momentary respite from the antagonism between man and fish. The bird is tired, having flown through the night in search of land, and Santiago welcomes the company of this silent stranger. That the old man speaks to the bird perhaps suggests the extent of his loneliness and, perhaps, his sympathy for a fellow traveler: “‘How old are you?’ the old man asked the bird. ‘Is this your first trip?’ (60). Here, the foregrounding of a simple nonhuman element of setting marks a major narratological point of interest in Hemingway’s novella. According to Patricia Valenti, one of the few critics to comment directly upon this scene, this represents a “leitmotiv in the story of Santiago and the marlin. Crossing this great body of water, there are all sorts of difficulties such as fatigue and natural predators” (41). However, to treat the small bird’s journey merely as an echo of Santiago’s trial, I think, is to miss how this simple satellite scene works to disrupt our expectations and understanding of setting in the narrative. Up to this point, Santiago uses elements of the setting to his advantage. He lets “the current do a third of the work” (33), “tr[ies] to use” a man-of-war bird to find dolphin (37), and is pleased by the way the yellow gulf weed adds drag to his line (59). As a fisherman, Santiago has learned how to instrumentalize the elements of the ecosystem by misrecognizing their qualities of simple recalcitrance; the seaspace for the old man is valuable insofar as it can be aligned with human needs and desires. But here Hemingway marks a turn that is both narratological and ethical in its dimensions: that is, here Santiago is at the mercy of his setting. Already confined to the boat and lashed to the unseen predator who tows him against the current, the old man is also used by the bird. In this moment,
Santiago’s skiff becomes a space of rest, a sanctuary for the warbler. Previously an element of the background, a dot in the sky that has come “from the north” (60), the warbler transitions into the narrative’s foreground and demands attention: its simple movements command Santiago’s (and our own) careful contemplation as it quite literally moves from the stern of the boat into the protagonist’s line of sight—onto Santiago’s fishing line, which “his delicate feet grip . . . fast” (60). For a brief moment, the line itself transforms from an object designed to master and possess nature into a space of refuge; it is a site of competing desires and it reveals the ethical value of such a simple scene: here we observe nature move from a position of synthetic backdrop to occupy the foreground. In this pause, the bird demands from the fisherman a sense of obligation and setting demands the reader’s attention.

By reconfiguring the terms of use to which Santiago is accustomed in his ecological relationships, Hemingway transforms the warbler into what I have in earlier chapters termed a thin character. As a simple-yet-opaque other, the bird works to challenge Santiago’s desire to imagine it as “company” (62). He speaks to it playfully as if it were human: “Stay at my house if you like, bird” (61), but the bird does not speak back, nor does it even acknowledge the man’s communicative advances. But what is more important from a narratological perspective is the way in which the text itself contradicts Santiago’s hermeneutic protocol. Whereas Santiago reimagines the bird as human in order to compensate for his loneliness, the text at no point

---

50 In *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, David Herman notes that questions of space are not new to narratology and, in fact, by the late 1960s “A.J. Greimas and his associates had already begun to make space a focal point of narratological research” (263). More important, my chapter builds upon Herman’s explication of figure and ground relations, or the dynamic between “located objects” and “reference objects” within narrative (274). For Herman, “storyworlds do not simply mirror an experiential domain prestructured into figure(s) and ground” (275); rather they come into being through acts of perception. To say that perception is spatially encoded is to emphasize the important ways in which representations of space can change or nuance what we come to think as important in the text. And these changing judgments, as Herman states, “can lead to inversions of what counts as figure and what counts as ground as both the perceptual field and the realm of emotional response” (277). Spaciousness, in the way I use the term, not only challenges our conceptions of figure and ground in Hemingway’s text but invites a new ethical relationship between the reader and text.
validates this anthropomorphism; instead, Hemingway disimagines the bird by retaining its imagistic simplicity and offering no suggestion of its symbolic purpose—he maintains the impenetrability of nonhuman interiority, and by doing so underscores the limits of Santiago’s interpretive gesture. In other words, this scene stages the ethical underpinnings of the spacious text: as the bird, a feature of setting, briefly transitions from the background into the foreground and back again, the reader comes to recognize nature itself not as an empty space, not as something merely to be worked upon and worked over, but as something which simultaneously beckons the interpreting subject and resists his imaginative advances. Moreover, that immediately after Santiago tells the bird he is “with a friend,” the marlin gives “a sudden lurch that pull[s] the old man down on to the bow” (61), reminds us of the fallibility of Santiago’s way of seeing the world. The violent pull indicates that Santiago’s anthropomorphist division of the space into friends and enemies—the useful and the useless—does not fully map on to the reality of the situation. At the same time, such narrative patterning preserves the possibility of a responsive relationship, as opposed to an utter lack of correlation, between the human and nonhuman other. The pull is a cue from the sea itself, an irruption\(^51\) of vast space into the foreground that reminds us of the potential power of setting in narrative.

Whereas the confrontation between man and fish has received the bulk of scholarly attention and is understood generally as the foundation for an allegory of man versus nature, the relationship between Santiago and the ecological space that surrounds him has only recently gained traction as a worthwhile focus of study. Indeed, Hemingway’s representation of the vast space of the Atlantic—simply wrought, limitless, and overwhelming—provides for an entry

\(^{51}\) I use the word irruption as opposed to eruption because the former indicates a “bursting in” or a confluence of activity at a specific site, whereas the latter indicates a “bursting forth” or a movement outwards. Irruption, then, is more precise for my analysis—especially in regards to my later discussion of lyric—because I want to suggest the ways these narrative elements present themselves abruptly but ultimately work within the larger ethical parameters of the text.
point into a third dimension of the simple text, spaciousness. As a narratological tool, my version of spaciousness diverges significantly from Gaston Bachelard’s more philosophical concept of the “vast,” which is for him “a word that brings calm and unity; it opens up unlimited space” (197). For Bachelard, there is comfort in vastness, a sense of the always-benign intimacy that can arise from one’s sensation of immensity, a feeling of place and at-homeness within the world.52 From my perspective, spaciousness refers to a simple, imagistic setting that gradually comes to occupy the narrative foreground. These simple images of space are not always already “felicitous,” nor necessarily “the friend of being” (208); rather, the vastness of a space—not only its size but also its uncluttered, accessible manifestation—has the potential to overwhelm the navigator. It can push one to the limits of one’s interpretive agency. Santiago’s ocean journey shows us that the simplicity of vast space can be recalcitrant, that it contests the terms of a subject’s imaginative freedom just as it invites such imagination.

This chapter, then, is more interested in the way Hemingway’s representation of space in *The Old Man and the Sea* challenges general narratological understandings of space as background, what Gerald Prince refers to as the site “against which other existents and events emerge and come to the fore” (9-10). To understand vast space in Hemingway’s novella primarily in terms of this synthetic manifestation, in which space chiefly serves a structural purpose as a tableau against which Santiago’s heroic individualism can be measured, is to miss a significant social and ethical criticism embedded in the narrative. To read simple space only ever as context and not text itself is to overlook the very otherness of the space and the way that

52 Although, in *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard focuses productively upon “quite simple images of felicitous space” (xxxi), and he conceives of space as something to be read like a text, his conception of simple spaces figures them only in terms of their positive use-value for the human imagination. According to Andrew Thacker, in *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism*, in these simple spaces one is “unable to imagine conflict” (17). I agree with Thacker’s implication that a space which is represented through stylistically simple means can unsettle the reader as much as it can comfort him or her.
otherness produces moments of self-consciousness, doubt, and humility in both Santiago and the reader. This approach aligns me more fully with Mieke Bal’s concept of “thematized space” in which space “becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an acting place rather than the place of action” (139). Narratology thus offers certain tools with which to speak about space, but at the same time this chapter seeks to advance the category of space in narrative theory by exploring the intimate and recursive relationship between space, narration, and hermeneutics. To analyze the discursive and stylistic constituents of simple space in modernist literature is to observe not only how rhetorical strategies testify to the multiple and oftentimes competing ideologies of space but how those ideologies come into being through interpretation.

As I examine the ways in which Hemingway moves the background into the foreground, I am also examining how the text conceives and positions us in terms of the ethical relationship between the human and the non-human. As a fisherman whose livelihood depends upon the ways in which he has learned to use the sea, Santiago begins the narrative as a subject defined by the impulse to master the other. This is not a necessarily unethical position; as we have seen in the analysis of Bishop Latour, even the smallest of actions—the lightest of touches—inevitably imposes in some way upon the other. Hemingway’s diction, moreover, carefully distinguishes Santiago’s tender and “loving” relation to otherness from that of the other fisherman in his town who “butcher” their marlin and who take their sharks to the shark factory where they are “hoisted on a block and tackle, their livers removed, their fins cut off and their hides skinned out and their flesh cut into strips for salting” (13, 11-12). The text by no means condemns the unlucky Santiago for his way of life. Indeed, the novella’s ethical contribution rests not in the ways that it wholly denounces “use” (of the sea, of others) but in the ways it prompts the realization of the
unavoidably unethical moments in life. This realization is what ultimately distances Santiago even more from the fisherman at the beginning of the story. And it is a realization—a recognition of the inevitable costs of individuation—that the reader might also glimpse through the hermeneutic protocols of Hemingway’s simple setting. By focusing more on the vast silent space that surrounds Santiago than on the constantly-moving and active marlin, I am, on the one hand, attempting to nuance our understandings of “nature”; on the other, I am attempting to show how even the most simply-wrought, putatively passive images of nature can invoke a sense of obligation to the other and a sense that we must live within the potential violences of interpretation.

*The Old Man and the Sea* is surely one of Hemingway’s most accessible texts. Easy to read and follow, it does not strain the reader’s ability to make cognitive links between narrative elements. And yet, it also resists interpretation. Perhaps the best piece of evidence in favour of its recalcitrant simplicity is the very difficulty critics had in speaking about this novella in the early years after its publication. If Hemingway insisted that “Sea equaled sea, old man was old man, the boy was a boy, the marlin was itself, and the sharks were no better and no worse than other sharks” (Baker, *Life Story* 505), then the critics have been quick to interject that it all means much more than that, even if they haven’t been able to pin down exactly what that meaning is. Philip Young argues that “there is no allegory in the book and, strictly speaking, no symbols” (21), and yet at the same time, it is “pregnant with implications about the contestants and the contest, but this time there is no need to say anything about them outright. It seems you never have to say it if you really mean it” (24). Here Young describes both a non-intrusive narrative technique on the part of Hemingway as well as an interpretive limitation on the part of the critic. The “you” of his statement is ambiguous because it describes just as much the author’s preferred
aesthetic of omission as it does Young’s own hesitations when confronted with simple recalcitrance of the text. Young, it seems, finds himself in a difficult position: challenged by a text which allegedly enforces interpretive silence through simplicity, the critic nonetheless expresses a desire to say something. There is, I think, a real sense of struggle in Young’s words. As a professional who has made it his business to interpret literature, he isn’t sure what to do with a narrative that is so simple that it can’t be anything but what it already is and what it sincerely professes to be—a story about an old man and the sea. At best, Young is able to say that the novella is “a metaphor which stands for what life can be” (22), but even this he qualifies by emphasizing the need to not really say anything. Even Hemingway’s detractors have appeared to concede that any symbolic reading of the narrative is ultimately unfruitful. According to Philip Toynbee,

It is a stuffed book—stuffed with the burden of all the theses which had been written about Hemingway’s message and philosophy. The demands which it makes on us are crudely “literary.” In fact it sounds like that penultimate note of a musical scale which creates a sense of intolerable incompletion in our ears. The book is doctor-bait, professor-bait. (112)

For Toynbee the simplicity of the text hollows it out, makes it a not-so-well-wrought urn that implores to be “stuffed”; its “incompletion” is such that it offers professors free interpretive rein—it can mean whatever they want it to mean. My larger point is that both Toynbee and Young, insofar as they gesture towards the actual process of interpretation rather than any

---

53 Young would later revise his comments, which were originally published in 1952. By 1966, he would feel the need to “tone down his praise” for the novel: “The feeling is now that although the tale is here and there exciting it is itself drawn out a little far. Even the title seems an affectation of simplicity, and the realization that Hemingway was now trading on and no longer inventing the style that made him famous came just too late” (25). Even so, I think this evaluative reversal testifies to how simplicity itself can provoke a critical self-consciousness. That Young questions his former self is precisely the point, for it is in rereading the text that he questions his former “mastery” of it.
comprehensive interpretation of the narrative, reveal how the simple text encourages moments of hesitation and self-consciousness in the interpreting subject. Both critics in their own way show that the text exposes the limits of the self’s capacity to imagine the simple other. For Young, this is a source of revelation and, for Toynbee, one of frustration.

Indeed, the novella’s thematics are hard to pin down. Its minimal story and pared-down imagery gives the reader simultaneously too much and too little to work with. Its narrative technique is decidedly thin, and there are only fleeting moments where the voice of the narrator is separable from the internal monologue of Santiago. Hemingway’s earlier critics are unable to ignore such simplicity, and in trying to account for it, they divide themselves into two general camps. On the one hand, critics interpret the simplicity of the tale as a drive towards an archetypal or epic quality, reading the text as an allegory of man’s heroic individuation against an indifferent or even antagonistic form of nature. Simplicity, for these critics, connotes an elemental level; Santiago is Man—he is hero—precisely because he can be imagined as anything and everything. In seeking to show Santiago as a figure of heroic individuation (that is, as a figure representing the primacy of the self over or despite a natural other) these critics elevate

---

54 That the story ends with an image of a skeleton—the marlin stripped of its flesh by predatory sharks—is an ironic image of the text itself. According to Ryan Hediger, it “signifies the impossibility of a trophy sufficient to represent either the living fish or Santiago’s experience of the hunt and his knowledge of the sea” (45). For Hediger, the skeleton marks a revision of Hemingway’s ethical code in regards to trophy hunting, a revision which can be more thoroughly seen in the difference between his first and second African safaris. For me, the skeleton in fact echoes Hemingway’s minimalist technique in the way that it brings the reader’s imaginative limitations to the foreground. That two tourists mistake the marlin for a shark dramatizes the capability of the stripped-down text to maintain a sense of its own otherness while simultaneously opening itself up to the critical gaze.

55 According to Earl Rovit, “The movement from type to archetype is prefigured. The great marlin will not come to a great fisherman; he will only be caught by a great Man. In Emersonian terms, Santiago is valuable because he is not a fisherman, but Man-Fishing” (103-4). For Delmore Schwartz, the epic character of the novella is decidedly American. Santiago represents “the essential condition of the pioneer” (97), and his quest for the marlin is an allegory of the “anxiety and the hope” of the American Dream itself, which makes “courage an obsession and an endless necessity in the face of endless fear and insecurity” (102). Leo Gurko, similarly, emphasizes the way human action in the narrative occurs within “a world that is fundamentally static” (64). Furthermore, it is this static, permanent setting which serves to highlight the epic disposition of man himself: “The concept of the hero whose triumph consists of stretching his own powers to their absolute limits regardless of the physical results gives The Old Man and the Sea a special place among its author’s works” (Gurko 68).
Santiago’s representative powers while discounting his mimetic dimension, which is to say his potential to be conceived as a real person in the world. Their mastery of the text, through their assertion of Santiago’s thematic function, is constituted by their exclusive focus on Santiago’s mastery over, or his resistance to, nature. On the other hand, critics of the second camp tend to downplay Santiago’s isolation and separation from the rest of the world; they see his heroism as founded not through an individuation of epic proportions but through a recognition of his interdependence with the world. What is new in this novella, according to Bickford Sylvester, is “Hemingway’s discovery that the need for extended effort in the face of inevitable darkness is not merely a man-made hypothesis, not a masochistic sop to the unmoored human ego, but the reflection of a natural law man is permitted to follow” (94). Where such criticism makes a place for itself is in the way it attends to the simplicity of Hemingway’s representations of nature. For example, Sheldon Grebstein pays close attention to the way in which “The sea succors and exalts man even as it overwhelms and ruins him” (44). Likewise, Clinton Burhans Jr. argues that Santiago’s experience of the universe teaches a “pragmatic ethic” which is based upon an “awareness and understanding of the solidarity and interdependence without which life is impossible” (80, 73).

Two things, I think, are significant about this second interpretive mode: first, the more emphatic focus on interdependence rather than individuation leads these critics to a more comprehensive consideration of nature itself—the sea, the universe, and not just the marlin. Although most still value the text for its “tragic vision of man” (Burhans 80), they nonetheless theorize more of an intersubjective relationship between man and nature than others have. Secondly, such attention to the simple representations of nature often produces moments of hesitation and interpretive doubt. One might note, for instance, how Grebstein describes
Hemingway’s craft in terms that parallel the way in which the sea, for him, both succors and over­whelms man:

Who does not know Hemingway’s writing? Yet who can profess to understand exactly how it is made, or unriddle the secrets of its special magic? We want to know more, for at its best, as in The Old Man and the Sea, it partakes of the miracle of enduring art: that it can never be exhausted by critic or reader, but that it renews itself and its audience perpetually. (50)

This oscillation between knowledge and non-knowledge, certainty and doubt, I think is more compellingly staged when one attends to the novella’s spacious dimensions. It is important that the revision of this second camp to those epic and archetypal readings that promote the freedom and power of the self suggests the hermeneutic self-cons­sciousness which a simple narrative “pregnant with implications” can incite within its readers. Hemingway’s text, we ought to remember, is paratactically titled, thus indicating a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship between man and sea. Whereas the novella’s earlier critics on both sides of the divide ultimately privileged the human-as-foreground, seeing nature in an instrumental capacity (as either backdrop for heroic individuation or teacher of an inter-human interdependent ethic), more recent criticism has expanded our focus to ask how biocentric theories of ecosystem inform and condition those previous anthropocentric readings. Similarly, I wonder whether there is a relationship between the text’s environmental ethics and its hermeneutic ethics. In other words, is there a link between the way the vast and simple spaces of the text work upon the reader and the way those spaces condition Santiago’s understanding of nature?

Biocentric, which refers to the treatment of life as a central fact, is according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a term that was actually first used during the modernist period. In an
1899 issue of *Nature*, R. Meldola loosely referred to it as a set of ideas that were “broader” in scope than those of anthropocentricism. By 1913, in *Fitness Environment*, L.J. Henderson would conclude that it was “right” for the biologist to refer to the universe as biocentric (“Biocentric,” def.1a). That the modernist era brought with it a renegotiation of the terms with which humans defined their place in, and relationship to, the external world is significant precisely because it provides an impetus for a fresh look at how literary representations of the nonhuman during that time intersected with an ethics of environmental responsibility. For example, Michelle Levy has recently argued that in the short fiction of Virginia Woolf, “human characters are no longer the exclusive focus; by allowing nonhuman forms of life and objects to share the same stage with human characters, Woolf expresses a vision of life in which the human presence no longer dominates but is simply part of a larger whole” (146). As I do, Levy also envisions an implied ethics in the way the external world both impels the imagination and “imposes crucial constraints on the life of the mind” (141). More to the point, far from imposing an ethical model upon the modernists, to investigate the burgeoning forms of biocentrism within the modernist text is to re-engage with an area of inquiry that Anglo-American writers at the turn of the century were themselves navigating.

Roger King defines biocentrism in terms of its difference from an anthropocentric ethics that focuses exclusively on human definitions of value and “weigh[s] the harm to nonhumans or the disruption of ecosystems only insofar as these constitute a cost or benefit to human beings” (210). Biocentric ethics attempt to posit a natural world that is non-instrumental, or, in narratological terms, non-synthetic:

The biocentric perspective challenges the anthropocentric assumption that membership in the moral community is restricted to human beings or other
(usually fictitious) rational beings. In other words, humans are not the only ones who possess intrinsic value and deserve the respect of moral subjects. The decentering of the moral community away from the human species requires that we learn to integrate nonhuman needs and interests into human moral deliberation. (King 211)

This ethical questioning of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman has informed the ecocritical response to *The Old Man and the Sea* in recent years. Most prominently, Glen Love has argued that the problem of the novella is such that it depicts a “natural world as the arena for human greatness but effecting thereby [the world’s] further diminishment” (*Ecocriticism* 129). Susan Beegel goes further to claim that the text does not necessarily support such a reading and that Santiago’s imagining of the sea as *la mar* proffers a way of seeing nature as “a protagonist on an equal footing with Santiago,” and thus a means to “abandon . . . the anthropocentric critical practice of relegating nature to the role of setting” (131). On this last point, Beegel and I share a common purpose: my focus on how vast and simple space works from the perspective of narrative ethics is an attempt to show how Hemingway foregrounds nature and, in doing so, draws a parallel between the ethical challenges involved in mastering nature and those involved in mastering the otherness of the text through interpretation. However, I challenge Beegel’s eco-feminist approach at the point where she loses her biocentric edge. She interprets the sea as a female protagonist, reinscribing the anthropocentrism that she attempts to disavow. Beegel establishes an ethics of compassion that is founded in our recognition of the sea’s human qualities, in its capacity as a beautiful subject to stand in for the wife Santiago has lost, and in the way it provides an outlet for Santiago’s “language of seduction” (Beegel 138). However, I do not see Santiago’s gendering of the sea (which occurs fairly early on in the story)
as necessarily endorsed by the text; rather, as I hope to show, Santiago progresses through this initial imagining of space-as-human into a recognition of space-as-space. This process, furthermore, anticipates the ways in which Hemingway’s simple representations of vast space condition the reader’s own self-conscious response to otherness by invoking a sense of imaginative mobility and freedom on the one hand, and a sense of imagistic integrity on the other.

The vast spaces of Hemingway’s novella articulate an anxiety towards the synthetic value of nature in both life and art. Whereas Love’s ecocritical approach stresses that “Nature exists in Hemingway’s work and life primarily as a backdrop for aggressive and destructive individualism, the same individualism which, written large, has authored ecological devastation and poisoned the organic origins of the contemporary society that Hemingway turned to nature to escape” (Ecocriticism 123), I argue that the prominence of vast and simple space in *The Old Man and the Sea* produces an interpretive anxiety that destabilizes such an anthropocentric reading. In bringing such ecology to the fore, the text implicitly asks what one ought to “do” with and in and to such space. Indeed, as Santiago laments that he “went too far out” (127)—that his error was one of trespass, of crossing spatial limits—the reader comes to recognize how vast space itself defers its own promise of freedom. This sense of space is key to understanding the hermeneutic ethics of the novella as it emphasizes both the potential for misusing the simple through an aggressive assertion of will as well as the power of the simple space to overwhelm the human agent. Moreover, the text’s representation of space appears to work against the grain of the dominant narrative strain. Whereas the battle between Santiago and the marlin dramatizes the intersection between human need (for sustenance, livelihood) and human desire (for individuation through the control over the natural world), the presence of vast space suggests an
alternative relation with otherness in which the ego hesitates and, for a moment, dissolves into the eco. The narrative, in this sense, exhibits a stubbornness: the simply-wrought natural world can be read as both background and foreground, existing for us and existing for itself.

Much of this ethical ambivalence is related to the ways in which the text’s representations of nature reveal a double-voiced discourse. Readers have noted how Hemingway’s “voice resonates within the voice of the character he is presenting” (Cain 112). Mario Vargas Llosa describes the narrative strategy as one in which “the omniscient narrator speaks from close proximity to the protagonist but often permits the narrative voice to be assumed by Santiago, at times completely vanishing while Santiago relieves anguish or monotony with thoughts” (46). Such focalization is integral to the text’s larger resistance of a purely individualist tragedy.

Relatively early on in the narrative, the text proffers an extended vision of the Gulf Stream ecosystem:

The clouds over the land now rose like mountains and the coast was only a long green line with the grey-blue hills behind it. The water was a dark blue now, so dark that it was almost purple. As he looked down into it he saw the red sifting of the plankton in the dark water and the strange light the sun made now. He watched his lines to see them go straight down out of sight into the water and he was happy to see so much plankton because it meant fish. The strange light the sun made in the water, now that the sun was higher, meant good weather and so did the shape of the clouds over the land. But the bird was almost out of sight now and nothing showed on the surface of the water but some patches of yellow, sun-bleached Sargasso weed and the purple, formalized, iridescent, gelatinous bladder of a Portuguese man-of-war floating close beside the boat. It turned on its side
and then righted itself. It floated cheerfully as a bubble with its long deadly purple filaments trailing a yard behind it in the water. (38-9)

There is a downwards movement in this passage from the panoramic perspective of the first sentence into Santiago’s detailed observation of the reflection of the plankton in the water. This movement from the implied author’s rendering of the vast and simple space into the particularized perceptions of the character also signals a shift in ethical perspectives. The panoramic view, with its characterization of the horizon as “a long green line,” suggests not the freedom of open space but of open space itself as a site of limitations and boundaries. The clouds, the coast, and the hills together arrest vision—they prevent the eye from seeing any further. Hemingway has embedded in this description a notion of the natural world as existing autonomously, not a background for human desires, nor wholly vulnerable to human vision, but a type of other that cannot be wholly pierced by human eyes. Moreover, this sense of limits is juxtaposed against Santiago’s own way of seeing space, which is, in fact, an attempt to defy limitation. Santiago’s “line” operates in contradistinction to the line of the horizon; his line leads his eye downwards, breaching the nonhuman ocean space.

This is not to say that Hemingway presents Santiago as nature’s unconditional antagonist. The man whose eyes “were the same colour as the sea” (10) demonstrates moments of profound respect and sympathy for the ecosystem. The marlin becomes his “brother” (102), and the flying fish are “his principal friends on the ocean” (31). But Santiago’s desire to see his line move into “the dark water” works against the way the text simultaneously challenges the reader’s impulse to see through the simple space.

As the passage moves forward, however, Hemingway does not maintain such a strict division between the two modes of focalization. In fact, the middle of the paragraph, beginning
with the dependent clause of the fourth sentence—“it meant fish”—is written with ambiguous focalization, a function of the free indirect discourse. The reader cannot be sure whether this sense of meaning ascribed to the space ought to be attributed to Santiago’s interpretation of his environment (Hemingway speaking through Santiago’s perspective), or whether, due to the simple declarative structure of the phrase, that the space is meaningful regardless of Santiago’s perception of it (Hemingway attempting to access a specifically ecological perspective). That in this sentence and the next (in which the “strange light” of the sun in the water “meant good weather”) the perspectives of the implied author and Santiago appear to merge exposes a certain interpretive recalcitrance. We can, on the one hand, understand Santiago’s interpretation of the ecosystem as a reading that divulges his propensity to see the space in terms of its instrumental value; in this reading, the strange light makes the weather “good” for fishing, for human activity. On the other hand, the fact of the weather can be read as a fact of the space itself; the construction of the sentence suggests that human meaning need not figure into the value of the space—its goodness—because it is the “strange light” and the “shape of the clouds over the land” that make meaning independent of Santiago. Immediately after this strange moment, the focalization once again becomes discernable. The diction—“formalized, iridescent, gelatinous”—I do not think we can attribute to Santiago, and the generally expository and descriptive technique echoes the voice at the beginning of the passage. Moreover, the difference between the narrator’s relatively thin, non-invasive image of the Portuguese man-of-war and Santiago’s vengeful interpretation of it as a “whore” (39) again exposes the unavoidable antagonism implicit in his relationship with the ecosystem. Santiago must always in some way use the sea; the text at no point suggests that such a role can or should ever be fully relinquished. What Hemingway’s foregrounded vision of nature suggests, however, is that those inevitably
violent and antagonistic moments might be tempered through a recognition of the subject’s imaginative limitations, the recognition that we ultimately oscillate between moments of control and non-control.

The larger point is that this brief moment of ambiguous focalization reveals the text’s ambivalence regarding one’s ethical navigation, use, and interpretation of open space. The passage does not ask its readers to take one side or another, and in fact, the merging of perspectives that occurs so briefly here allows us to participate momentarily in both ego- and eco-consciousness simultaneously. In this way, we move from an observer-position to a more sympathetic view of both ethics: we see the sensitive detail with which Santiago reads the space in order that he might sustain himself; and we also see the space as active, as an ecology that resists human hierarchies of value. This is a moment where the narrative almost irrupts into lyric, where the reader suspends judgment and instead projects him or herself into both perspectives at once.\(^5^6\) Insofar as this representation of vast space asks that the reader occupy two competing subject positions, it signals a moment of ethical hesitation, rich in uncertainty, which challenges the interpretive protocols we place upon the text-as-other.

Such moments, I think, revise our expectations for how we conceive of natural space in the novella. To read the simply-wrought space not just as background but as an integral part of the foreground is to understand it as potentially beyond the manipulations of human eyes and hands. Beegel reads the sea as “*beyond control*” (146), arguing that there is a sense of “reciprocal obligation” implied through Santiago’s treatment of *la mar* as a “mother goddess” (142).

---

\(^5^6\) I am indebted to James Phelan’s definition of lyric as “one, somebody telling somebody else on some occasion for some purpose that something is—a situation, an emotion, a perception, an attitude, a belief; and, two, somebody telling somebody else on some occasion about his or her meditations on something. Furthermore, in both kinds of lyric, the authorial audience is less in the position of observer and judge and more in the position of participant. While we recognize that the speaker is different from us, we move from that recognition toward fusion with the speaker” (“Rhetorical Literary Ethics” 635). While I believe that the lyricality of space remains something of an undercurrent in Hemingway, I treat its revelatory quality in more depth in my section on spaciousness in Cather.
Although I do not share Beegel’s gendered approach, I do find that this sense of ecological obligation arises (both in Santiago and the reader) through Hemingway’s refusal to “relegate nature” to an unambiguously passive position. Vast space in this story consistently resists human attempts to see into it and to know it:

> Then the sun was brighter and the glare came on the water and then, as it rose clear, the flat sea sent it back at his eyes so that it hurt sharply and he rowed without looking into it. (35)

What’s significant here is not only the way in which Hemingway has activated the space and shown how the simple interaction between sun and sea defy Santiago’s gaze; rather, it is the way the simple prose style itself minimizes the degree to which we can read the space as personified. In other words, I think that the implied author goes to great lengths not to anthropomorphize the sea as Santiago does when he thinks of her “as though she were a woman” (32). Whereas Beegel locates the ecological ethic of the narrative through an interpretation of the sea as “a protagonist on equal footing with Santiago” (131), I understand the simplicity of passages such as the one above as retaining the integrity of space as space. The discomfort that Santiago here feels is not a function of a personified or competitive desire but of dimensionality. In other words, it is precisely the simple and expansive flatness of the space that works against the human desire to see. Thus, when Hemingway attempted to explain the novella, writing that “sea equaled sea, old man was old man,” he was not only emphasizing the value of a mimetic reading strategy, but I would argue he was also re-performing the ethical position of his implied author. In other words, insofar as the simple representation of space in the novella constitutes a limit to the type of over-interpretation that would attribute meaning to the space only in terms of something it is not (ie. a person), Hemingway is attempting to narrativize a relationship to otherness that takes as its
ethical source a sincere contemplation of surface. Just as Hemingway warns against “going out too far” in our interpretive ventures, so too does his implied author’s version of simple space mitigate a certain interpretive impulse to see through the surface of the narrative by turning image into symbol. *The Old Man and the Sea* thus conditions our imaginative response to otherness by imposing limits to the way in which we read and see spaciousness; it is both a source of freedom but also, importantly, a text whose meaning is structured on its own terms.

Like smoothness, the dimension of spaciousness is constituted through paradox. Santiago is both freed by the vast space he navigates and disempowered by it. There is the need, on the one hand, to individuate himself against the spacious tableau and, on the other, to integrate himself within the simple space. In his three days at sea, Santiago grapples with this question of self and place. But it is, I am arguing, Santiago’s contemplation of space that competes against his drive to conquer, master, and kill the marlin. Further, it is this contemplative participation in vast space that eventually nuances his relationship to the marlin—it is what provokes his self-doubt and self-criticism. Santiago moves from a desire to “show him what a man can do and what a man endures” (73) to a place where he feels the obligation to apologize to the marlin, “I’m sorry, fish” (121). This sense of responsibility begins for Santiago through the way in which he learns to read the simple space of the ecosystem that surrounds him:

> He looked across the sea and knew how alone he was now. But he could see the prisms in the deep dark water and the line stretching ahead and the strange undulation of the calm. The clouds were building up now for the trade wind and he looked ahead and saw a flight of wild ducks etching themselves against the sky over the water, then blurring, then etching again and he knew no man was ever alone on the sea. (67)
In the space of this paragraph it is Santiago’s very way of seeing himself and the world that changes. The movement from “alone” (from a sense of self as alienated and exiled and the world as a purportedly human place) to “never alone” (a sense of self as absorbed into a space and the world as a place populated by many orders beyond the human) is also a tentative shift away from a narrative of tragic individualism where the world is “an arena where heroic deeds are possible” (Gurko 64). Dwight Eddins reads the vast space of the sea as “an encounter with nada in all its life-denying force” (72), but here the spacious setting is neither the antagonist to (human) life, nor is it a meaningless surface upon which the hero might mark himself. The sky, in this moment, becomes a space of signs, of nonhuman markings. The “etching” of the wild ducks dramatizes a textualized space. It becomes something written upon but also something which “blurs.” This conception of the text as simultaneously readable and the unreadable echoes Hemingway’s strategy of ambiguous focalization insofar as it both proffers and withholds the reader’s interpretive access. It is not Santiago’s relationship to the marlin in this moment that triggers his sense of ecological community. Though he is connected to the great fish by the line that stretches out ahead of him, his recognition that “no man was ever alone on the sea” is engendered through the way in which he reads the space itself. Here we see the spacious text literalized; we see how vast space can both torment and comfort the subject. What Santiago reads when confronted with such a text is the presence of the nonhuman and of its potential inscrutability, and what Hemingway minimizes here is the causal connection between the space-as-text and Santiago’s realization that he will never be alone. Such an omission—the connection between vision and knowledge, sense and understanding—serves to emphasize the space itself as a potential source of meaning. Not simply a figure of connection but an agent, the space here appears to speak—to write—for itself.
I do not want to suggest that Santiago’s reading of spaciousness is an epiphanic moment; indeed, he moves back and forth between moments of intense sympathy with nature and intense rivalry. Instead, I am positing the more modest claim that these instances where space irrupts into the foreground produce moments of self-consciousness—not so much a reversal of ethics, but an awareness of an alternative mode of ethical behaviour. Santiago’s reading of spaciousness has taught him the limitations of understanding the nonhuman other in terms of its instrumentality; whereas, previously, he has interpreted the value of nature primarily in terms of its use—he appreciates the “yellow gulf weed” because of the “added drag” it puts on his line (59)—his feeling of connection to the space when he sees the etching of the wild ducks now becomes dependent upon a theorization of responsiveness and responsibility. The space transforms into a creative and creating nonhuman presence, one which temporarily alleviates Santiago’s angst and, most significantly, whose simple “blurrings” solicit a new form of attention to the other by challenging the reach of the fisherman’s individualist vision.

In fact, the larger significance of this scene is the way in which the foregrounded space leads Santiago to a momentary recognition of the self’s limitations. His hand, which has been cramping for some time, he now describes as “a treachery of one’s own body” (68). Having just been confronted with a vision of unreadable and unmasterable otherness in vast space, Santiago now interprets his own self as losing control. The body rebels against itself. The treachery of his cramp is the recognition that his vision of self as an empowered and unified subject is flawed. That in this sequence Hemingway juxtaposes such a moment of spatial, nonhuman awareness against a scene that emphasizes the very difficulty of “holding the line”—of, literally, holding onto the marlin—once again exposes the friction between the integrity of nature and man’s desire to possess and to master the other. Ryan Hediger locates in this scene what he calls “the
cramp of ethics,” whereby “the frustrations expressed in this passage show the space between Santiago the desiring person and Santiago the body” (47). Hediger argues that Santiago’s cramp is not merely a sign of the disparity between the human’s “desire for . . . absolute strength and the reality of . . . human weakness and mortality” (47), but that it is actually in the way that Santiago treats his own body as other\(^57\) that he arrives at a newly ethical relationship to otherness more generally. The cramped hand is both a sign of the human will to power as well as a painful reminder of the limits of that power; its otherness—that is, its manifestation as something separated from Santiago’s will—is ethically productive precisely because it ambiguates the terms of Santiago’s mastery over nature. It produces a self-critical and self-conscious moment in Santiago, a moment that is defined not by the abandoning of control but by the realization that control is shared between the human and nonhuman. While Hediger and I agree that Santiago approaches a new mode of ethical awareness in this moment, we differ in our interpretation of its source. The thrust of Hediger’s claim is that Santiago learns ethics through a recognition of the human body’s otherness—that is, Santiago needs only to acknowledge the other within himself in order to learn ethical obligation towards the nonhuman. This approach is limited, I think, precisely because it renders the nonhuman elements of the text as always already secondary; they do not pose any ethical challenge or solution in and of themselves. In a word, Hediger’s approach does not explain the power of the vast space, the way in which it is also an agent, and the ways in which it etches onto the human. Conversely, by interrogating Hemingway’s representation of simple setting, and by showing how it oscillates between a background and foreground position in the text, I am arguing that it is the nonhuman space itself that conditions both Santiago’s and the reader’s response to the other-as-text. In this sense, Santiago’s

---

\(^57\) Santiago tries to “gentle the fingers” of his hand (44), but we learn it is “[t]he sun and his steady movement of his fingers” (50) that ultimately uncramp the hand. According to Hediger, Santiago is performing a “careful inhabitation of his body” (47), and this leads him towards ethical obligation.
interpretation of his cramp as a form of treachery is built upon his inchoate sense of spaciousness; if the etchings and blurrings in the sky remind him that there are other valuable types of companionship beyond that of the human, then the cramp extends this critique, reminding him that human control has its limitations and is only one of many possible responses to the sea.

The ethical crux for Santiago centers upon his conflicted relationship to nature’s places. His personification of the sea as la mar is in fact a response to what he sees as the destructive views of the younger fisherman, who speak of the sea “as a contestant or a place or even an enemy” (33, my emphasis). While it appears, here, that Santiago’s vision of nature precludes the interpretation of space-as-place—that is, an interpretation of vast space domesticated and familiarized by the human ego—he does not fully disavow this vision of place. In fact, Santiago idealizes the conversion of nature into place:

He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. He never dreamed about the boy. (27-8, my emphasis)

To dream of nature’s places, indeed, to dream of nature as a non-antagonistic place full of play, is to perform the same sort of ethical lapse of which he accuses the younger fisherman. Santiago’s dreams of places reveal a proclivity to interpret natural space according to human desires. But his perspective on the younger fisherman also shows that he understands the dangers and potential violence implicit in such an ethical position. It is in this way that Hemingway establishes the ethical pull of simple and vast space. “[T]he long, golden beaches and the white
beaches,” and “the high capes and the great brown mountains” and the “white peaks of the Islands rising from the sea” (27), all coalesce to proffer a nostalgic vision of free and open space to which Santiago’s mind may wander without constraints. And yet, Santiago expresses his distaste for viewing the sea as a place of unconstrained human empowerment, even though he cannot fully relinquish his dreams of nature as what Bachelard would label an intimate immensity. Here, the intersection of ego and eco produces hesitation—the simple space beckons to be used, imagined, and freely navigated, but its otherness also resists the interpretive pressures of the human.

In “On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter,” an article Hemingway wrote for Esquire in 1936 (which is generally thought to contain the source material for The Old Man and the Sea), the author remarks, “And after a while the danger of others is the only danger and there is no end to it nor any pleasure in it nor does it help to think about it. But there is great pleasure in being on the sea, in the unknown wild suddenness of a great fish in his life and death which he lives for you in an hour while your strength is harnessed to his: and there is satisfaction in conquering this thing which rules the sea it lives in” (243-44). Whereas Hemingway here confesses that his aim is the conquest of nature, Santiago eventually comes to doubt this ethic, and even from the beginning of the novella the fisherman’s desire for control is inextricably linked to the necessities of his impoverished livelihood. In the article, Hemingway appears to suggest that the great fish works as an ethical substitute for the human other—the pleasure-in-danger that it provides in the putatively apolitical realm of the sea helps the fisherman cope with his disempowerment in the violently politicized human realm. In the novella, however, the ocean provides no respite from ethics, and the danger is not pleasurable. Indeed, Santiago’s confrontation with the sea gradually broadens his sense of responsibility to the world and thus
reveals to him the possibility imagining himself in other ways—not as conquerer, nor victim, but as an ecological participant for whom the desire to individuate oneself is balanced against the creative power of the spacious foreground. Santiago sets out to show the world “what a man can do” (73), but the world also teaches him what he can do.\textsuperscript{58}

That the narrative ends with Santiago once again dreaming is not insignificant. It marks a small but momentous step towards a more biocentric ethic. As Manolin sits beside the beaten, exhausted fisherman, the narrator offers a final glimpse into Santiago’s mind: “The old man was dreaming about the lions” (140). For Steven Florczyk, the scene represents a nostalgic culmination, “a desire to recover a past, a world where we may live according to the rules of a simpler yet more fulfilling time” (164). According to Beegel, the dream is Edenic, “a place where viewing nature as a contestant or an enemy is no longer possible, and love alone remains (156). But I think Hemingway’s aesthetic of omission adds something more to this final scene. It is not merely a vision of human and nonhuman interdependence, nor is it a wholly primitivist ideal of simple living divorced from modernity. This final dream is not merely a reiteration of Santiago’s earlier dreams of places—Hemingway has in fact simplified Santiago’s dream by minimizing the image. The author omits “the long yellow beach” (90) and all other spatial references in this final image. Why are the lions the only thing left? The effect of such simplification is that it dramatizes the friction between the anthropocentric and biocentric ethics that have informed the text up to this point. The ambiguity that results from this simplification solicits from the reader the same sort of ethically productive hesitation that the vast spaces have inspired in the protagonist. On the one hand, the elimination of space in Santiago’s final dream can suggest a reclamation of the imaginative power of the individual subject; by subordinating

\textsuperscript{58} For a more comprehensive account of the Hemingway’s own ethical transformation, especially through the lens of his two African safaris, see Ryan Hediger’s “Hunting, Fishing, and the Cramp of Ethics in Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea, Green Hills of Africa, and Under Kilimanjaro.”
space to the silent periphery, Hemingway is, in one sense, maintaining its status as background. It becomes a context we take for granted, something that need not be mentioned. The dream itself is thus foregrounded—it appears as a sign of the human imagination itself, of man’s ability to cope with and overcome the pressures of an overwhelming natural world. As Santiago says, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (114).

On the other hand, insofar as the conspicuous absence of places in this final dream is also a revision of Santiago’s previous dreams, it also suggests a modest ethical turn in Santiago’s way of thinking about the natural world. Given that the text has in several key scenes dramatized the limits of an anthropocentric vision of nature, Hemingway’s subtraction of place from Santiago’s dream suggests the ways in which vast space has moved, in Santiago’s mind, from an object against which human desire is foregrounded to an unimaginable and unnarratable other. At the end of his three-day trial upon the sea, Santiago is unable to imagine those vast natural spaces which were once such treasured places in his mind. That space is here disimagined—that there is no setting to his dream, only lions and nothing else—paradoxically foregrounds the otherness of space and suggests that it cannot be fully mobilized by the human mind. Earlier, the marlin has appeared to Santiago as “very strange” (74), and in the face of its strangeness he tries, unsuccessfully, to master and possess it. But if Santiago’s encounter with the marlin has taught him to be self-conscious not only about his own physical prowess but about the limitations of his knowledge of the vast sea space, then here the text’s disavowal of space-as-place through the dream sequence can be understood as a step towards a new biocentric responsibility. It is, in a sense, a different response to the interpretive challenge that the marlin had posed. To disimagine the space is to maintain its otherness by attempting to separate it from human structures of meaning. Santiago has moved from a vision of vast space as a woman—la mar—to a new
glimpse of space as non-synthetic, ineffable other. This is not to say that he unmistakably forgoes the will to power—that appropriative impulse which undergirds both the act of fishing as well as the reader’s interpretive gestures—but that the narration of his dream now prompts the reader to recognize that such acts have the potential to violate the integrity of the other.

The pain and remorse that Santiago feels after the marlin’s flesh has been desecrated by the sharks provides the reader with an opportunity to evaluate not only the degree of responsibility Santiago takes for his failed attempt to master nature but, more important, how he ultimately conceives of man’s right relationship to the nonhuman world. One might notice, through numerous iterations, that when the fisherman apologizes to the massacred marlin, it is an apology always constructed through spatial terms: “‘I shouldn’t have gone out so far, fish,’ he said. ‘Neither for you nor for me. I’m sorry, fish’” (121); “‘Half fish,’ he said. ‘Fish that you were. I am sorry that I went too far out. I ruined us both’” (127). Santiago’s apologies do not hinge primarily upon the specific act of hunting (fishing is, after all, a means of sustenance and survival for the impoverished man) but, rather, upon the violation of space. To have gone “too far out” is to navigate vast space without any self-awareness. It is to believe in the American myth of man’s mastery of and entitlement to the space, to imagine oneself as Ahab, “one captain . . . blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale” (Melville 152). Indeed, from the very beginning of the story, Santiago plans to go “far out” (14), but it is only after his ordeal that the qualifying and evaluative adverb is added to the phrase. Florczyk argues that this recognition “reinforce[s] the need to rely upon the community within which he operates” and that his “participation in the natural world implies this larger responsibility that involves consequences regarding himself and other members of this community” (158). Certainly, Santiago’s realization of his limits lends itself to a renewed appreciation of others,
especially Manolin, whose presence underscores the importance of interdependence within human relationships. But to go “too far out” upon the sea is to glimpse, first and foremost, a new ethical relationship with the nonhuman other. In other words, it is not just the community of people that Santiago learns responsibility towards but also the ecological community. In such an apology, then, we witness a change in how Santiago has come to view his relationship to the sea. Whereas initially he understands the spaciousness of the sea as a backdrop against which man’s unimpeachable freedom—to navigate, to master, to interpret—can be measured, he now recognizes the sea as something which has called him to account for his trespass.

What changes, then, is precisely the way in which Santiago comes to imagine vast space, and thus the ethical quality of his relationship to the simple, inscrutable other:

“The wind is our friend, anyway, he thought. Then he added, sometimes. And the great sea with our friends and our enemies. And bed, he thought. Bed is my friend. Just bed, he thought. Bed will be a great thing. It is easy when you are beaten, he thought. I never knew how easy it was. And what beat you, he thought.

“Nothing,” he said aloud. “I went out too far.” (132-133)

In the moment of Santiago’s greatest suffering, when he is weak, exhausted, and beaten, he exhibits a conspicuous interpretive anxiety as well. The fisherman is no longer sure exactly how to characterize the sea; whereas at the beginning of the narrative, he is certain of the vast space as *la mar*, a woman, now his impulse to anthropomorphize is at best equivocal. The patterning of this passage is markedly smooth and as we have seen with In Our Time, the smooth text incorporates disruption—the limits of imaginative connection. The grammatical breakdown of the third sentence—less a declarative statement than it is an image that now only exists in a state of potentiality—suggests that Santiago can no longer communicate the anthropomorphic
interpretation of space as he once had. Although, here, he does not fully relinquish this view of the natural world as a place of friends and enemies, his internal monologue conveys a powerful element of self-doubt. Moreover, this effect is also achieved by means of Hemingway’s paratactic patterning of the passage. The prevalence of “and” as a conjunctive link between the protagonist’s thoughts has two related effects: first, insofar as the conjunction carries with it a desire for constant supplementation, the sequencing suggests that Santiago is searching for meaning rather than ascribing to a particularly comprehensive perspective on the world. Without the connective logic that has previously exemplified Santiago’s view of the sea as “something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them” (33, my emphasis), Hemingway shows a protagonist who is much less convinced by his own imaginings. The passage is more an anxious rehearsal of old ideas than it is an expression of a coherent ethical scheme. The smooth prose marks a moment of hesitation. The second and related effect of Hemingway’s parataxis is that it aligns Santiago’s interpretive anxieties with those of the reader. Just as the protagonist’s encounter with vast space has caused him to question his anthropocentric impulse, and thus the articulation of his right relationship to nature, so does the recalcitrant simplicity of the passage solicit our generous imaginings and yet still withhold itself from us. (What is the equivalence between the “greatness” of “sea” and “bed,” or the specific antecedent of the pronoun “it,” for example?) Like Santiago, we find ourselves in a position where the simple text (the sea, the space, the sky) resists the pressures of the human by retaining its otherness, urging us to question the limits of our interpretive reach. What it is, I believe, that we learn through this type of reading is that ethics is both a case of recognizing the limits of the self and also the potential power of the other-as-text. Indeed, Santiago here begins to disimagine the sea; less a place of friends and enemies and more a
nonhuman space, the sea reappears here as a simple fact in and of itself, something that need not

*inevitably* be associated with human perception and use. The end of the fisherman’s journey
marks the latent beginnings of his biocentrism, an ethical mode that works in conjunction with
the hermeneutics of Hemingway’s simple and recalcitrant images of space. But as Willa Cather
shows us, the disengagement from forms of human creativity and imagination that this self-
effacing step entails comes with its own set of ethical snags.
3.2 Excavation and Lyric: The Ethical Call of the Vast and Simple Southwest in *The Professor’s House*

If in *The Old Man and the Sea* the spacious and simply-described image of the sea signals the ethical pull of a biocentric mode of interpretation, in Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, vast space often appears to its protagonist, Godfrey St. Peter, as a compensatory fiction. Cather herself describes Book II, “Tom Outland’s Story,” as one would the opening of a window—a letting in of “the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa” (*OW* 30-31). The images of natural simplicity in the American Southwest that Cather instills into the story of Tom Outland may implicitly critique the “stuffiness” of urban modernity—of cramped houses and quotidian concerns. They may also make the domestic spaces of Books I and III, as one critic has said, seem “pallid and earthbound” (Christopherson 94). But, more significantly, in the way that the novel’s main characters respond and react to the vast spaces of the American landscape, and in the way that they negotiate the freedom that landscape offers, we see how spaciousness conditions their ethical imaginations. Tom Outland’s developing ecological consciousness in particular demonstrates that Cather does not view the vastness of the Southwest so much as a backdrop for individual adventurism and escape (a reading that, as we will see, is more readily endorsed by the professor) as a space where responsibility towards others, both human and nonhuman, is inscribed upon the subject.

Indeed, much of Cather’s fiction is attuned to the power of vast space and such representations certainly permeate *The Professor’s House*. Alfred Kazin argues that in Cather’s fiction, “landscape was character, to be cherished at the last more than human character” (110). What I think, however, a narratological analysis can add to such a discussion is the recognition that Cather’s “thematized spaces,” to use Bal’s terminology, do not supplant human character;
rather, vast and simple space in Cather’s text expands one’s understanding of obligation and prepares and conditions the subject’s relationship to otherness. As Audrey Goodman points out, “few critics have explained how [Cather’s novels] transcribe the experience of place and produce their effects on the reader” (142, my emphasis). My purpose, in this sense, is twofold: firstly, I want to show how this spatial experience is intensely ethical and inevitably hermeneutic; secondly, I will argue that the major difference between the way St. Peter conceives the vast natural world and the way that Tom ultimately comes to respond to it is a narratological problem of a similar kind that we have seen Hemingway work through in *The Old Man and the Sea*. For St. Peter, space is ultimately background—a means with which to measure the extent of one’s freedom and escape. For Tom, although he may start from a similar position, simple space eventually comes to occupy a narrative foreground; the story becomes more about the space than about Tom’s adventures in it. “Tom Outland’s Story” is interspersed with images of vast natural space that are constituted through lyric pauses which, eventually, not only align the homodiegetic narrator and implied author but also proffer a hermeneutic mode different in kind from that of the professor. In the end, Cather’s novel finds its ecocritical consciousness through simplicity; spaciousness—in nature, in imagery, in technique—challenges the nature of our responsive and responsible relationships towards others precisely because it cannot be fully mobilized as a subject.

There is a moment relatively early in *The Professor’s House* when, while attending a production of *Mignon* in Chicago, Godfrey St. Peter and his wife Lillian turn and face the audience during intermission. As the husband and wife linger between the acts, the reader also lingers; we contemplate the significance of this pause that halts the progression of two narratives

---

59 Rosario Faraudo is the only other critic, to my knowledge, who has brought attention to Cather’s “protagonist” spaces using Bal’s narratological terms. However, she focuses more on the “reality effect” of thematized space and how it reveals “the author’s consciousness of a collective culture at a particular historical period” (580).
simultaneously. They have just spoken of “something” that has lately come between them, though that something remains unstated:

She said nothing, but he saw her lip quiver, and she turned away and began looking at the house through the glasses. He likewise began to examine the audience. He wished he knew just how it seemed to her. He had been mistaken, he felt. The heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one’s own. Presently the melting music of the tenor’s last aria brought their eyes together in a smile not altogether sad. (78)

It is a moment of avoidance; in the absence of the music, the pair examines the audience instead of looking at each other. St. Peter has just told Lillian of his wish that they “should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young” (78), and they both face up to the truth that they are not the young lovers that they once were, that they cannot reclaim a moment frozen in their memories. Here, St. Peter admits a certain hermeneutic limit even as he shares this emotional moment with Lillian—he cannot read his wife, cannot interpret the quiver of her lip: a simple, perhaps unconscious, gesture reveals the potential opacity of the other, challenging one’s capacity to imagine and live in the world. But Cather, through her dramatization of a lingering audience, also produces a self-conscious moment for the text’s readers. This satellite scene in a sense prepares us for an entire story of pauses, of disruptions in the forward movement of narrative and interpretation. *The Professor’s House* is a novel rich in simple contemplative moments—of interpretive revisions and occasions of hesitation—and it is in these instances that

---

60 The tenor’s last aria in Ambroise Thomas’s *Mignon* refers to the part sung by the character of Wilhelm, who recognizes that Mignon is in love with him, and yet he loves another. He laments, “What she in her breast nurtured, would ardent love become, / And thus perturb the peaceful current, the current of her life, would ere long disturb the current of her peaceful life. . . . / That what she now unwittingly nurtured, would disturb the calm current of her life” (qtd in Giannone 466). This allusion to a fateful love not only echoes the professor’s fading love for his wife but also implicitly attests to the aesthetic value of a form such as the aria—a form that often produces a lyrical pause, a meditative moment that disrupts the narrative progression which, as I hope to show, is so central to Cather’s narrative ethics.
the text locates its own particular hermeneutic ethics. Such pauses illustrate characters carefully considering themselves, others, and the spaces they occupy, while also soliciting from us our own careful consideration of the work we do upon the otherness of the text. In this sense, I follow Richard Millington’s suggestion that Cather’s fiction “makes the experience of reading the work an object of study” (“Against Allegory” 45). This particular scene interrogates the very capacity of art as a vehicle of sympathy, intersubjectivity, and ethics. Cather’s use of meiosis (“not altogether sad”) minimizes the positive ethical potential of art—of human constructs—to bring people together, and it suggests, furthermore, that human endeavors to know one another may inevitably fall short. To see ourselves in the Mignon audience—to see St. Peter and Lillian looking at us in the peopled and humanized space of the theatre—is to recognize our own participation in the meaning-making of the text. Moreover, in this intermission we come to recognize the ethical limits of human design; St. Peter cannot reconstruct the meaning of Lillian’s quivering lip, we cannot ever perfectly translate that “something,” and the opera can only fleetingly bring these two together. Art, Cather seems to say, is sometimes not enough to break through the imaginative limits of the interpreting subject.

It is significant, then, that in the aftermath of this imaginative failure—after St. Peter has realized that Mignon cannot return the husband and wife to the emotional concord they once shared in youth—that St. Peter finds comfort in a vision of vast space, “a line of gleaming snow peaks, agonizingly high and sharp, along the Southern coast of Spain” (79). This retreat to nature and to the spacious horizons of his youth is, in fact, customary for St. Peter. It is often in his imaginations of the nonhuman that he finds, like Santiago, a means of nostalgic escape from the imperfections and insecurities involved in his daily affairs with other people. This retreat is not unethical in and of itself: St. Peter’s nostalgic moments in fact help him to cope with the more
immediate anxieties of his life—with the loss of Tom, the loss of his house, the loss of love and, perhaps most important, the loss of his youth. The backwards glance through these vast spaces preserves not only memories but a sense of self-with-origins, of individuation, and control. The issue, as we will come to see, is that St. Peter resists returning from these nostalgic spaces. While his imaginations of vast space allow him to re-engage with the values of a world he has since lost, they ultimately effect a withdrawal from interpersonal responsibility—his wife is conspicuously “not in” this particularly idyllic dream of snowy peaks (79). If here the vision of nature appears to compensate for and appease St. Peter’s anxieties, Cather subtly intimates that simple representations of vast space are not good substitutes for human relationships, nor should they necessarily help us retreat from the engagement with and interpretation of our world. The word “agonizingly” suggests instead that the text’s treatment of nature’s spaciousness is not just a promise of male freedom, of rugged individualism, and of separation from human affairs but a type of space that also has the potential to overwhelm the subject—the same sort of “blotting out” that Jim Burden attests to amidst the wide open Nebraska prairie.

For St. Peter, Lake Michigan is “the great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness” (20). To conceive of it in such simple terms—as a fact, omnipresent—is to avoid the type of anthropocentric impulse that leads Santiago to imagine the Gulf sea as a woman. St. Peter does not elide its nonhuman disposition. Still, he does treasure the lake for the human functions it serves: “You only had to look at the lake, and you knew you soon would be free” (20), he says, and here the reader recognizes a common trope of Americana in the image of a wide open space that is liberating, individuating, and wholly separate from the dreariness of the everyday. “The lake, like his window,” Marilyn Chandler contends, “is that door to the unbounded, to the freedom that he longs for but can attain only symbolically” (194). But this “unboundedness” is
more a product of St. Peter’s imaginative desire than it is a feature inherent in Cather’s simple image. Indeed, the great fact of the lake is that it is a space used by St. Peter, a space the sight of which is “of more assistance than all the convenient things he had done without” (22). Cather here exposes the hierarchical nature of St. Peter’s relationship to space: he conceives of its value only in terms of its capacity to fulfill human desires, both symbolically and literally. It is in this way that St. Peter comes to occupy a similar ethical position to that of Santiago at the beginning of his journey; for both men, natural space is conceived of synthetically—as an instrument with which to structure the conceptions of oneself. The sight of the lake allows him reimagine the freedoms of his youth, just as when he swims through it, wearing his “vermillion” rubber visor from France, he momentarily recaptures those youthful energies he so admires in Tom Outland and of which he laments the loss in himself.

And yet there is also a certain ineffable quality to the lake, an otherness which appears to work against St. Peter’s instrumentalization of it. It is indescribable; its simplicity drastically reduces the man’s ability to tell about it.

[B]ut his lake was itself, as the Channel and the Mediterranean were themselves.

“No,” he used to tell the boys, who were always asking him about le Michigan, “it is altogether different. It is a sea, and yet it is not salt. It is blue, but quite another blue. Yes, there are clouds and mists and sea-gulls, but—I don’t know, il est toujours plus naïf.”

This is an unnarratable space. Its simple recalcitrance exposes the limits of the professor’s interpretive capacity; he cannot make it “mean” precisely what he wants it to mean. The way in which he hedges his description—”I don’t know,” “but”—and how he is forced to qualify, imprecisely, the quality of the lake’s blueness points to the singularity of the space’s otherness.
Such descriptive evasions, furthermore, work to counteract the professor’s cursory possession of the space as “his” own. Insofar as it cannot be wholly captured linguistically, and resists the subject’s attempts to communicate its significance, the lake withstands becoming a part of a human landscape. Cather here shows how spaciousness works to arrest the narrative impulse, and how the professor responds to this challenge is particularly significant: confronted with the recalcitrance of simple space, St. Peter resorts to the French language. To his interlocutors, the French boys to whom he speaks, this change may signal a failure of the English language to provide the proper words with which to express his experience. To Cather’s implied English audience, the recourse to French adds yet another layer of recalcitrance. The effect of this discrepancy is twofold: on the one hand, the switch in language draws attention back onto the narrator as opposed to the narrated event—the professor’s linguistic dexterity becomes a subject of interest in and of itself. Threatened with a sense of his own limits, St. Peter denies those limits through a renewed linguistic performance. It is a foregrounding of self at the expense of the interpretive challenge proffered by the spacious image, and it contrasts Santiago’s eventual disimagination of space in his dreams (which signals at least a tentative recognition of one’s own imaginative limitations). On the other hand, the switch also exposes the professor’s implicit recognition of his limits as both a narrator and interpreter. The French supplement reveals the inadequacy of what preceded it. It is important that this scene can be read so ambivalently because it draws attention to the way simple space solicits our linguistic control at the same time that it resists it.

The narrative ethics associated with Cather’s representations of space emerge further through the contrast between St. Peter’s and Tom Outland’s responses to the novel’s spaciousness. Tom’s way of describing vast space is different from that of the professor, and it
suggests an alternative type of ethical relationship between the self and other. Whereas St. Peter responds to simple space by asserting his linguistic acuity over the other, Tom’s vision of the mesa as “one great ink-black rock against a sky on fire” seems to treat the mesa itself as a text, as an active, creating space, full of its own meanings (171). It’s not that Tom’s prose-style isn’t richly metaphorical in its simplicity—certainly his style draws attention to itself; rather, it’s that Tom’s rhetoric also directs the reader’s attention away from itself and onto the ambiguous power of the mesa:

No wonder the thing bothered us and tempted us; it was always before us, and was always changing. Black thunder-storms used to roll up from behind it and pounce on us like a panther without warning . . . . After the burst in the sky was over, the mesa went on sounding like a drum, and seemed itself to be muttering and making noises. (171-2)

The intensity of Tom’s attention to the space is provocative. His aural imagery mixes that of the human and nonhuman together; it sounds like a drum (a human instrument), it mutters to itself, and yet the “noises” it makes are neither fully music nor language. This moment initiates an ethical intersection, the confrontation between what Carol Steinhagen has described as Cather’s “respect for the inherent power of nature and for the power of human beings to shape and design that nature” (64). Here the mesa, described in terms of its ability to generate its own sounds, challenges “the human capacity to make, to create . . . the basis of the writer’s art” (Steinhagen 64). Just as the scene at Mignon has exposed the limitations of art as a catalyst for human connection, so does Tom’s description of the mesa gesture towards a mode of creation that contests the primacy of human design.
There is a definite reverence that mingles with Tom’s desire to excavate the mesa. Certainly, he justifies his interpretive project—his need to know more and find out more about the “deep canyons and caverns” of the mesa (172)—through the rhetoric of temptation. The shape and sounds of the space are tantalizing. But Tom is also, in part, overwhelmed by the mesa, stymied by the recalcitrant simplicity of the space. Though he eventually does access its interior by following some cattle down the river and up a canyon (178), he is also highly conscious of the ways in which the mesa denies human access. “The north end,” Tom recalls, “we could easily believe impassible—sheer cliffs that fell from the summit to the plain, more than a thousand feet” (170); further, “the great rim rock, which projected over the erosions like a granite shelf” makes the mesa, from that perspective, “inaccessible” (174). In this sense, the image of the unexcavated mesa comes to look a lot like Morris’s minimalist cube, a structure which denies interior access but whose simplicity also invites the imaginative work of the subject.

Similarly, Tom’s orally-inflected narrative is both bothering and tempting to the reader, and as such, it echoes the spacious quality of Cather’s southwestern landscape. Outland is, as Lillian recalls, “far from frank, though he had such an open manner” (152). And we notice that Tom comes to no substantive conclusion about the mutterings and noises of the mesa; he implies a certain communicability between mesa and man but does not put that message into words. His simple prose promises access, but simultaneously withholds itself. Whereas the professor is satisfied with the idea of his lake as a “naïf” instrument of human freedom, Tom approaches the mesa more ambivalently. He does not see it solely in terms of its use-value, but as a type of “permanent text, one ‘inked’ in stone, so to speak” (Moseley, “Concentric Texts” 40). And though Tom is at this point guided by an impulse to know the mesa in its entirety—to excavate,
discover, and master its secret spaces—he is also much more willing than St. Peter has been to pause amidst space and to let it suspend his adventurist impulse just as its description suspends the narrative progression. Guy Reynolds argues that in Cather’s nature writing there is a significant balance between the human desire to drift through the world and to master it. “The Cather protagonist,” Reynolds continues, “achieves self-mastery, even as (s)he is acted upon and shaped by environment; action is both transitive and intransitive, switching ceaselessly between meditation and mastery” (186). But this is not just a lesson that Tom Outland learns; it is an ethical protocol that Cather also places upon the reader through the way in which the simple, foregrounded spaces of the text confront our own excavatory impulses as interpreters of texts.61

There is, moreover, in Cather’s text, a clearer distinction between hermeneutic protocols than in The Old Man and the Sea. This is, as I will continue to show, mostly because there are unmistakable differences between the way St. Peter and Tom each develop a narrative mode to correspond to their spacious settings, whereas Hemingway’s ethics are constituted through the more subtle and sometimes ambivalent growth of a single character, Santiago. Hemingway’s ambiguous focalization adds to the text’s ethical uncertainty, while Cather—as will gradually become evident—more clearly aligns her implied author in style and strategy to the narrative voice of Tom Outland whose simple lyrics serve to revise rather than relinquish his hold upon the world.

Tom’s excavations on the outskirts of the mesa lead him to discover a set of irrigation ditches, in which he finds several cliff-dweller artifacts—pottery, arrowheads, and a stone pick-ax. If we read the mesa as having just challenged Tom’s sense of individual dominance, as

---

61 Mary R. Ryder interprets Cather’s nature writing less ambivalently. For her, Cather’s ethics arise not through the oscillation between mastery and non-mastery of the environment but through the primacy of one’s harmonious relationship with nature (79). In the Cather text, according to Ryder, the masculine land ethic always gives way to the feminine. My argument, however, rests on the idea that Cather’s ethics are richer and more nuanced precisely because the desire to control can never be fully relinquished.
having insinuated itself as a vast form of nonhuman creative power and thus having challenged Tom’s sense of the other-as-controllable, then we can see in the way Tom meditates upon these artifacts that he is learning to abandon an instrumentalized vision of the other. The recollection of this discovery, moreover, triggers in Tom a moment of lyrical narration, an interpretive mode that arises from the way space supplants narrative progression—the way it solicits a pause. As I have noted, James Phelan argues that the chief difference between narrative and lyric form is the way in which the audience is constructed. Whereas narrative places us into a separate observer role from which we can judge characters, audience response in the lyric mode “stem[s] from adopting the speaker’s perspective without judging it” (“Rhetorical Literary Ethics” 635). In lyric, the implied reader is not asked to distance herself from the speaker; the text asks that we “contemplate the speaker’s argument for its own sake” (Narrative as Rhetoric 33). The presence of lyric within the narrative is therefore fundamental to enacting the hermeneutic ethics that Cather asks her reader to adopt. The invocation of the present tense in conjunction with the meditation upon vast space signals a moment in which the reader is asked to suspend momentarily his or her judgment of Tom and instead participate in his perspective. “There is something stirring,” Tom recalls, “about finding evidences of human labour and care in the soil of an empty country. It comes to you as a sort of message, makes you feel differently about the ground you walk over every day” (173). The lyric mode serves two main purposes here: first, like the imagistic simplicity of the mesa itself, it serves to hinder the progression of the narrative of discovery and excavation—for a moment, nothing happens; secondly, it emphasizes the value of an affective and empathetic response to the putatively empty space. Here, Tom-the-teller

62 In yet another article, Phelan clarifies that “In lyric narrative, the logic of event gives way to the logic of revelation and exploration of a character’s emotions and attitudes in a particular situation” (“Now I Lay Me” 58). This revelatory disposition of Tom Outland’s narrational mode, as I have been arguing, not only disrupts narrative progression but works to revise the younger Tom’s narrative of adventure.
attests to the value of vast space as shared space, as a space that is “already inscribed by native cultures” (Goodman 163), and thus as a space that summons responsibility for the human and nonhuman other alike. This is a response of Tom-the-teller; it constitutes an ethical recognition that Tom has come to learn after the events of the narrative. Such an irruption of lyric in the midst of a relatively progressive nouvelle establishes an un-ironic mode of reading where we see Tom not in terms of his disparity from the ethical norms of the text but in alignment with them. There is thus a significant parallel between the way Tom reads the spaciousness of the Southwestern landscape and the way Cather’s simple imagery confronts our own interpretive mastery of the text, demonstrating the ethical relationship that simplicity asks of its interpreters. It’s not that he wholly abandons interpretation; rather, he momentarily steps into a passive, uncertain role. He incorporates into his own language the simple recalcitrance of the space and thus rewrites the terms of his potential mastery over it.

Cather is also careful to distinguish between Tom-the-teller and Tom-the-younger. Where the present tense appears, then, signals where Tom revisits his former self at the time of narration “on one of those rainy nights, before the fire in the dining room” (155); it is a revisionary impulse—a desire to go back and revisit one’s ecological and interpretive excursions with fresh eyes. That these moments also mark a change in strategy—a brief switch from narrative to lyric—marks the extent to which Tom’s understanding of himself within and upon the mesa has changed. And embedded in this shift is also a hermeneutic shift insofar as the lyrical irruptions show Tom as resisting the impulse to excavate (to discover and to know) and proffering instead a mode of interpretation characterized by respect and responsibility towards the simple space. It is a less-impositional form of interpretation—the inexplicability of the “something stirring” locates a character who has become intensely conscious of his imaginative trespasses. The minimalist
lyric in this text suggests an alternative way of seeing the simplicity of both the text and the world, a hermeneutic frame that is less concerned with the drive to translate meaning and individuate oneself than it is with the rich pause amidst uncertainty.

In attempting to pose the “charged simplicity” of Cather’s narrative as a mode of ecological encounter, Glen Love argues that “In Tom’s narrative another filter is removed between tale and reader, and a corresponding sensory and environmental immediacy is achieved” (Ecocriticism 110). However, despite the soothing “aural appeal” of Tom’s words, the “vowels intoning like the slow, steady beat of a drum” (Albin 30), Tom is not the only narrator of Book II. Deborah Karush points out that “it is difficult to separate Tom’s voice from the Professor’s, since the first-person narrative . . . is actually a retelling, after Tom’s death, of a story Tom told the professor years ago” (156). Similarly, Moseley observes that Book II “subsumes four other texts: the text of St. Peter’s memory, Tom Outland’s oral narrative, Outland’s written diary, and Outland’s personal experience and memory . . . . For the most part we as readers take this memory at face value, but we should be aware that the personal judgment found in St. Peter’s evaluation of the narrative as a story of “youthful defeat” has been filtered through his own memory” (“Concentric Texts” 38). Indeed, the professor is a major if unstated presence in this story; he is both frame narrator and narratee. The environmental immediacy which Love posits as the basis of Cather’s ecological ethics is filtered through the professor, and thus the simplicity of Tom’s voice ought to be read as reflexively commenting on St. Peter as well. The professor’s recollection of Tom’s story as “nothing very remarkable” (155) suggests how Tom’s simple story might be conceived as all too familiar in human—indeed, in American—life. Because, for the professor, Tom’s account is memorable as an all too common American myth of individual conquest and loss, perhaps even Turnerian in its narrative of frontier-like discovery and
indigenous contact, this remark reveals how the simple story can be mobilized for competing narrative desires and for conflicting ideological uses. The environmental immediacy that the simplicity of Book II invokes is tempered by the professor’s narrative position: his retelling of Tom’s story casts Tom’s voice less as an ethical response to the vast Southwest space and more as an tenderfooted expression of adventurism, “a story of youthful defeat, the sort of thing a boy is sensitive about—until he grows older” (155). This counterpointing of ethics is more understated in Hemingway’s text precisely because this crisis occurs within a single character rather than through a juxtapositional technique. Cather, however, asks her reader to consistently account for the presence of multiple perspectives.

The simplicity of “Tom Outland’s Story” is indeed prismatically diffused through a mode of triple focalization that reveals the simple story as an unreservedly shared text. Tom shares the narrator’s role with St. Peter, and St. Peter similarly shares the role of narratee with the reader. The larger point is that this sharing—this inability to say whose story this is—reflects the same challenge to one’s interpretive mastery that the Southwestern landscape ultimately performs upon Tom. Cather’s narrative does not reject possession; rather, ownership of story and land is better described in terms of an oscillatory relationship between characters rather than the sustained power of one over another. Such responsive intersubjectivity suggests, moreover, that the ethical imperative of Cather’s novel rests not on an unqualified choice between mastery and non-mastery (possession and dispossession) but on the recognition that the subject must

---

63 The emergence of the second person perspective—”It comes to you as a sort of message”—in Tom’s story places the reader in an ambiguously intimate relationship with the text’s community of tellers and listeners. While it may work to separate us from the professor as auditor, it can equally hail us as a recipient of the text, a subject position that demands a certain response and responsibility to the narrative. Tom’s ethical imperative, as voiced through his lyric, thus extends to us as well.

William Waters, in his essay, “Rilke’s Imperatives,” interprets the poet’s specific use of “you” as an occasion for ethical directives. The reader who deflects this hailing gesture into a responsive role resists his/her own exposure. But failing to surrender to the text in this way also means that the reader will fail empathetically as well—to be “draw[n] into a role one did not occupy before” (728).
negotiate multiple relationships simultaneously, sometimes involving more and sometimes less
control of the other. The triple focalization thus also helps to locate an implied author who aligns
herself with the ethical recognition that Goodman sees in Tom of a space already-inscribed by
indigenous presence. The simplicity of Book II catalyzes our desire to interpret and to ultimately
know Tom, and yet we are also prone, as Tom is to the space itself, to meditate upon the way
Cather’s simple prose arrests us and impedes the adventure our own interpretive excavations.
This is how, from a narratological perspective, Cather’s fiction intermingles an ecological and
hermeneutic ethics, anticipating, as Goodman rightly argues, “our reluctance to claim too much
penetration for unfamiliar places and cultures, but . . . also articulat[ing] our continued desire to
translate their meaning, and to reach for more” (164).

The recalcitrant simplicity of the space itself has, in a sense, prepared Tom for this
moment of perspectival sharing. After discovering the cliff-city, Outland remarks that “the thing
that must have made it delightful to live there, was the setting” (190). It is important that when
he is “facing an ocean of clear air” he begins to see from the perspective of others, and, indeed, it
is the sight of this simple and vast space itself that inspires in Tom a respect for those “who had
the hardihood to build there” (191). Similarly, to feel “differently” towards the ground is to
recognize the ethical limitations of only viewing space as a site of excavation; it is also, Tom
appears to recognize, a space of creativity, both in the ecological sense and in the sense that it
preserves these simple evidences of human craft.

That the mesa both encourages Tom’s excavation and inspires his hesitation presents a
hermeneutic challenge. As Tom and his partner Roddy delve deeper into one of its “spacious
cavern[s],” they also voice a reluctance “to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar
curiosity” (183). This reluctance does, in part, stem from a desire to possess, a desire to
reimagine the mesa in terms of a private symbolic value, much in the same vein as Jim Burden’s thickening interpretations of Ántonia. “They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from” (219), Tom says of the mesa’s relics after Roddy sells them to a German dealer. Tom’s words reconstruct the mesa as a part of an American national imaginary and yet, as I will show, the hermeneutic challenge in his words also interrogates the politics of choice in the world of the text and beyond.

From one perspective, Tom elides in this moment the presence of Indigenous peoples. He privileges the citizenship of boys like him—the white, male body—and, in doing so, displaces those who would have in fact created and participated in the mesa culture. Tom asserts the primacy of his own identity at the cost of others’. “The local community is thus surrendered for the nostalgic national ideal,” Sarah Wilson convincingly argues. “This locally focused inhumanity brings to life the more abstract inhumanities performed in the name of nostalgia and serves to suggest how profoundly unsuited nostalgia is to the brokering of a flexible and inclusive community, national or not” (“Fragmentary” 584). From this point of view, Tom’s words here contradict the mode of layered narration which Cather utilizes, a mode that I have suggested finds its ethical foothold through its “shared” nature. At the same time, however, Tom is also speaking for the dispossessed. Boys like him and Roddy are indeed of a lower social and economic class, itinerant workers whose sense of belonging is consistently disrupted by their need to keep moving in order to live. The promise of America, the promise of plenty, the promise of land and comfort—of home—has to this point eluded them. From this perspective, Tom’s invocation of indigenous patrimony is less an act of imposition than it is an attempt to connect his sense of displacement with the history of indigenous dispossession, expulsion, and diaspora in America. It is a potentially empathetic gesture and one that in fact echoes the shared
nature of Cather’s strategy of focalization. In terms of narrative ethics, the larger significance of this simple utterance is that it beckons from the reader an interpretive choice that is by no means wholly resolved by the text. The fact of this choice, moreover, produces a self-conscious moment for the reader whose interpretive freedom is met with the recognition that there are multiple positionalities to which one must be accountable. The point is not to give up interpretive “control” and succumb to passive indecision; rather, the point is that Cather’s simplicity posits modes of otherness that force us to hesitate in our grasp of the world, promoting a self that must persistently revise the terms of its power.

Such hesitation, I think, is also motivated by the ecological and ethical challenge that the very otherness of the space performs upon the young adventurers. Contrary to my view, Bachelard contends that vast space always already provides the subject with a sense of imaginative freedom. For Bachelard, “immensity” acquires “a primal, intimate value” in the dreamer’s mind. “When the dreamer really experiences the word immense, he sees himself liberated from his cares and thoughts, even from his dreams. He is no longer shut up in his weight, the prisoner of his own being” (195). To be sure, the sight of the mesa amidst the openness and immensity of the Southwestern landscape leads Tom to claim that “It was the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever” (168), a space free of worries and of the constraints of time itself. This conception of space leads Judith Fryer to interpret the spacious settings of the novel as “invitations to begin again to imagine” (“Desert” 31). Vast space, understood in this way, is “felicitous,” “a friend of being” (Bachelard 208), a source of comfort, home, and human place within the nonhuman world. But, as Laura Winters points out, Tom is also “threatened by open spaces” (45). Insofar as the vastness of the mesa is also unsettling, agonizing, and inaccessible—a space that through Tom’s lyric we recognize as also somewhat unnarratable—
Cather produces a feeling in both Tom and the reader that there are limits to our comfortable imaginings. The freedom that Tom experiences on the mesa is not boundless, and the imaginative freedom that his simple text seems to promise the reader is also limited.

The spacious text is thus one which suggests a hermeneutic mode that is self-aware, which is to say conscious of interpretation (like excavation) as a potentially violent imposition upon the other. It asks that the reader, like Tom, move between subject positions, between mastery and non-mastery, knowledge and uncertainty, in the hopes of locating a more responsible relationship between self and other. For Hemingway, such responsibility is implied through the text’s ultimate disavowal of the places in Santiago’s dreams; it is an obligation that lends itself to an inchoate biocentric ethic precisely because it signals a retreat of the human imagination. But the distinctive mode of lyric in The Professor’s House differentiates Cather’s experiments with minimalist space from those of Hemingway. Cather articulates an ethics that remains responsible to the nonhuman other while simultaneously grasping at the periodic necessity of imaginative control over one’s surroundings because such performances are important acts of individuation.

When Tom first discovers the cliff-city within the mesa, we observe, for example, not only how he falls back into a lyric mode, but how his interpretation of the city rhetorically echoes the design of the city itself: “I wish I could tell you what I saw there, just as I saw it, on that first morning, through a veil of lightly falling snow. Far up above me, a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture—and something like that” (179). The cliff-city is a sign of the intermixing of human creative energies with the generative power of the nonhuman, and Tom’s recollected moment of discovery performs the mutuality of the encounter. The present-tense lyric, first of all, works as a
second layer upon the narrative—it reinterprets the moment of clarity (of sight, of vision, of new knowledge) as an opaque and indescribable moment. The narrative of discovery is reconceived by Tom-the-teller as simultaneously a lyric of loss. Furthermore, the rhetorical loss to which Tom calls attention is, from the perspective of the implied author, a means of dramatizing the limits of human creativity. Tom’s inability to provide the perfect metaphor testifies not to the felicity of the space, as Bachelard would have it, but to the ways in which space can also be a source of narrative anxiety. What’s more, when Tom revises the metaphor of the sculpture through an ambiguous supplementation (“and something like that”) he performs, in a sense, the very hybridity that the cliff-city exhibits. If Tom cannot fully interpret the city as a sculpture, it is because he now (only after the events of the narrative) recognizes the ethical pull of its nonhuman elements, and his lyric description thus reads as an attempt to invoke that sense of responsibility, what Glen Love sees as “the sense of human participation in, and obligation to, natural setting” (Ecocriticism 113). It is in this way, too, that Tom’s reading of vast space is ideologically different in kind from that of the professor. Whereas the professor’s conception of spaciousness reconstructs a sense of boyhood freedom through a certain willingness to disengage from the interpretive pressures of the narrative present (“I don’t know”), Tom’s treatment of the mesa is less nostalgically-inflected; he foregrounds space as something which engages the

---

64 Love’s ecocritical account of The Professor’s House is largely concerned with the “ecological consciousness” of the narrative, and how Cather thematizes “the major similarities that unite us as a species which provide the basis for memorable communication and human understanding” (Ecocriticism 115). He treats “style as ecological conception” in which “everything is connected to everything else and the commingling of organism and environment can be foregrounded for closer study” (106). His analysis provides remarkable insights, especially in regards to how Cather’s bioregionalism—the specified and precise attention to American settings—challenges those readings that would interpret the text as a willful romanticization of history. Moreover, he is one of few critics to draw attention to the fact that Cather’s “topographical imagination” anticipates Hemingway’s own, the way “Nick Adams, walking to the country of the Big Two-Hearted River, has much in common with Tom Outland, walking into the canyon of the Blue Mesa (111). Love also notes the resemblance between Cather’s minimalist technique and Hemingway’s iceberg theory of omission (115). Where I build upon Love’s analysis is in the way simplicity itself can be seen as a mode of ethical response to natural space.
subject in the world, refiguring simplicity itself as a site of present obligation rather than mere imaginative trespass.

To recognize the strategy of triple focalization in Book II, furthermore, is to lend weight to the more politically-motivated criticisms such as Jean Schwind’s that point towards the trespasses of cultural possession that occur in The Professor’s House. If Schwind argues that the mesa represents the interconnections and obligations of self and other in the way that Indigenous culture has built itself into the nonhuman space, “expos[ing] Tom Outland’s frontier virtue as a vice” (“Frame Up” 86), then the presence of multiple tellers and multiple listeners in the nouvelle discloses an implied author who has crafted a text as a similarly shared space that problematizes individual acts of possession. Schwind is especially critical of Father Duchene, the priest who visits Tom and Roddy upon the mesa, and the pseudo-curatorial role which he plays. Reading the cliff-dwellers’ culture, Duchene summarizes his observations in such a way that his interpretations come to appear more as critical impositions than responsible investigation. His interpretation of Mother Eve, the mummified female corpse Tom, Roddy, and Henry find above the city, Schwind argues is especially reprehensible; Duchene “forces her into a cultural framework that destroys her native identity” (“Frame Up” 74). Aurélie Guillain similarly contends that the priest callously veils the corpse’s otherness, “converting its urgent, silent scream into a quiet narrative” (299).

Cather does not, however, wholly discredit Duchene as an interpreter. In the way that he “examine[s] everything minutely: the pottery, cloth, stone implements, and the remains of food” (195), we can recognize a significantly empirical impulse—a willingness to consider evidence closely and meticulously. Nor is Duchene, having lived “among the Indians nearly twenty years” and who speaks “several Indian dialects” (196), simply an outsider imposing himself upon the
Indigenous culture. Similarly, he even at one point advises that Tom and Roddy do not dig into
the ridge at the top of the mesa because “[i]t is probably the most important thing here, and
should be left for scholars to excavate” (196). Indeed, the priest does much to prepare himself to
be a responsible interpreter whose performances of knowledge do not inevitably violate the
otherness of the space.

Still, the major problem from the narratological perspective, is that Duchene’s
interpretation contradicts the hermeneutic model proffered by Cather’s simple rendering of vast
space. The spacious does not ask that we wholly relinquish interpretive control, but it does
encourage us to question the consequences of our imaginative acts. Whereas Tom’s lyrical
irruptions reveal these moments of self-awareness, Duchene’s interpretive mode lacks this sense
of reimagination and revision.

I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny,

making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by

religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead,

protecting the children, doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and

sentiment for this stronghold where they were at once so safe and so comfortable,

where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had
to fear. They were, perhaps, too far advanced for their time and environment.

(198)

Duchene narrativizes the space, turning his summary of a people into a story, but it is a story that
tends to reinscribe his own cultural values upon the text of the mesa. The respect for the dead
that the Father intuits, for example, is nowhere in evidence, and in fact “the look of terrible
agony” preserved on Mother Eve’s face suggests otherwise (192). To be “too far advanced” for
one’s time may indeed suggest a degree of humility, as if to say that the cliff-dweller culture had achieved a communal peace unimaginable in the priest’s own epoch, but it reads more as wish-fulfillment, a mapping of the priest’s own theocratic ideal upon the mesa, precisely because of his lack of self-awareness. Even Tom appears to recognize the unreliability of Duchene’s synthesis, characterizing the priest as speaking “slyly” (201).

Indeed, the “reverence” that Duchene feels for the mesa is not a reverence for the concrete reality of the space but a reverence for its purported representative qualities of place. It is a reverence for the humanization of the mesa, for “a sacred spot” where “humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality” (199). What Duchene reads into the mesa, then, is not the coexistence of the human and nonhuman but the domination and control of nature by the human agent. Here he privileges the human imagination—the capacity to order the world through design—above all else, and yet we recall Cather’s suggestion in the *Mignon* scene that there are also limits to human imagination, to creativity and art. Duchene’s method of reading the space does not account for these limits; his attempts to *know* the cliff-city ultimately consign the space itself to a tableau against which human ingenuity is more readily visible. It is a reverence that heightens the ego at the cost of the eco, a hermeneutics that echoes the professor’s in the way that space is only conceived in terms of its usefulness to the self.

Tom’s reverence for the vast spaces which surround him, for the “ocean of clear air” (191), is, as we have seen, an empathetic moment. It is a reverence defined by a “wondering and appreciative gaze [that] takes in the thousand-foot spaces as much as it does the ostensible object of its scrutiny . . . it does not necessarily look at or for anything but merely into a great opening” (McGiveron 398). It is through this type of contemplative, self-dissolving gaze that Tom is able, at least fleetingly, to share the perspective of the cliff-dwellers. He literally sees the world from
their vantage point. This vision of shared space resonates with Cather’s shared text. More important, the triple focalization of Book II draws attention to the potential insufficiency of Duchene’s synthetic mode of narration. In contrast, Cather’s narrative strategy conditions the reader much like the spacious Southwest conditions Tom, signaling our freedom yet indicating our obligation to the other-as-text. The recalcitrant simplicity of “Tom Outland’s Story” suggests the value of moving through and within perspectives as opposed to the possession of unimpeachable knowledge.

The point at which, I think, the ethical positions of Tom-the-younger and Tom-the-teller more fully align occurs after Tom chastises Roddy for selling the mesa’s relics to the German dealer, Fechtig. It is a falling-out that Tom genuinely regrets, remarking, “Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it” (229). After Roddy has left, Tom sits alone atop the mesa, but he does not see himself as free of obligation. The nonhuman space itself inspires in Tom a sense of responsibility to the other that his earlier self—in his drive to excavate, to delve, and to know—has neglected. Tom cues his auditor into the upcoming significance of the scene by switching to a future tense, “I’ll never forget the night I got back” (225); this serves to slow the progressive movement of the story, and what both narrator and narratee inevitably dwell upon is the setting: “The climb of the walls helps out the eye, somehow. I lay down on a solitary rock that was like an island in the bottom of the valley, and looked up . . . . The arc of sky over the canyon was silvery blue, with its pale yellow moon, and

---

65 The other most obviously shared space in The Professor’s House is the attic where St. Peter’s papers and Augusta’s patterns mix and mingle. According to Chandler, “The measure of the extraordinary quality of the professor’s relationship with [Augusta] is his willingness to share his space with her” (201). But the ethical foundation upon which this space is shared is problematic. When it is time to move into the new house, St. Peter doesn’t allow Augusta to take her dress forms: “They stay right here in their own place. You shan’t take away my ladies . . . .[Y]ou can’t have my women. That’s final” (12-13, my emphasis). Such possessive rhetoric suggests that Augusta is more an extension of her forms, from St. Peter’s perspective, than an active subject. In other words, in Book I he sees her in synthetic terms, as instrumentally essential to the balance of the room but whose own occupational needs are inessential. The “shared” element of the space is certainly suspect or at least different in kind from that which the triple focalization of Book II proposes.
presently stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water” (226). Here Tom describes his perspective as having been guided and moved by the nonhuman space and, as such, he comfortably occupies a subject position defined by its willingness to share perspective rather than impose it. The intensely simple colours of Tom’s description lend an imagistic quality to the scene, and yet the qualifiers (“silvery,” “pale”) attest to the ultimate imprecision involved in the translation of experience from narrator to narratee. Here Tom’s need to supplement exposes the descriptive limitations of the narrating act, but the need to supplement does not drive Tom to disengage from the world.

Tom’s vision of space both subdues the narrative impulse by insisting on space’s indescribability and inspires that impulse—the compulsion to make meaning, to create, to imagine. Moreover, that this description shows Tom as only momentarily suspending his excavatory inclination constitutes an ethical mode of interpretation that rests upon a concept of accountable freedom—an interpreting subject aware of the violent potential of his or her inspired trespasses. The ambivalence of Tom’s imaginative interpretation is as poignant as it is ethically productive:

I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole . . . . Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. (226-7)
Here Tom-the-teller invokes the time of narration through his present-tense statement of “I remember.” Moreover, the “something that happened” echoes the “something” of his previous lyrical irruptions. Tom’s refusal to say who possessed what (or what possessed whom) suggests a temporary moment of self-abnegation that coincides with his newly religious feeling and even echoes the “light” narrative touch that Latour learns in *Archbishop*. This also marks a subtle movement away from the Tom who insisted that the mesa “belonged to boys like you and me” not because it is necessarily a less ambiguous moment but because the subject(s) of possession and belonging here remain unqualified. It is, in fact, the very ambiguity of the phrase, “It was possession” that works to suspend the reader’s judgment of Tom, on the one hand, and also reveals Tom’s own newfound perspective on the “right” relationship between self and other, human and nonhuman. Tom and the space are both possessing and possessed. This ambiguity, according to Guy Reynolds, “encapsulates the paradox of an ‘environmental imagination,’ since an ‘environmental imagination’ is at once an imagination *of* the environment and an imagination formed or created *by* the environment . . . . a heightened, mystical state-of-being when we are both formed by and in mastery of the environment” (187). No longer does Tom conceive of the mesa only as a backdrop for a narrative of individualist adventure; no longer is spaciousness merely a useful source of freedom. Now it inspires in Tom a state of consciousness in which the human imagination and the creative power of simple space intermingle. It is a curiously empathetic moment where Tom’s sense of self does not wholly dissolve, nor does it entirely overshadow the space. Rather, to live *on* the mesa is live within it and without it simultaneously, to know but not to know.66

---

66 Adam Zachary Newton, working specifically with Bakhtin’s theory of *vzhivanie*, proffers an important way of understanding how such ethical acts of identification work: “Though perhaps closest in literal meaning to ‘incarnation,’ *vzhivanie* translates for practical purposes as ‘live-entering,’ and means, simply, a mode of active engagement with the other which mediates between identification or empathy on the one hand, and objective respect
But to add to Reynolds’s reading, it is not just the ambiguity itself that gives this scene its ethical weight; rather, it is the way Tom’s lyric also articulates a hermeneutic protocol. We see in Tom a new way of seeing vast and simple space—a reenergized relationship between the self and text-as-other. Lying motionless upon the rock as he gazes into space, Tom in this moment embodies the very stillness of the mesa; if the ambiguity of his statement arrests the reader’s drive to stabilize meaning, then his lyric mode conveys a communicative gesture that is less interested in imposing or inscribing oneself upon the other than it is in participating in the perspective of that other. The text similarly possesses its readers. Wayne Booth uses a comparable term, occupation, wherein we are not only absorbed by the text but “occupied by a foreign imaginary world” (*Company* 139). Here we recognize an ethic that is conditioned by the vast space itself and one which, for the reader, comes into being through the simple recalcitrance of Cather’s imagistic strategy.

To “co-ordinate and simplify” is to conceive of oneself in the same terms as the simple vast space that Cather represents—as containing potential multitudes but presenting to the world a sincere and accessible image. That Tom, when he now reads the *Aeneid*, sees “two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green piñons” (228), signals the extent to which the simple space has influenced his own hermeneutics. The double-vision of space and page represents the inextricability of the eco-consciousness from the ego.

When Tom reads the picture of the space as a text—as a canonical work no less—and vice versa he acknowledges a dissolution of the strict boundary between human and nonhuman creativity.

...
The image suggests that the attempt to understand ought to be a necessarily responsive moment, and that ethical interpretation begins in the recognition of a recursive relationship between self and other. Steinhagen argues that Tom makes his experience on the mesa “an affirmation of his power to create landscape” and thus “affirms rather than dissolves the boundary between self and environment” (74), but Cather’s emphasis here on Tom reading suggests that he has also ceded his creative drive to others. “I didn’t want to go back and unravel things” (227), says Tom, and in that utterance we recognize a deferral of meaning and a minimization of the excavatory impulse amidst the power of vast space. It is this same sense of interpretive limits that has captivated Santiago when he bears witness to the etching of the birds upon the sky. But with Tom, it is only a momentary deferral, for it is his very act of telling that does, in some way, unravel things. He participates in a type of contemplative, self-limiting, yet also creative and free reading in the sense that Derek Attridge speaks of, a reading that “involves working against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work. Encountering the other in reading, the mind . . . lets itself be carried to the borders of its accustomed terrain by the text” (80). Tom’s revelation on top of the mesa produces a moment of self-awareness, a glimpse of the possible violence of excavation that gets coupled with the eagerness of discovery and adventure. It is an awareness of human trespass on the nonhuman, but even so, Tom does not fully abandon his sense of self. His lyric mode works just as much as a testament to human consciousness and creativity as it does a deferral of the narrative impulse and drive to impose meaning upon the simple other.

If the experience of vast space has taught Tom to simplify himself and likewise the encounter with Cather’s simple text has suggested to the reader a hermeneutic ethic founded in
the oscillation between mastery and non-mastery, Tom’s influence on the professor has also catalyzed a certain process of simplification. St. Peter recognizes that it is because of Outland that the final volumes of his treatise on the Spanish adventures in North America are “more simple and inevitable than those that went before” (234). The two friends in fact travel together to the Southwest and use the diary of Fray Garces, a missionary, to follow his 1775 route through the vast desert space. In this sense, Tom’s influence on the professor appears to indicate a certain Hemingwayan ideal—the aesthetic value of experience itself: to live in the space, to participate in its pathways and dangerous crossings is to begin to comprehend it. But if in its ambiguity and lyricality Tom’s experience of “possession” implies the intersection and intermingling of the ego with the eco (rather than the ascendancy of one over the other), then the professor has certainly seemed to go to the extreme in the other direction in the wake of Tom’s death. As I have elsewhere intimated, the professor’s presence in the text testifies to the divergent ways in which simplicity can be read and mobilized. In Book III, Cather uses a strategy of free indirect discourse to mark the professor’s inability to return from his simple nostalgic spaces and re-engage with the vicissitudes of the world. In a sense, St. Peter sees only world: “He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him . . . .

When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine-trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: ‘That is right.’ Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his path, he said: ‘That is it’” (241). Here the professor degenerates into a state of non-being and the simplicity of his words appears more a caricature of Cather’s aesthetic than an echo of it; his rhetoric indicates the moment of crisis when we absorb one imperative too completely. Albin claims that this discourse operates under the same aesthetic
framework as Tom’s story in Book II—one which displays language as “carefully, almost reverently simplified in the hope that it will acquire elemental power like that of a rock rising from the plain, or a plow backlit by the sun” (40). I agree that in this scene Cather aligns herself aesthetically with Tom, but Albin does not account for the difference in focalization between St. Peter and the narrator. Where the protagonist’s simple demonstratives signal his transition into a non-creative state-of-being, the intense colour, creative energy, and imagistic simplicity that Cather attributes to the space works to both contrast the utter dissolution of self that St. Peter here represents and align the implied author’s narrative mode more fully with that of Tom, who never wholly forgoes the human drive to interpret.

The major difference between St. Peter’s, “That is it” and Tom’s, “It was possession” is that the former insinuates an absolute separation between self and other—a belief in the inevitable objecthood of nature—whereas the latter postulates a responsive relationship derived out of mutual obligation. Here, the professor lacks the self-awareness that Tom has gained. St. Peter cannot return from the emotionally potent and liberating experiences of his youth that he comes to associate with nature’s spaces: to linguistically reduce the world to a site where “sun suns” and “rain rains” is to imagine the other as wholly explicable and as exerting no interpretive challenge. It is an under-reading of the spacious text, a refusal to acknowledge the simultaneous recalcitrance of the simple other. It also reimagines one’s self as powerless—as uncreative and unengaged—and thus unable to live and act in the world of the present. While Tom learns to fleetingly disimagine himself—to acknowledge how space overwhelms him—the professor here disimagines his environment and so reclaims it as background. He pines for “those long, rugged, untamed vistas dear to the American heart” (246), not because they rejuvenate one’s ecological perspective (as the oceans of clear air do for Tom) but because they offer the opportunity to
“forget” the defeats of one’s history, the corruptions of the human world—but also one’s trespasses. Although the professor finds a certain youthful freedom in such an interpretation, we realize that it is a freedom without responsibility to otherness, a freedom that fixes his desire to “avoid meeting his own family” (250), and thus different in kind from the ecological imagination Tom has learned and the hermeneutic ethic Cather has constructed through the foregrounding of vast and simple space.

It is, in the end, not Tom but Augusta who saves St. Peter—literally from asphyxiation due to the gas that has filled his cluttered attic and figuratively from the isolative and alienating consequences of his realization that his family has no real need for him anymore. It is Augusta who opens two windows and lets the fresh air from the lake blow into the near-forgotten house and revive the near-forgotten man (254). Her selfless and compassionate care is what inspires in St. Peter a newfound sense of connection: “He even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping definition, but real . . . . a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound” (256-7). But this sense of responsibility does not extend to his family, towards whom he doesn’t “feel any obligations” (257). That the professor sees himself as “outward bound” is thus a curious statement, for to be bound outwardly is, as T. F. Strychacz contends, to be bound to “responsibility and social convention”(58)—to others outside oneself. On the other hand, Rafeeq McGiveron argues that we ought to read the phrase “in the more common sense of being headed outward on a journey” (405). St. Peter sees himself not as bound to but bound with Augusta; the ambiguity of the phrase allows the professor also to express his desire to be bound for the outside, conceiving of “outside”—of open space—in terms of the escapist impulse he has advocated elsewhere in the novel.67

---

67 The phrase “outward bound” also alludes to Robert Browning’s “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” in which the Bishop’s defense of his own faith leads a journalist, Gigadibs, to broaden himself and travel: “Something had struck
The professor’s inability to express his obligation to the spacious world in terms of an intersubjective relationship distances him from those self-reflexive and lyrical moments in Tom’s story that constitute the ethical challenges of space as a simple other. In the concluding moments of Cather’s narrative, the “apathy” which St. Peter feels towards a family that has “hurt” him bespeaks a reluctance to respond to the demands of others, however straining those demands may be (258). At the same time, he feels “the ground under his feet,” and with this sense of momentary stability, he believes himself able to “face” his family and the future. The ground fortifies him, but whether it occasions the same expanded sense of responsibility towards otherness that Tom Outland has developed, Cather leaves unclear. More important, such ambiguity—such qualified reengagement with the world—suggests the very challenge of the spacious text’s ethics. If simplicity demands of its readers a pause, a break in the drive towards meaning, and a moment to contemplate the repercussions of our freedoms, then Cather here reminds us that others (people, places, texts) can hurt us, and responding to them is hardly ever easy.

The critical history of Cather’s oeuvre often cites the author’s ambition to write “novels of the soil,” but as Goodman asserts, little work has been done on how such an aesthetic produces its effects upon the reader (142). I get the impression that this is at least in part a consequence of the hazy critical language we use to describe Cather’s environmental poetics. Clive Hart, for example, makes a claim for the novel’s “carefully planned organic shape” (281), and Bill Christophersen asserts that Book II “revives us like fresh air” (93).68 Craig Albin,
moreover, argues that if Tom’s “words are to render anything close to the beauty he has beheld at Blue Mesa, they must emerge as naturally from his own experiences as the tall range grass emerges from the soil” (30). But claims like this that support the idea of the naturalness of both Tom’s and Cather’s voice only tend to beg the question: how can style and strategy—products of human craft and manipulation—accurately be called “natural”? This language of an organic style, to me, feels imprecise, nor does it do justice to the skill involved in telling a tale by means of simplicity. In fact, the simplicity that St. Peter so values in Tom’s voice—“mature, confident, seldom varying in pitch, but full of slight, very moving modulations” (107)—and the simplicity that we recognize in Cather’s own stated narrative ethics—“Art, it seems to me, should simplify” (OW 102)—cannot in any precise way be characterized as “of the soil.” What can be more accurately said about such a strategy is that it echoes the ethical challenge that Cather instills into her representations of landscape, those vast and simple spaces. If Susan Rosowski argues that “botanical and ecological principles helped shape Cather’s very idea of art” (“Ecology” 42), then I am arguing that her simplicity cannot merely be equated with nature. Instead of claiming a murky conception of style conceived out of real landscape, I am arguing for a fiction whose ecological and ethical position is found in the way Cather has crafted a narrative strategy that solicits the reader’s responsibility both out of and to the spaces of the text.

Both The Old Man and the Sea and The Professor’s House testify to the inextricability of narration and space—to the idea that space is not only a component of story but that it also constitutes story. In these texts, simple space extends far beyond its scenic or descriptive function; it generates a high degree of narrativity through its embedded hermeneutic protocols. Like Hemingway, Cather foregrounds simple images of space in order to interrogate the limits of geography to novelistic structure, his emphasis on an ethics that is conceived out of the land anticipates my broader claim of a hermeneutic protocol that is constituted through the alignment of the narrative’s simplicity with Tom’s developing responsiveness to the spacious Southwest.
our interpretive mastery. But unlike *The Old Man and the Sea*, Cather’s narrative does not ultimately recoil from the violences of the self’s imaginatively trespass upon the other. If Hemingway’s comparatively singular focus on the confrontation between man and nature gains its ethical traction through a premise of intersubjectivity, then Cather’s narrative ethics emerge through her questioning of how the simple text might take on the properties of vast space and how such spatial presence modifies and enlarges certain ethical ideals of intersubjectivity by soliciting new modes of responsibility. There is a carefully crafted analog between the way space beckons Tom’s lyric response and the way Cather’s simple imagery solicits the reader’s interpretive pause. And it is in this pause that we may too encounter possession. If it is possible to locate a hermeneutic imperative in *The Professor’s House*, it is not that we ought to try to live outside the violence of possession, critical or otherwise; rather, we need to be at least aware of the impositions we inevitably enact upon others (spaces, texts, people) who challenge the primacy of our own individuating imaginations. This acknowledgment, constituted in the simplicity of Tom’s lyrical revisions, is an indispensable foundation to ethical interpretation.
Postscript: Journalism, Democracy, and Simplicity

If through the preceding study I have suggested that Hemingway’s and Cather’s narrative ethics are especially engaged with issues of reader accountability, individuation, and freedom, then a new set of questions arises: from what context did this concern with the interpretive responsibilities of a readership emerge? To what were these authors responding? How was simplicity particularly attuned to a discussion of American freedom during the modernist period?

In his tour of America in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville expressed a decided ambivalence towards the role of a free press in the young democratic nation. As he argued, the risk of this freedom—of this relatively unrestrained right to publish one’s ideas without fear of state reprisal—was that it cultivated a certain stubbornness amongst the citizenry, an uncritical and unreflective loyalty to their own ideas. “The nations amongst whom this liberty exists,” de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, “cling to their opinions as much from pride as from conviction. They cherish them because they hold them to be just, and because they chose them of their own free will; and they adhere to them, not only because they are true, but because they are their own” (239). In 1927, John Dewey articulated a similar concern with an American mass media whose technologies were rapidly expanding but also limiting the citizen’s capacity to make free and informed interpretations regarding issues of public life: “Telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost, have attained a remarkable development. But when we ask what sort of material is recorded and how it is organized, when we ask about the intellectual form in which the material is presented, the tale to be told is very different” (179). Dewey was responding more directly to Walter Lippmann’s charge that the free press in America, in that it spoke simply to the lowest common denominator, could not “bring to light the hidden facts” and
“make a picture of reality on which men can act” (226). For Lippmann, “the troubles of the press” stemmed from the failure of a “self-governing people to transcend their own casual experience and prejudice” (229-30); for Dewey the “problem of the public” was founded within an ineffective popular discourse that denied the public “the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns” (208-9). All three of these writers conceived of a free press as a fundamental democratic right and a source of popular empowerment. They understood that the modern democratic project could not succeed without journalists and their “vulgar turn[s] of mind” (de Tocqueville 237), not only because bad journalism and bad reading were inevitable components to freedom but also because it was those journalists who so visibly and so popularly performed on a daily basis that freedom which defined a nation. However, what all three writers also gestured towards was a certain paradox of democracy. They implicitly understood that the very practice of freedom could limit the cognitive flexibility of the individual reader—even if that practice depended most upon the reader.

That de Tocqueville could not proffer a satisfactory resolution to his misgivings suggests the extent to which the press in America had embedded itself as the ideological cousin to the individual citizen’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Lippmann, who was skeptical about the way “modern means of communication” could sustain individual prejudice by “the manufacture of consent” (158) believed that the way to solve this problem of stubbornness was to change the role of the journalist from a gatherer of information to a mediator between the nation’s experts and its public (229). Dewey, conversely, contended that the press could ideally provide a forum for “debate, discussion, and persuasion” (208), and that through this more engaged role, would soften the inflexibility of the citizenry. More important, each writer
understood that the exercise (and success) of democracy was intricately linked to the ways in which texts solicited responses from their readers and to the idea that interpretation was an essential responsibility of the citizen.

Hemingway and Cather were both journalists, and even after they had embarked more fully upon their literary careers, they would continue to publish in the type of media that had given them their starts. Though his work for the *Toronto Star* is what initially brought him to Europe following World War I, throughout the 1930s and 40s Hemingway was contributing to the North American Newspaper Alliance, as well as popular periodicals such as *Esquire*, *Vogue*, and *Colliers*; Cather, similarly, spent her early years writing for the *Pittsburgh Leader* and *The Nebraska State Journal* before moving on to such magazines as *McClure’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Both authors had clearly trained themselves to tap a popular readership, and as such they helped to form an accessible modernist discourse that sought to stimulate readers to take an active interpretive role. Like many of their literary contemporaries, Hemingway and Cather were deeply invested in probing the capacity of language and art to represent a complex and unknowable modern world, but their works also demonstrate one of the less critically-heralded aesthetic strategies that modernism embraced in order to accomplish this goal. They find in literary simplicity an innovative way to explore the relationship between realism and reliability. They posit, through various technical means, a simple representation of an uncertain narrative world whose unreliability stems just as much from the interpretive choices its readers make as it does from the text itself; their texts engage the reader in a performance of democracy. The simple text offers to the reader a certain promise of freedom—a promise that is constituted in part by a relatively easy and accessible primary reading and in part through an aesthetic of omission that requires an active and creative audience. It is a freedom, moreover, that includes
the possibility of interpreting the text in ways that ultimately confirm one’s comfortable beliefs. That the texts in this study have so consistently foregrounded our inferential capacities, which is to say the ways in which we freely construct meaning from even the most minimal of signifiers, suggests the authors’ commitment to the idea of an engaged popular citizenry as well as to the belief that such engagement is most productive when the citizenry is not wholly constrained by its texts. But neither is the promise politically naïve; indeed, what reveals such hermeneutic freedom as particularly democratic is the way in which the texts are persistent in their questioning of the responsible relationship to otherness. By actively engaging readers and simultaneously suggesting the limits of those free interpretations, the simple text responds to the democratic paradox that de Tocqueville originally intimated. An aesthetics of simplicity celebrates the fact of the reader’s freedom, but the hesitations it produces also discourage him or her from becoming too attached to a certain interpretation. It is this sense of accountability—this implicit recognition of the fact that the freedoms of the individual subject may at times work at cross-purposes with those of another—that discloses Hemingway’s and Cather’s deep investment in the democratic project and, more largely, the possibilities of speaking of modernist minimalism as a phenomenon both formed by and forming a popular discourse of democratic responsibility.

But what is the link between these authors’ literary texts, their journalism, and the interpretive challenges that attached themselves to a democratized reading public in America? In *Different Dispatches: Journalism in American Modernist Prose*, David T. Humphries contends that in the literary works of Hemingway and Cather there are stylistic and structural features that are particularly journalistic, and these features “help create a broader forum for debates about
culture and the boundaries of national communities” (12).69 In all, Humphries finds that Hemingway and Cather referred to journalism in their literary texts not only to help engage a popular audience by incorporating a recognizable and accessible discourse, but they also “deployed recognizable features of popular journalism as the basis for experimenting with issues of perspective, narration, plot, and genre” in order to challenge how readers imagined their national reality (5).

I follow Humphries’ argument, agreeing that Hemingway’s and Cather’s fictions incorporated elements of a journalistic discourse. Certainly, Hemingway’s bare style emerged from what he learned as a cub reporter at the *Kansas City Star*. The *Star*’s stylesheet meticulously admonished potential writers: “Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive not negative,” and as Elizabeth Dewberry notes, “The stylesheet also contained injunctions to avoid the use of adjectives and to eliminate every superfluous word, all of which Hemingway followed more or less throughout his career as a writer, regardless of the genre in which he was writing” (19). In the same vein, M. Catherine Downs notes that Cather’s “ability to describe a scene or a person in a few deft sentences” (32), likely arose out of her training in the 1890s when newspapers, following the reforms of Joseph Pulitzer, reduced the use of elaborate written description as they more readily printed photography.

---

69 In the case of Hemingway, Humphries looks specifically to the author’s importation of the newsreel form through the interplay between the short stories and vignettes of *In Our Time*. He argues that, like the popular form of the newsreel, the structure of the short story cycle forces the reader to “follow a prearranged series of fragmentary images that unfold continuously in time” (95). What’s more, the newsreel form allows Hemingway to employ growing modernist “questions about the authenticity of the newsreel as a means of examining the potential authenticity of language itself” (87). In his analysis of Cather, Humphries observes how the author often creates characters who “use” and respond to journalism in their everyday life and how those encounters work to “disrupt the complacent narratives of history” (10). With *Song of the Lark*, for example, he shows how the difference between Anna’s reading of newspapers and Thea’s mode of journalistic observation “emphasize distinctions within an American society already defined by conventions” (25). Anna’s subsequent taste for sensationalism, Humphries argues, sharply contrasts with Thea, whose “sources of musical inspiration come in part from her ability to observe as a reporter and make connections across different aspects of modern life” (25).
This is not to say, however, that Hemingway and Cather’s simplicity was directly imported from their own careers as reporters. Although they learned much in these early years, even their journalism incorporated non-traditional and experimental methods. It was not the direct influence of journalistic practice that made their literary styles so innovative; rather, the way in which these writers pushed against that practice turned out to be a formative influence upon their fictional art. Dewberry points out that in an article for the *Star*, “Battle of Raid Squads,” Hemingway not only provides two fundamentally conflicting eyewitness accounts of a revolver battle between two St. Louis revenue officers and two city detectives but he also, quite simply, contradicts himself. Whereas the very first line of the article reads that the officers “may die,” six sentences later Hemingway tersely states, “Both will recover” (qtd in Dewberry 20). Dewberry suggests that in its unspoken challenge to journalistic conventions of accuracy and reliability, this is an early example of Hemingway “implicitly questioning assumptions about the nature and function of representation” (20). The contradiction also produces a moment of hesitation where the text challenges the reader to reconsider his or her interpretation of events. Likewise, Downs notes that before Cather began to write more conventional theatre reviews for the *Nebraska State Journal*, she wrote a column called “One Way of Putting It,” comprised of vignette-like character sketches of real people. On 26 November 1893, she writes of a pianist who is playing in a dancehall. Cather strikingly juxtaposes the dancers who move passionately and embrace with the pianist who feels old, tired and jaded. But she keeps playing. Downs observes that “The pianist’s private cynicism . . . is a true story. It is real, the stuff of small tragedies. Yet the dancers’ passion is real, too” (39). Just as Hemingway begins to suggest the ethical challenge of multiple perspectives, Cather begins to craft her art of suggestive juxtaposition in order to intimate the possible impositions that arise when the realities of others
intersect and overlap. Moreover, both writers were constructing narratives whose ethical weight relied in some measure upon the ways in which readers were tempted with the possibility of interpretive choice. If in the 1920s, Lippmann criticized the reading public for their failure “to transcend their casual experience,” then these writers were seeking ways to challenge their readers within a journalistic discourse by producing moments of self-reflexivity and interpretive recalcitrance that worked at cross-purposes with the reader’s potential ideological stubbornness. I read these authors’ strategies of simplicity as a particularly modern way of countering the ideological stubbornness that de Tocqueville believed was so inherent to democratic freedom. While Hemingway’s and Cather’s fictional styles may appear especially indebted to journalism, it is the ethical protocols constituted through their styles that intersect more largely with issues related to the interpretive responsibilities of a reading public. These protocols—these embedded imperatives suggesting the necessity of accountable freedom—are responses to the problems of democratic interpretation that had been associated, over time, with the practice of journalism in America.

In 1923, Hemingway told Gertrude Stein that he was going “to chuck journalism” (*Selected Letters* 101). Cather, similarly, left *McClure’s* in 1911, and she would later harshly condemn the industry for the ways in which it used its writers: “The great American newspaper takes in intellect, promise, talent; it gives out only colloquial gossip. It is written by machines, set by machines, and read by machines” (*The World and the Parish* 271-72). That Cather felt herself, at one point, to have been a machine—not only robbed of her individuality, talent, and freedom but also robbing her readers of the same qualities—suggests that she could not ultimately sustain the modes of social and ethical inquiry demonstrated in her earlier articles through a purely journalistic medium. Likewise, Hemingway’s move to fiction suggests not a
wholehearted disavowal of the ethical project he began during his time at the Kansas City Star, nor a rejection of journalism’s democratizing ideal of “a vocabulary that can be understood in the street or in the marketplace” (Adam 26); rather, it was a recognition of the limits of a discourse that could not live up to this ideal because of the ways it tended to coerce interpretation from its readers. Dan Shen’s stylistic analysis of Chapter V of In Our Time speaks implicitly to this point. She compares the “detached and merely observing position” of the vignette’s external narrator to a newspaper account of the same event which Hemingway had read (142). The article was entitled, “ATROCITIES MARKED GREEK EXECUTIONS OF FORMER LEADERS,” and Shen exposes the journalist’s use of emotional modifiers: “To begin the horrors of that morning . . . a ghastly line . . . an appalling instance . . .” (qtd in Shen 142-3, her emphasis). In contrast, Hemingway’s thin narration—“They shot the six cabinet ministers at half past six in the morning against the wall of a hospital” (51)—is much more simply-wrought than its journalistic precursor. More significant, however, is that this simplicity does not coerce the reader’s interpretation of the event; it theorizes a hermeneutics of choice, soliciting our engagement and response to the text while simultaneously asking us to consider the ethics of disengagement, of emotional detachment, and interpretive restraint.

Simplicity may, in broad terms, align Hemingway and Cather with a journalistic style, but in the ways that their fictional styles invite a self-reflexive reader—a reader who becomes aware of choices and responsibilities involved in interpretation—they reimagine simple writing not only in terms of popular accessibility but in terms of an accountable freedom. This study has attempted in its practice to describe and account for the allure of simplicity—that is, the very real pleasures of a narrative that calls us into an interpretive role that is also contemplative, even meditative—and thus show how the simple text might mediate the gap between a professional
and non-professional audience. We have seen how simplicity, through its various dimensions, beckons the reader’s inferential work but simultaneously obstructs such imaginative reconstruction, and it is no coincidence that this process analogizes the very challenges of democratic freedom and choice. Hemingway’s iceberg and Cather’s démeublé aesthetic both emphasize a sense of accessibility and bareness and in so doing activate the reader’s power to recreate meaning and imaginatively respond to the text; however, this activation of individual will—or, to use a Tocquevillean frame, this adherence to one’s own interpretive convictions—is destabilized by the very recalcitrance of the text’s simple otherness. The thin character whose lack of interiority confronts our capacity to know someone, the smooth structure whose paradoxes inhibit imaginative connection and generalization, the spacious foreground that challenges the terms of our subjectivity, all these elements produce a self-conscious moment of reading—a moment that asks us to consider carefully the limits of our interpretive freedoms. The ethical conundrum of the simple text—indeed the question that underlies all narrative ethics—in fact translates between the domains of literature and politics: how is the ideal of individual liberty tempered when one encounters an other who implicitly constrains such liberty?

Hemingway and Cather do not so much provide solutions to this problem as they emphasize and reiterate its presence as a defining frame through which to view the social and cultural life of the United States in modernity.

Recently, scholars of American modernism have been pointing to the historical inaccuracies of a criticism that would divide the politics of early twentieth-century writers into, loosely, democratic and non-democratic camps. In Modernism and Democracy: Literary Culture 1900-1930, Rachel Potter contends that the political motivations behind the contemporary recovery of many non-canonical modernist authors may have “distorted” our
understandings of their works (187). Potter observes that when an “attack on democracy is a foundation for high modernist definitions of art,” contemporary critics will tend to emphasize “the inherent value of democratization” in order to critique high modernism (4). Likewise, in *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*, David Kadlec argues that “In fashioning bad modernists as authoritarian and good modernists as champions of ‘difference,’ these critics have relied on a schematic distinction between ‘dominant’ and ‘emergent’ ideologies, a distinction that provides critics with an easy means of navigating a particularly thorny moment in literary and cultural history” (5). Potter’s close analysis of H.D. and Mina Loy, by contrast, demonstrates that these poets’ articulations of a democratic impulse were, at best, ambivalent, and oftentimes their poetry constructed a version of female selfhood that embraced a “self-legislative” and “egoist” female body that ran counter to “juridicial models of freedom and identity” (16,15). Potter contends, for instance, that Loy saw “the ideas of rights and equality as damaging illusions which keep women in chains” but that Loy was also “a feminist and a democrat” (187). Kadlec locates a similar ambivalence within the political underpinnings of American modernism, arguing that in their call for “direct action,” antidemocratic and anarchist premises significantly shaped a literature that was looking to “overcome the stasis of representation” (2). He casts his analytical net wide, reading writers from Ezra Pound to William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore to Zora Neale Hurston, in order to demonstrate how American pragmatist philosophy, with its underlying pluralistic impulse, came into being through its incorporation of antidemocratic principles.

My own study of simplicity in Hemingway and Cather contributes to this ongoing discussion in American modernist studies not by trying to unknot the array of political impulses that may have informed their particular aesthetics but by asking how their rhetorical strategies
challenge us to think hard about the ethical complexities of participation within the democratic nation. Rather than promoting what Potter cites as the “inherent value of democratization,” this study reminds us of the ways in which modernist stylistics can be seen as engaged in both the critique of democracy, as it was circulating during the period, as well as its practice. The narratological focus on these particular modernists, then, is an important counterweight to the more contextual studies of Potter, Kadlec, and others; it suggests how a literary strategy might operate within the public sphere by responding to the democratic criticisms by individuals such as Lippmann. It also, without having to invoke problematic distinctions of “high” versus “low,” shows how Hemingway and Cather implicitly recognized the ethical shortcomings of democratized-yet-unengaged citizenry and thus theorized interpretation itself as a significant practice of citizenship. This implies a tentative sympathy to Dewey’s recommendation for a popular discourse that engages the public in the discussion and debate of its most pressing issues. Democracy, said Dewey, “will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (184). Furthermore, in the way the simple text guides the parameters of its own interpretation and encourages the reader to follow those parameters, it suggests an encounter between text and reader that is modeled upon the democratic impulse towards accountable freedom. This impulse hinges on the way interpretation works as an analogy to the citizen’s participation in a shared national culture and ideal: to enter into a recursive relationship with the text-as-other, to participate in the creation of meaning, to recognize the potential violences of the active self and thus become aware of alternative ways of imagining the other—these are all democratic gestures in the sense that they incorporate the practice of liberty with the ideal of accountability to a largely unknowable national citizenry. We thus see in both Hemingway and Cather a modernism no less experimental than their
contemporaries, no less provocative in its ethical challenges to the reader and, perhaps most
significantly, a modernism whose indeterminacies, anxieties, and pleasures are still occasion for
an invigorating and fruitful exploration.

The elements of simplicity within Hemingway and Cather expose a modernism attuned to
both the risks and the rewards of a shared social fabric. If in simplicity, we have located an
embedded ethics that summons a pivotal moment of self-awareness—an awareness of the
potential impositions, appropriations, and trespasses implicit in the interpretive impulse—then
we see how such an aesthetic begins to locate within the literary experience the processes of that
self’s revision. In other words, to read Tom Outland’s lyrical moments amidst the Southwestern
landscape or to read Frederic Henry as adopting the simple recalcitrance he has learned from
Catherine is to see how simplicity constitutes a narrative mode that reimagines the terms of one’s
power and autonomy. Such modernism does not commit itself against interpretation; the
choice—the freedom—of the simple text is conspicuous in its appeal to the imagination. Rather,
its ethical pull consists of the way it interrogates the reader’s impulse to master the other-as-text
and finalize interpretation, and then suggests different types of non-instrumental relationships
without ever wholly forgoing the real necessity of the self’s individual and individuating power.
In this sense, Hemingway and Cather provide an interesting response to the problem of obduracy
that de Tocqueville traced to American freedom: by writing texts whose ethics come into being
through an interpretive process that persistently looks back upon itself and its possible burdens,
the authors find in literature a potential flexibility and nuance that neither they nor de
Tocqueville could ultimately find in American journalism.

Narratology offers an especially useful set of critical tools for articulating the stakes of
simplicity in literature. In the way that it fosters close attention to the forms of literary discourse,
it has allowed me the means to suggest the early stages of a new vocabulary to identify the
elements of simplicity. In the flexibility and breadth of its theory, it models a spirit of perceptive
critical inquiry that Hemingway and Cather also urged of their readers. That said, this study is
meant as a beginning—a beginning of a way to talk about simplicity without undoing its
disposition as something simple, a beginning of a more comprehensive examination of simplicity
within and beyond modernism, and a beginning of a more frank discussion of the sometimes-
fraught, sometimes-friendly relationship between literary interpretation, criticism, and the world
beyond academia. If I have written, in Hemingway’s words, at least one true sentence, then it is a
good beginning. And if I have added something worth thinking about to our picture of the world
and encouraged readers go back and look again, then it is even better.
Works Consulted


McGiveron, Rafeeq O. “From a 'Stretch of Grey Sea' to the 'Extent of Space': The Gaze Across Vistas in Cather's *The Professor's House*.” *Western American Literature* 34.4 (2000): 389-408.


---. The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.


---. “Spatial Structures and Forms in *The Professor’s House*.” *Cather Studies* 3 (1996): 197-211.


---. “This is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in The Professor’s House.” *Cather Studies* 2 (1993): 72-91.


West, Benjamin S. “Reconfiguring Cather and Settling The Professor’s House: Reading The Professor’s House as a Modernist Text.” *Teaching Cather* 7.2 (2007): 17-22.


Wolf, Werner. “Frames, Framings, and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media.”

*Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart.

---. “Framing Borders in Frame Stories.” *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Ed.

Wolfe, Susan J. “Insistence and Simplicity: The Influence of Gertrude Stein on Ernest


Wooley, Paula. “‘Fire and Wit’: Storytelling and the American Artist in Cather’s My Ántonia.”
