

A Virgil on the Prairie: Jim Burden's Poetic Vision in *My Ántonia*¹

Despite the nearly two-thousand-year divide, the Roman poet Virgil and the American author Willa Cather both wrote amid seismic societal upheaval. On one hand, Virgil crafted his most influential poetry during Rome's brutal civil wars and the collapse of the Republic. On the other hand, Cather penned *My Ántonia* – her most acclaimed work – between 1915 and 1918, as the First World War and industrialisation transformed the modern world. In the face of an uncertain, tumultuous future, both writers turned their gaze backwards, towards the rustic landscapes of their upbringing.

Cather, a lifelong classicist², not only pays tribute to Virgil through fleeting allusion – his work is embedded within the very fabric of *My Ántonia*. Through Jim Burden's first-person narration, she adopts the pastoral sensibility of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*: rooted in an idyllic rural past that stands in stark contrast to the complexity of urban existence. Moreover, Cather overlays the *Aeneid*'s themes of exile and migration onto the American frontier. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to argue that Virgil's influence on *My Ántonia* reaches far beyond mere homage; it is the lens through which its classically-educated narrator, Jim, frames memory, displacement and man's relationship to the natural world – creating his own American myth, thereby becoming a kind of Virgil on the prairie. Crucially, Cather subverts and challenges this lens – revealing the vast gulf between the narrator's romantic, “incommunicable past”³, and the harsher realities endured by the prairie's inhabitants. In doing so, she exposes its perils: such a myth reduces the complex relationship between a land and its dwellers to idyllic narrative, aestheticises suffering, and ultimately risks patronising those it seeks honour.

Pastoral Memory

Ostensibly, *My Ántonia* traces the life of its titular heroine, Ántonia Shimerda, from her arrival in Nebraska as a child to motherhood by the novel's end. A Bohemian immigrant girl forging a life on the frontier at the close of the nineteenth century, her fictional story is emblematic of the real struggle of immigrants, drawn by the promises of the American Dream. Instead of finding opportunity, the Shimerda family – particularly Ántonia herself – encounter exploitation, hardship and loss: Ántonia is forced to work the farm throughout her childhood, forgoing education; following her father's suicide, she assumes even greater responsibility. After moving to the nearby town of Black Hawk (based on Cather's hometown of Red Cloud⁴), she labours as a “hired girl”, being one of many young, immigrant women

¹ *The edition used throughout this essay is Oxford World's Classics Edition, which includes references to notes by Janet Sharistanian.

Translations for Virgil, wherever used, are from (unless stated otherwise):

Fairclough, H R. Loeb Classical Library Volumes 63 & 64. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. 1916.

² See, e.g. Jacks, L. V. “The Classics and Willa Cather.” *Prairie Schooner* 35, no. 4 (1961): 289–96.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40626699>.

See also Explanatory Notes 126 - Sharistanian, Janet

³Cather, Willa; *My Ántonia* V

⁴ See <https://www.willacather.org/about/willa-cather-biography>

working within it; when she becomes pregnant, her fiancé Larry Donovan abandons her – forcing her to work, and to bear her illegitimate child alone.

Yet, this narrative is mediated entirely through Jim Burden – an orphan raised by his Baptist grandparents and shaped by the ideals of white Anglo-Protestant America. His first-person, retrospective account transforms the narrative into a deeply personal bildungsroman – one in which his own coming-of-age is inextricably bound up with, and, at times, overshadows *Ántonia*’s story: *My Ántonia* charts *Jim*’s life – his education, romantic life and homecoming, separate from *Ántonia*’s. The novel’s introduction is told by an unnamed narrator, a friend of *Jim*’s, who encourages his composition of the manuscript ‘*My Ántonia*’ – not as an objective biography of her, but *Jim*’s personal recollection of their shared experiences. It is through *Jim* that the narrative of *My Ántonia* becomes shaped by Virgilian lyrical reflection and pastoral sensibility; one that concerns not only *Ántonia*, but Nebraska itself:

*“There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made... the world was left behind,... we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it.”*⁵

Jim’s very first impression of the Nebraska frontier casts the landscape in mythic and symbolic terms. Related to one of the first scenes in the *Georgics*, the land appears vast, uncultivated and full of potential – not yet inscribed with ownership or civilisation. His description evokes Virgil’s vision of a utopian, pre-Jovian Earth, when “to mark possession of the plain or apportion it by boundaries was sacrilege”⁶. Just as Virgil imagines a time when “nature offered her gifts freely to all”⁷, Cather’s portrayal of the prairie, through *Jim*, exists, initially, in an untouched, primordial state. However, such an image only exists in the realm of fleeting memory – overwritten by the advance of surveying and infrastructural change in the years that followed:

“Years afterward, the open-grazing days were over... the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie... all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines...”

Jim’s reflections throughout the novel reveal an overarching sense of nostalgia for the prairie – not only as the backdrop to his childhood, but as a broader symbol of a vanished world: an idyllic and pastoral way of life irrevocably marred by time and progress. The once open, untamed land – free and generous – has been “sacrilegiously” parceled out and fenced, “apportioned by boundaries”. This transformation reflects the logic of Manifest Destiny – an ideology that framed the conquest of open land as noble, necessary and inevitable. In this way, the prairie’s transformation signals not only an environmental loss, but a political and ideological erasure of a more harmonious relationship between people and land. This sense of loss and detachment encapsulates a key line within Virgil’s *Georgics*, which is directly quoted as the novel’s epigraph:

⁵ Cather, Willa; *My Ántonia* I

⁶ Verg. G. 1.126-128

⁷ *ibid.*

“Optima dies... prima fugit.”
*“The best of days are the first to flee.”*⁸

This line adapted from *Georgics III*⁹ captures both the mood and structure of *My Ántonia*, which unfolds as a long reminiscence – a deliberate, poetic search through the narrator’s memory for the irretrievable. ‘*Optima dies...*’ offers a blueprint for Jim’s approach to memory: the ‘best days’ are gone, and, as a result, the narrative’s mood is suffused with elegiac nostalgia. Yet, this nostalgia is neither shapeless nor chaotic; the presentation of Jim’s memories is vivid, coherent and highly aestheticised. His ability to render the past in such immersive detail suggests not only a strong emotional attachment, but a deliberate, artistic shaping of his experiences – a living, almost mythic portrait of a vanished world. As Joseph Urgo also observes, Cather adopts a “preservationist aesthetic”, wherein Jim’s memory is “inextricable from the landscape of his childhood and the figures with whom his childhood was entangled.”¹⁰ Through this process, the past remains alive in Jim’s consciousness – the prairie and its people – even as they ebb further away:

*“I begrudged the room that Jake and Otto and Russian Peter took up in my memory... in some strange way they accompanied me through all my new experiences. They were so much alive in me that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how.”*¹¹

Even though Jim’s recollections breathe life into a lost world, they do so by mythologising its inhabitants. His admission that these childhood companions (the Burden’s farmhands and an immigrant labourer) remain vivid in memory, yet unconsidered in reality, reveals that he does not regard their continued welfare – provided that their static presence, frozen in memory, serves his pastoral vision. Distanced by time and location, these men become archetypal pillars of Jim’s prairie mythos, forever frozen at the apex of their utility to his story. Jim finds justification in this impulse to elevate raw experience into a kind of legend through Virgil himself:

*“Primus ego in patriam mecum... deducam Musas.”*¹²
*“..for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.”*¹³

Jim reflects on this line as part of his classical education, a prescription from his teacher Gaston Cleric. Crucially, Cleric interprets Virgil’s *patria* as “not even a nation or a province, but the little rural neighbourhood on the Mincio where the poet was born”¹⁴ – not the lofty capital or the “palatia Romana”, inhabited by his patrons Maecenas or Augustus, but his “father’s fields”¹⁵ on the outskirts of Mantua. This reading portrays Virgil not as a grand imperial bard, but a poet rooted in place – whose work celebrates and preserves the landscape and culture of his home. In a similar way, Jim self-consciously adopts this

⁸The translation used in the novel itself

⁹Verg. G.3.66-67

¹⁰ Urgo, Joseph “My Ántonia and the National Parks Movement”
<https://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/catherstudies/5/cs005.urgo>

¹¹ Cather, Willa; *My Ántonia III*

¹²ibid.

¹³The translation used in the novel itself; as Sharistanian mentions, this translation is roughly accurate, but not exact.

¹⁴ ibid.

¹⁵ ibid.

Virgilian role – not as a chronicler of the American nation, but as a recorder of the local, deeply personal prairies of Nebraska. Jim brings the Muse to these plains in an act of literary preservation; his local world and its inhabitants are celebrated and immortalised – stories of endurance and resilience that might otherwise fade from memory. Like Aeneas carrying the Penates – the household gods and the cultural legacy of Troy – Jim symbolically ‘carries’ the memories of the Nebraska prairie and preserves it through his writing. To him, documenting his memories serves as a poetic act of conservation, sanctifying the landscape and its inhabitants much like Virgil’s Muses celebrated his own rustic *patria*.

Unsettling the Pastoral Ideal

Yet, Jim’s relationship with the prairie is not purely reverent. Elizabeth Nicole Morgan describes Jim as simultaneously a ‘preserver’ and ‘defiler’ of the prairie¹⁶; in his youth, Jim actively interacts with the land in ways that foreshadow its eventual desecration:

“On one of those dry gravel beds, was the biggest snake I had ever seen. He was sunning himself, after the cold night, and he must have been asleep when Antonia screamed... His abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick. I ran up and drove at his head with my spade... in a minute he was all about my feet in wavy loops. I struck now from hate... Even after I had pounded his ugly head flat, his body kept on coiling and winding, doubling and falling back on itself.”¹⁷

The raw, visceral act of killing this snake – implied to be an almost instinctual, hateful act of violence against an “old and lazy”¹⁸, pathetic creature – a withering emblem of untamed nature – symbolises Jim’s, and by extension, settler society’s, disruption of the prairie’s original freedom and unity. It inverts the Arcadian ideal celebrated by Virgil in the *Eclogues*, a utopia wherein humans live in harmonious balance with the natural world and its creatures. This tension only further deepens in Jim’s adult life; it is mentioned in the introduction that Jim has become a “legal counsel for one of the great Western railways” – complicit in one of the great industrial and capitalist forces that reshape and exploit the prairie landscape. Expanding on Morgan’s idea, Jim’s duality also manifests in his broader role as an agent and witness; he plays a role in the prairie’s desecration, yet is powerless to prevent its irreversible mutation. Jim records what he reveres – but cannot restore, nor protect this vanishing world. This is encapsulated by one of the most deeply symbolic moments within *My Ántonia*:

“...a plough had been left standing in the field... Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun... black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun... [after it set] that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie.”¹⁹

The plough, silhouetted against the setting sun, is rendered “heroic in size” – a monument of rural labour, permanence and human rootedness in the land. But, as the sun dips below the horizon, it “sinks back to its

¹⁶ Morgan, E.N. “Selling the Country’s Secrets: Willa Cather’s Eco (self)criticism in *My Ántonia* and *The Professor’s*” University of South Carolina

<https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2090&context=etd>

¹⁷ Cather, Willa; *My Ántonia* I

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Cather, Willa; *My Ántonia* III

own littleness”, lost to the passage of time and encroaching industrialisation. Jim, powerless against these abstract forces, can only look on – a witness to the fading world he preserves but also effaces.

This dynamic within Cather’s narrator is reminiscent of Aeneas’s. His struggle between *pietas* – duty, restraint, and preservation – and *furor* – passionate, uncontrolled and destructive impulse – parallels the conflict within Jim. He exhibits his own kind of *pietas* through the act of literary conservation, yet is also entangled within the ‘*furor*’ of industrial progress, complicit in the destruction of the world he cherishes. Much like Aeneas, who arguably succumbs to his *furor* in killing Turnus,²⁰ Jim loses to, and collaborates with the inexorable forces that eradicate the *patria* and way of life he longs to preserve. One could further argue Jim distinctly mirrors Virgil himself – bound to serve Rome’s elite patrons like Maecenas and Augustus, the latter of whom oversaw the confiscation of his Mantuan *patria*. This relationship reveals the deeply complex dynamic of the poet’s split loyalty: between personal attachment to his homeland and the demands of imperial power. Jim, like Virgil, embodies a profound compromise – caught between romanticising a vanishing world, while enabling the dominant forces that erase it. This dual role reveals a broader gulf between Jim’s idealised memory of the prairie, and the harsh, unadulterated reality of its inhabitants; Mr. Shimerda and Antonia Shimerda, in particular, exemplify this contrast between romanticism and stark truth.

‘Anti-Epic’ and the Aesthetic of Suffering

The Virgilian model of exile, exhibited by Aeneas, is strongly tied to the tragic story of Mr. Shimerda. Both characters are uprooted from their homelands against their accord to establish new lives; whereas Aeneas is compelled by divine mission, sanctioned by the gods and destined to found a new civilisation, Mr. Shimerda is ultimately driven not by *fatum*, but out of economic necessity and family pressure:

*“My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls. [sic]’”*²¹

Aeneas is described by Parry as a “servant of an abstract destiny”²²; he is shown to struggle with comprehending his journey – with its intangible and unrealised destination – in wishing for his own death²³ and lamenting to Dido “*Italiam non sponte sequor*”²⁴. Similarly, Mr. Shimerda embodies this profound and even suicidal pain of displacement: trapped in a harsh and alien environment that, unlike Aeneas’ quest, offers no divine nor heroic purpose, no promise of prosperity. Forced to labour, Mr. Shimerda is deprived of his personal source of happiness, his fiddle. Representing more than music, it is inextricably tied to his past life, culture and identity – his *patria*:

*“I went over all that Antonia had ever told me about his life before he came to this country; how he used to play the fiddle at weddings and dances. I thought about the friends he had mourned to leave...”*²⁵

²⁰ See Verg. A.12.950-952

²¹ Cather, Willa; My Antonia I

²² Parry, Adam. “The Two Voices of Virgil’s ‘Aeneid.’” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2, no. 4 (1963): 66–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20162871>.

²³ See Verg. A.1.94-101

²⁴ Verg. A.4.361;

²⁵ Cather, Willa; My Antonia I

While Aeneas carries Troy's Penates as sacred emblems of his people's continuity and destiny, Mr. Shimerda carries his fiddle – a deeply personal and private relic – that lacks this communal and divine vitality. Though he brings it to the New World, it is remarked that it “wouldn't be of much use here”²⁶ and therefore rendered impotent. With no one to play alongside him, the fiddle becomes inert: a silent reminder of cultural isolation and exile without purpose. It does not sustain him, as the Penates sustain Aeneas, but ultimately embodies a rupture from the *patria* that once gave it meaning – exacerbating the profound loneliness and dislocation Mr. Shimerda faces. Unlike Aeneas, who endures in his exile – culminating in the founding of Lavinium – Mr Shimerda cannot; his exile, mournful and quiet, leads to his suicide:

“...it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda...”²⁷

Cather's presentation of Mr. Shimerda, therefore, is one that subverts this Virgilian mold; one could regard him as a kind of antithesis to Aeneas. Whereas Aeneas carries divine purpose and a spirit of *virtus* – the Roman ideal of masculine excellence – Mr. Shimerda is an aging immigrant, uprooted from his homeland without direction or divine mission. The epic of Aeneas, as such, gives way to Mr. Shimerda's anti-epic defined by loss: there is no fated city to be found, no prophetic assurance, no son of a goddess. For Jim, the prairie's open, expansive horizon kindles poetic awe, yet it represents something entirely different for Mr. Shimerda; it is a site of alienation and despair – a vast, yielding expanse that never becomes a home. In his exile, there is only a sense of quiet desperation, as his hope and identity slowly erode in a cruel, relentless and indifferent world – divorced from the pastoral idealism that Jim portrays. But even in death, Mr. Shimerda becomes the subject of Jim's narrative myth-making, filtering him through the literary archetype of the wandering, restless spirit:

“... I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country. I thought of how far it was to Chicago, and then to Virginia, to Baltimore, — and then the great wintry ocean...”

This image of the dead Shimerda as a wandering spirit, slowly tracing his way back to his homeland, bears similarity to the unburied dead in *Aeneid VI*, among them the helmsman Palinurus, who pleads with Aeneas for proper rites so his soul might find rest²⁸. Like Palinurus, Mr. Shimerda is suspended in liminality – his suicide renders him both physically and spiritually unmoored. For Jim, this liminal state becomes a source of symbolism: Shimerda is no longer simply a man – but a symbol of exile, melancholy and doomed yearning. By casting Mr. Shimerda in a literary light – Jim aestheticises his suffering, transforming tragedy into beauty. Yet, this reveals more about Jim than Shimerda: it exposes a rift between the narrator's literary imagination and the reality of immigrant despair. Shimerda's suffering becomes a poetic device – less of a record of experience, but a projection of Jim's need to impose narrative shape. By subverting the epic narrative of exile and exposing the flaws in Jim's Virgilian lens, Cather reveals a dissonance between his lyrical vision and the reality it obscures – a dissonance rooted in privilege.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ See Verg. A.6.337-383

Indeed, despite Jim's immense feeling of kinship and belonging towards the prairie, his *patria* – he never actively labours its soil. While the Shimerda family live within a sodhouse, crude and half-buried in the earth – a dwelling of necessity, not of comfort or choice, the Burdens live in a neat, orderly farmhouse: a place of genteel leisure and warmth, where the finer arts can thrive. Jim's classical training grants him the poetic vocabulary needed for bringing the Muse to Nebraska, but it is his status as a 'WASP' – a white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class Protestant – that truly enables this poetic project. While Ántonia toils on farmland, working "like mans [sic.]"²⁹, or as a hired girl in Black Hawk, Jim, alternatively, can spend a summer "scanning the *Aeneid* aloud and committing long passages to memory"³⁰. His intellectual and artistic cultivation depends on a material security that immigrant families like the Shimerdas cannot access. Cather frames this as a disparity not just economic, but cultural. Despite their generosity and willingness to help the Shimerdas, Jim's grandparents remain wary of their customs – particularly their Catholicism. Even as they offer aid, the Burdens interpret the Shimerda's beliefs through the lens of American Protestant suspicion towards 'Romanism': foreign, bizarre and even "heathenish"³¹. As a child, Jim absorbs this cultural othering, referring to their language dismissively as "Bohunk"³² and echoing nativist attitudes: "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home."³³

It is through this position of privilege – described by Orly Lipset as "blinding"³⁴ – that Jim contextualises Ántonia as the heroine for his myth; his romanticised descriptions of her verge on paternalistic, most evident in the title of the book itself: '*My Ántonia*' underscores the possessive, subjective nature of Jim's narration. His *Ántonia* is not necessarily Ántonia Shimerda, but a carefully curated effigy – an icon of the prairie: resilient, life-giving and elemental. Her hardships, while not ignored, are ultimately subsumed into a mythological framework that, while elevating her resilience, does so at the cost of recognising the full extent of her suffering. Lipset states that Jim "distances himself from issues relating to labor and suffering, and instead latches onto details that reinforce his notion of the idyllic farm".³⁵ Indeed, he does not personally dwell on the toll labour has taken on her – not even while she is pregnant, wearing a "man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim"³⁶ – nor on the emotional trauma of her abandonment. Instead, he recasts her perseverance in a mythic light, where hardship is stripped of its brutality and transformed into aesthetic virtue. In this way, Ántonia's suffering becomes central to her symbolic value: not as something to be mourned, but glorified in a rustic analogue to epic heroism – forged not through military conquest, but toil and endurance. By the end of the novel, Jim's vision of her has crystallised into this ideal: remarried and embracing motherhood, he describes her accordingly:

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Cather, Willa; *My Antonia* II

³¹ Cather, Willa; *My Antonia* I

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Lipset, Orly "Optima dies prima fugit: Jim's Privileged Nostalgia in Opposition to Cather's Portrait of Modernity in *My Ántonia*"

<https://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-8/lipset/>

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Cather, Willa; *My Antonia* IV

“She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.”³⁷

This blend of metaphor and simile aligns *Ántonia* as a primeval, mythic matriarchal figure: timeless, foundational and deeply rooted within the soil of Nebraska. As with the other characters within *My Ántonia*, she becomes an archetype within Jim’s memory, namely as an American heroine, whose value lies in her fertility and fortitude, rather than her inherent personage. Throughout his narrative, Jim admires *Ántonia*’s bold defiance of gender conformity – her physical strength, autonomy and embrace of roles perceived as masculine – in ways that recall Virgil’s *Camilla* in *Aeneid XI*.³⁸ Like *Camilla*, *Ántonia* is mythologised not by her own voice, but by a male lens that casts her in symbolic terms; remembered more as a fleeting image of a warrior-maiden than as a character with inner life, *Camilla* is swiftly absorbed into the *Aeneid*’s broader, male-dominated and martial narrative – largely forgotten after her death.³⁹ In a similar way, *Ántonia* becomes more of an icon than an individual, preserved within Jim’s prairie mythos – yet rather than vanishing, becomes its central figure. His portrayal of her, though honouring, ultimately risks flattening the complexity of *Ántonia*’s gendered experiences; her survival is transformed into a spectacle, her suffering into aesthetic. As such, Jim’s act of literary preservation is paradoxical; intending to immortalise her, he instead imposes a fixed, symbolic identity that quietly overwrites the lived reality of her life. *Ántonia* becomes suspended in contradiction: a figure of strength and suffering, yet denied true personhood. She is remembered not for her inner self, but as an image shaped by Jim. The very act that seeks to honour her becomes, from a position of privilege, quietly patronising: it aestheticises her suffering, mythologises her endurance, and reclaims her life into Jim’s story – softening it into a symbol palatable to his memory and myth.

Conclusion

In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather constructs a novel that is both a homage to and subversion of Virgilian tradition. Through Jim’s classical lens, the prairies of Nebraska are cast in mythic light: the land becomes a kind of American Arcadia, and its inhabitants transformed into symbols of exile and endurance. However, Cather ultimately reveals the cost of this literary gaze. Beneath Jim’s pseudo-Virgilian, lyrical vision lies a subtle but persistent cheapening of the immigrant experience: hardship is beautified, suffering becomes a spectacle, and individual voices are lost within a vast pastoral myth authored by privilege.

This is not to say that Jim’s project is without sincerity. His reverence for *Ántonia*, his companions and the prairie is real, and his attempt to preserve them – his ‘*Optima dies*’ – through language, reflects a deeply human impulse to hold onto what time and society has erased. But in doing so, Jim reclaims these lives into his own story, framing them through this privileged classical lens that dignifies, yet distorts and subtly patronises. Like Virgil, bound to empire even as he mourned what it cost, Jim’s impulse to preserve is shaped by forces beyond his control. But his vision is his alone: his remembrance becomes an act of reinvention – and in seeking to honour, he unwittingly erases.

³⁷ Cather, Willa; *My Antonia* V

³⁸ See Verg A.11.648-652

³⁹ See Verg.A.11.897-900

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