The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism by Susan J. Rosowski (review)

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my doing it is indeed submerged in the larger consensus — namely that I and everyone else in English departments should be doing it. Within the literary culture which surrounds me I think there is a fair amount of bad faith of this kind.

But there is another kind of bad faith. That stems from the current literary criticism, of which this book is an example, which leans heavily on sociology, Marxist thought, deconstruction, all aimed at unmasking the deceptions that authors — that *texts*, for *authors* and *literature* are suspect terms in this criticism — practice on a public. In such criticism one kind of bad faith arises from ostensibly departing from traditional practices while denying that such departures do not constitute, in Gerald Graff's phrase, "literature against itself." Another kind is in denials of "departures from public ideals of the true and just." These are of labyrinthine complexity ranging from the public's naive self-deception that there is a "true and just" to the critic's self-deception that the true and just resides in exposing that the true and just doesn't exist.

Now all this could have been said in simpler terms, as simple as the author's sentence: "Something is not right in *Huckleberry Finn* and we know it" (241). The author's familiar, partly concealed, purpose is then to tell how Mark Twain should have written the novel could he have but shaken off his bad faith. I am being unjust to the author, for I think he may at times read Mark Twain's books for simple pleasure. On page 175, for example, he remarks, "The irony here is perfectly delicious."

I find it also ironic that the earnest literary critic, despairing of a world free of racism and slavery, purports to become engaged by embracing a socially engaged literary criticism that exposes other writers' evasion of social engagement. The bad faith arises from not recognizing how absurdly distanced from social engagement, how subservient to academic laws and customs, literary criticism is. By comparison, Mark Twain's evasions seem trivial, his glimpses of the true and just more to be trusted than the critics' revelations of the true and just that he somehow missed.

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SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. 284 p.

In *The Voyage Perilous*, Susan J. Rosowski discusses Willa Cather's major works of fiction in the context of her views on art and the artist. Rosowski links Cather with the late eighteenth-century literary historical movement that reacted against the "dehumanizing implications of the scientific world view" and with British romanticism in particular. Cather centered her attention on the power of the creative imagination "to transform and give meaning to an alien or meaningless material world" (x). In the first half of her career, Rosowski argues, Cather saw the world as dualistic, polarized into the spiritual and physical. It was the artist's task to bring the two together. Bartley Alexander's (*Alexander's Bridge*) failure was that he could not do this, but Cather's three strong heroines of *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia* accomplish it. Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours* cannot integrate the spiritual and the physical either, and even the artist-priest, Godfrey St. Peter (*The Professor's House*), suffers from a "lapse in perfection" (131) that leads him into "the tragedy of irresolution" (159).

Since Cather did not find negation creative, Rosowski states, she eventually moved away from it, discarding romantic duality and adopting symbolism as the artist's way of perceiving the world. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, mood and feeling become the reality. Bishop Jean Latour saves himself through his ability to "conceptualize" (172), to see meaning in ordinary acts and objects. A similar kind of symbolization occurs in *Shadows on the Rock*, but in that novel, Rosowski suggests, romanticism's dark strain of threat and chaos begins to predominate in the form of the Canadian natural wilderness and the French political wilderness. These dark elements, Rosowski points out, have been present in Cather's work from the beginning, and in *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* they achieve full expression. Prior to *My Mortal Enemy*, however, the "horror was absorbed by a general mood of positive romanticism" (217). Rosowski daringly discusses *Lucy Gayheart* in terms of its resemblance to *Dracula*, and she treats *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as an American gothic, with Sapphira as a feminine gothic hero, brooding gloomily in her mansion and evilly plotting the destruction of an innocent young woman.

Obviously, this is a book that challenges many of the traditional views about Cather's work. Rosowski forces us to reexamine our ways of reading Cather. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that any future criticism of Cather's novels will have to take into account what Rosowski does here. So often, criticism written from a single premise closes doors and almost requires selective reading. *The Voyage Perilous*, however, does not. Instead, it opens the works and calls the reader to new possibilities for understanding, principally because Rosowski reads the texts so carefully and thinks about them so creatively. The book abounds in good sense. It is written from a mildly feminist perspective — that is, it does not back away from feminist issues — but it does not let that perspective distort the reading of the works, a problem that has plagued Cather criticism in recent years.

I do have occasional quarrels with Rosowski's interpretations, especially of the last three novels. For me, those novels are not so villainous in tone as she makes them out to be. Furthermore, Rosowski omits discussion of some rather important short stories that carry clear romantic implications, stories such as "Uncle Valentine" and "Double Birthday." There are also some rather curious kinds of omissions of Cather's own statements about her work. Often, Rosowski defends the method of a novel on the grounds that Cather did just what she said she had done, or intended to do. But with *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather's statements about her intentions to capitalize on the ethereal nature of "shadows" are ignored in favor of what to me are less emphatic passages in the novel describing wilderness and chaos. These are minor points, however, differences of opinion or emphasis rather than flaws in thinking or design.

One practice of Rosowski's I found to be very helpful: she provides carefully wrought transitions and summaries at the beginnings and ends of most chapters. Thus, her argument is continually presented and clarified, as is the place of each major work in the Cather canon. In many ways, this book is a fulfillment, and a very satisfying one, of the work so well begun by the late Bernice Slote in her fine introduction to *The Kingdom of Art*. Rosowski is certainly one of Cather's most intelligent critics. Her book is full of fresh insights that make presumed obscurity seem suddenly obvious. For example, the relevance of the story about the Russian bridal party that is attacked by wolves has been questioned by hundreds of readers of *My Ántonia*, but Rosowski simply observes that its relevance to that novel lies in its being another account of "the tragedy of life in a wilderness" (81). That kind of wisdom is typical of this book, a book written by someone who knows Cather

thoroughly and who writes with confidence of important things.

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PETER RUPPERT. *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986. 193 p.

Peter Ruppert's *Reader in a Strange Land* is an attempt to apply literary theories on semiotics and reader response to the utopian novel. Since reader response criticism is a fairly new field and since Ruppert's book is, as far as I know, the first monograph in the area, he performs a valuable service to those interested in utopian thought.

He summarizes the weaknesses in utopian literature which have led to the present lack of respect for the genre: on the one hand, it has failed to inspire the achievement of a perfect society which many readers expect from it; on the other hand, its dullness and rigidity make it a failure as fantastic literature. Ruppert defends the utopian genre by stressing its effect on the reader. By engaging the reader in a dialogue, by challenging existing social values and disturbing and provoking the reader, the successful utopian text activates and liberates us rather than leaving us passive and complacent. The reader thus plays an essential role as an "active producer of meaning" which "grows out of the interplay between social fact and utopian dream" (6). The same utopia will produce different responses from readers because it is essentially a "work in progress," both subversive and constructive at the same time.

According to Ruppert, there are two general types of utopian readers: those primarily interested in its sociopolitical functions and those who approach it as imaginative fiction. The first type, those who read utopias primarily as blueprints for perfection, do not make a sufficient distinction between nonfiction and fiction, fail to take into account the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in utopia's apparent realism, and blur the distinction between utopia and history. Ruppert clearly prefers readers of the second type, among whom he differentiates three different schools of thought: those who, like Darko Suvin, read utopias in terms of cognitive estrangement and value them for their usefulness in defamiliarizing the reader with the prevailing ideology; those who, like Northrop Frye, see them as therapeutic and mythic; and those — futurists like Alvin Toffler and Marxists like Ernst Bloch and Louis Marin — who emphasize the "anticipatory" aspects of the genre. These diverse readings make it clear that utopian literature is not as programmatic and one-dimensional as it is often assumed to be, and that if we focus on the dialectic at the heart of utopia we will appreciate its essential value.

In an expansion of this thesis, Ruppert discusses in detail the theories of Darko Suvin and of Gary Saul Morson, as well as Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading,* from which comes the idea that literary utopias are best understood as a dialectical model "in which reader and text are welded together in mutual dependence" (55). From the "reader oriented criticism" of Iser, Umberto Eco, and others, he draws the distinction between "open" texts that invite the participation of the reader and "closed" texts that produce a more precise and passive response (60). Since for Ruppert the primary value of utopian texts lies in their ambiguities, equivocations, and contradictions, the "open" text is the more useful. However, even books as apparently "closed" as Bellamy's *Looking Backward* can serve to "startle and confound the reader" (73) into