

Memory and Image: Graphemics for a New Frontier Icon in *My Ántonia*  
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Presently we saw a curious thing: ... On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share – black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (*My Ántonia* 237)

Almost half of the way into Willa Cather's fictional memoir of life in frontier Nebraska, four young pioneer women and a young man are visited by an image that appears to be written against the sky. The viewers are at first wordless, so drawn to it that they jump up to stand at attention before a signifier as commanding as a national flag. Much in the way that a national flag can communicate symbolically to a nation of people their shared experiences and values, the fleeting phenomenon of the plough silhouetted on the setting sun seems to be instinctively understood by these young people as a symbol of their own lives on the prairie. *My Ántonia* is a novel of memory elegizing the late nineteenth century Plains culture of North America, narrated by its orphan character from Virginia, Jim Burden. It is a double narrative of the passage into early adulthood, tracing Jim's maturing consciousness as it meditates on and is shaped by the life of his closest childhood friend, Ántonia Shimerda. She is the luminous image at the center of both his narrative and his mind. As a lyric inventory of Jim's memories of

Ántonia, the novel's narrative structure and characters seem fairly evident, and yet this work is also inscribed with a dense and highly elaborated code of visual and verbal images, a code predominantly derived from the popular visual culture of late 19<sup>th</sup> century American frontier life. Cather drew these images largely from those pictorial sources most commonly available to people who lived and worked on the Great Plains then, and with W. T. Benda, her illustrator for the novel, she shaped them into a visual lexicon that forcefully represents Jim Burden's most formative memories.

Many of Jim's memories are simple still and moving images of Ántonia, representing the experiences that he shared with her. Cather's figurative language and verbal images throughout the narrative communicate the naïve quality of these picture-memories. This seemingly transparent verbal imagery finds its visual parallel in the stark drawings that, working closely with Cather, the illustrator Wladyslaw Teodor Benda created for *My Ántonia*. I agree with the scholars who have called for a detailed consideration of this novel's images but would add that a critical method grounded in theories of the image, the relationships between image and text, and theory of visual culture, especially the popular visual culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is essential to understanding the success of this work. Under Cather's specific directives, Benda's drawings for *My Ántonia* were resolved into a subtle pictorial formula that was based to a significant extent on an earlier period of 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrational practice. Benda worked within this formula to produce a suite of illustrations that constitute one half of a bitextual graphemic system operating within the novel. The other half of this system includes indelible images that Cather produced in words, such as her image of the plough against the setting sun. By carefully placing Benda's inventory of graphic images into a dialogue with her own picture

writing - including her figurative language and verbal imagery, and her careful stylistic curation of Benda's images - Cather convincingly elevates the character and social value of the immigrant pioneer woman.

It has often been noted that Cather was actively involved in the art and design considerations for her fictional publications; nevertheless, the insistence with which she fought for W.T. Benda's eight drawings to be included in *My Ántonia* stands as a distinctive part of the novel's history. Cather's correspondence makes clear her intention to place an embedded visual narrative alongside the verbal narrative of Jim's friendship with Ántonia (Mignon and Ronning, *Preface to the Scholarly Edition of My Ántonia, The Willa Cather Archive*). These linked narratives together represent the passage of each of the characters into adulthood; each responding to the other, they elaborate and ultimately establish the iconic identity that Ántonia comes to possess in Jim's mind. Using sophisticated illustrational techniques, Benda carefully orchestrated sources from visual culture both high and low for his illustrations, producing a series of images that, in large part because of these blended cultural sources, are credible as Jim's memories and imaginings, and thus powerfully communicate Ántonia's significance, first to him, and then through the compelling female icon in his mind's eye, to the novel's readers.

Cather scholars who have treated the novel's illustrations assume a critical distance between Cather and Jim Burden; in so doing, they place the sophisticated art knowledge of the novelist (and former art critic) over the uncomplicated memories of her country-bred lawyer character. In connecting the illustrations with painting and illustrational styles more likely known by a seasoned arts professional than a counselor of Western railways, they tend to

locate their sources in Cather's mind and experience. Some, for instance, put much credence in Cather's knowledge of nineteenth-century painting as a source for Benda's illustrations, but perhaps not enough in the popular illustrational practice of the time that would more likely reflect both Benda's experience with adapting these painting sources for commercial purposes, and Cather's editorial experience (gained during her years as an editor at McClure's magazine) with this adaptive practice<sup>1</sup> that was common in the pairing of illustrations and written text. Cather's character of Jim would have been most familiar with the popular visual art found in the many mechanically reproduced images available during the contiguous time periods in which Cather's novel was set and written.

My own reading of Benda's drawings identifies them fairly narrowly as products of Jim's consciousness: I read the both the verbal and visual "pictures" that were crafted for this novel as comprising, in their common starkness, graphemics for Jim's more personal, individual language of his pioneer West. It is precisely through Jim's remembered mental images, born within his character and the experience he narrates, that Cather wishes us to read her vision of "the precious past" ("360"). If Benda's drawings were intended primarily as figures of Jim's private memories, we should ask how the influence of European and American art and illustrational practices based on these images contribute to the novel's success. My own critical tendency with regard to this question is to move from considering the art contexts surrounding Cather's narrative to a visual analysis of the novel itself, examining it from the angle of contemporary theoretical approaches which address from a broader social perspective the phenomenon of the image in art and in culture. As these may better reveal the specific effects of Benda's images on Cather's narrative, I offer the following brief review of image, image/text,

and visual culture theories as a basis for exploring the relationships between Cather's word images and Benda's drawings.

The inquiry into the place of the image in cultural exchange has assumed its unique power to participate in the generation of social meaning. Historical studies of fine art measure its social influence from its position in the gallery or collection, an understanding which necessarily restricts that influence to those members of society who have had access to museums and private connoisseurship. Since the years of mechanical reproduction and increased exhibition of images on all social levels, however, the idea of the social presence and power of the image has been reconceived. It is understood by its current students as a phenomenon with a broader base of cultural participation and wider social application than painting, sculpture, or even book illustration. Many now treating the subject, such as Victor Burgin and Nicholas Mirzoeff, stress the idea of the image as a social-cultural construct, both in its production and its interpretation, a phenomenon of both outer and inner worlds of signification, entangled with processes of language and with other human processes of mental and emotional passage. This expanded approach to images raises new questions about both their creation and interpretation, as Burgin frames succinctly:

... representations cannot be simply tested against reality, as reality is itself constituted through the agency of representations (238).

From this perspective, the image is understood to function, to a significant extent, within the existence of a visual culture that drives the proliferation of mass-produced images, a state of

imaging technologies and ideas about the visual that had already begun to characterize life in America and Europe after the mid-nineteenth century (Mirzoeff 4).

The primacy of Cather's visual semiosis in *My Ántonia* gives it much of its power, derived at the time of the novel's publication from the burgeoning popular visual culture that preceded it. Jim's world featured an expanding presence of mass-produced images that naturally figured prominently in his young life and developing mind. From the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth, Americans experienced a steady rise in their access to art images in a multitude of print forms such as books, magazines, newspapers, commercial catalogues, playing and trading cards, public posters, even colored paper figures and scenes used, as were those unearthed from the lining of Otto's trunk, as Christmas decorations. According to James J. Best, in *American Popular Illustration*, the appetite for Civil War news was the principal social stimulus for the development of an American industry of illustration in which artists were assigned to travel and work with reporters, producing images to accompany news stories (3-4). The woodcut engraving was a common type of mass-produced image in wide distribution in the nineteenth century; mid-century printing processes involving metal plates and boxwood were the predominant means of producing Civil War illustrations. Reproductive technologies evolved rapidly during the Civil War. The resulting later-century proliferation and mass production of illustrated reading material widely disseminated visualizations of American life romantic and sentimental, luring avid consumers like the Black Hawk depot telegraph operator whom Jim liked to visit (211). Jim's first Nebraska Christmas tree, decked with paper treasures sent from Austria by Otto's mother, surely owed much of its effect on Jim to the magic of the mass-produced image:

... brilliantly colored paper figures, ... a bleeding heart, the three kings, gorgeously appareled, and the ox and the ass and the shepherds; ... the Baby in the manger, and a group of angels, ... Our tree became the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches (80).

During the composition of *My Ántonia*, two of Cather's letters to her publisher, Ferris Greenslet, articulate a standard for Benda's images in relation to her emerging story, insisting that his drawings be able to "echo" the illustrations that she herself tried to draw before beginning to work with Benda (245). In connection with her words, his images should "give the tone of the text," and must "have some character and *interpret and embellish the text*" (247). In the novel's two narratives, proliferate popular images, notably the old woodcuts that Jim would have seen as a child, intersect with private mental images to provide a basis for his memories of Antonia, and thus, for Benda's images of her. Jim's memories of the orphaned portion of his childhood are constructs of his past relations with his mother, Ántonia and the other women in his life; Benda's drawings, similarly layered, capture the emotional tone of Jim's longing through references to the nostalgic popular arts of the past. They offer to our minds a story told in picture memories of a young immigrant girl whose gathering strength and generosity not only restore Jim's sense of family but make possible the survival of her own family and its future.

In his regular commercial practice, Benda's illustrational style was distinctive, despite the familiarity of his subject – woman - and his romantic realism - the preferred style of art for many of America's leading illustrators. His women were often foreign, "orientalized" images

that contrasted with the more familiar and sentimental “American Beauty” images produced by Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Chandler Christy. Despite this distinction, however, his customary style was consonant with the standard realism of the illustrators of his time. The amount of detail in Benda’s usual line and shading stands in high contrast to his handling of those elements in the drawings for *My Ántonia*. There, Benda’s images are less evidently realistic, styled with the simpler and more crude manner of early woodcuts. His illustrations bear an expressive, yet abstract quality: they depict figures as seen in the mind’s eye. Thus, they are more easily read as essentially private memories than as the type of historically accurate narrative scenes championed by Howard Pyle, who trained many of America’s foremost Golden Age illustrators (Best 8).

Placed carefully by Cather, the eight drawings for *My Ántonia* collectively contribute the story of Jim’s inner growth – a micronarrative of a similar shift in consciousness about the value of the immigrant pioneer woman - to her broader narrative arc of two friends growing up in the last decades of frontier Nebraska. In the comments to follow, I offer my thoughts on the manner in which three of Benda’s drawings and one of Cather’s verbal images help to effect the transformation of Jim’s Ántonia from immigrant child to heroic pioneer icon.





The novel's first image responds to Jim's description of his first sight of *Ántonia* and her family. The picture gives us the indelible first impression of *Ántonia* in Jim's enduring visual memory. Jim's verbal image includes details that have been "sacrificed" in Benda's drawing. The figures in the image are gathered close into a composition that reveals little of the subjects' individual marks. Their identities are obscured by the way Benda has positioned and articulated his figures; Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda look down, Ambrosch and Marek are turned away, Yulka is barely – if at all - visible. Only *Ántonia* is facing the viewer/reader, and all of the family members' features are crudely drawn and deeply shadowed. The outlines of the total group form the most identifiable shape in the image. As a visual introduction to his Nebraska journey, it stands as a dark marker of the abrupt transformation that Jim, Jake, and the Shimerdas are experiencing, and of the state of mourning – for the security of family and place, the certainty of primary emotional bonds – that the newly-orphaned Jim must be feeling. The sight at once reassures as a vision of family, but also carries hints of foreboding in its obscurely massed shapes. Attempting to recall his first sight of the Shimerda family from the distance of 30-plus years, he summons it from his

memory supported by the remembered mass-produced images that surrounded him in childhood; the first generation of readers of Cather's novel are also more likely to have made a similar association with popular media such as the woodcut.



Figure 7. *Antonia and Her Team*

Benda's fifth drawing signals a tonal shift in Jim's emotional state, in the image of Antonia returning home with her team of horses. The image responds to Jim's memory of Antonia coming toward him from the fields, first from afar and then close up: "When the sun was dropping low, Antonia came up the big south draw with her team. ... now she was a tall, strong young girl, ..." (117). Here, the foregrounded graphic elements of line and mass, etched sharply into the simply articulated background, again reference the woodcut.

She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. ... She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out

of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries.  
(117)

While Cather has obviously sourced her verbal description partly in images such as Millet's, Millet's paintings are full of the subtle color tonalities and the specific visualizations of period clothing and human postures that signal the practice traditions of realism. Benda's more crudely developed, woodcut-like image of *Ántonia* with her team of horses refers, again, to the popular medium that would more likely inform Jim's mental picture of her. Despite Cather's allusion to the old-country peasant woman's appearance, Jim's memory of *Ántonia* communicates a strikingly different picture to our minds, one of a strong, pragmatic, young woman who gains strength in the hard work of sustaining her family farm, who not only "can work like mans now," but doesn't mind wearing men's clothing if it is useful to her (118).

The composition of the image foregrounds her; there is no mistaking that the horse team is being ably managed by a female, who, despite Jim's memories of her body's strength and power, is figured with her head covered by what might be a scarf. Though her headpiece reminds readers of her status as a foreign other, this commanding image of *Ántonia* as a team driver shows us that her life has, like Jim's, become happier and more fulfilling to her. In this image, Benda pictures her transformation from a Bohemian girl who would never have been allowed to drive a horse team into a woman eminently capable of making her contribution to the American farming culture of the West.



Figure 10. *Antonia in Winter*

Benda's image of *Antonia* walking home in winter at the end of her first pregnancy communicates the emotional distance between Jim and *Antonia* later in the novel. The drawing has its source in a strong verbal icon since Jim relies for this memory-as-image on the Widow Steavens' sharing *her* memory of the sight with him. Thus, Benda constructs an impression of Jim's memory-of-another's-memory, an appropriation of what the widow saw and felt, to visualize Jim's interior sight. The gender mix of *Antonia*'s clothes, especially the hat settled low over her head, speaks potently of what her meaning has become at this point to Jim: a woman who redefines the feminine by the elevation of her character, a transformation of womanhood noted by Hjalmar Boyeson, to a "soul which never concedes defeat ..." and who binds Jim to her above all. Benda invokes Jim's elevation of *Antonia* in the gravity of his drawing, which features her stately determined posture, enlarged by the weighty outlines of her dark winter attire. Benda's visual narrative, in Boyeson's words, "lift[s] the character to a higher plane," capturing the fact that the pregnant *Antonia*, who still works the land like a man,

has become an icon of regeneracy that transcends the feminine to encompass the devoted cultivation and stewardship that is the heroic legacy of the frontier (101-2).

Cather's verbal images are distilled and rhetorically powerful visual abstractions on the order of Benda's drawings. The closing image of *Ántonia's* children scrambling out of the fruit cave in Book V is, like the plow, an iconic picture in a circular frame. Jim's visit to his friend is cluttered with references to pictures, actual and remembered, but Cather's images of the plough magnified against the setting sun in Book II and of the children emerging from the cave in Book V serve as a pair, framing the narrative of the two friends' final passage into full adulthood. This later image also obliquely echoes Benda's first illustration of *Ántonia* with her family, thereby suggesting the effect of bookends for both the verbal and the visual narratives. Nonetheless, each one functions to illuminate the way that she gives meaning not only to their passage from child to adult, but to the Plains' passage from grassy wilderness to abundant farmland:

*Ántonia* had always been one to leave images in the mind ... - that grew stronger with time. In my memory, there was a succession of such pictures, ... like the old woodcuts of one's first primer ... She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. (342)

As graphemic systems are used for the written communication of shared cultural understandings, Benda's visual and Cather's verbal images form a bitextual graphemic system to envision and communicate an elevated cultural icon of American pioneer womanhood. From what we know of Cather's own Nebraska childhood, certain women, like Annie Pavelka and

Carrie Miner, whom she admired as a child in Red Cloud and with whom she continued in close friendship throughout her life, informed Cather's vision of her character, *Ántonia*, as the representation of a transcendent new female type. Cather's picture writing, deployed masterfully with Benda through the popular visual imagery of late nineteenth century America, gives to the central figure of her novel an enduring power.

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Questions for discussion:

1. How would you characterize Jim's love of Antonia? How can his relationship with her be distinguished from his relationship with Lena Lingard? What do you think the two women mean to Jim? Why do you think Cather placed him in a relationship with each of these women?
2. What does the suicide of Antonia's father tell us about his character, his family members, his oldest daughter? Does his harsh act change the direction of the novel's plot, and if so, how? Does it illuminate particular themes or narrative structures that Cather wants to elaborate in her narrative?
3. *My Antonia* begins with the two main characters arriving in totally unfamiliar and unimaginable prairie grasslands. In part, they learn to know the place into which they have been put by learning to know one another. What is the significance of place in Cather's novel?
4. Jim and Antonia do not at first speak the same language: how do they mediate this barrier? Through what aspects of their early experiences together do they find ways to communicate and bond together?
5. What – if anything – do you believe Cather's picture writing contributes to your understanding of her novel's meaning and value?