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Reading Cather Backward: In Search of a Nonhuman Post-America

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Résumé:

En partant d'une nouvelle posthume rarement étudiée, nous mettons en lumière la façon dont le nonhumain produit un contre-récit dans l'œuvre de Willa Cather, apportant un contre-point aux visées dominatrices des hommes. Ce contre-récit n'annule pas pour autant l'enthousiasme dont fait preuve l'autrice face aux prouesses des civilisations. Plutôt qu'une défense du pastoralisme comme seul remède aux maux nés de l'industrialisation et du capitalisme, la post-Amérique de Cather est une expérience de pensée visant à provoquer un décentrement critique du lecteur.

Mots-clés: Willa Cather; anthropomorphisme; évolution; non-humain; animaux

Abstract:

Starting from a rarely-studied posthumous short story, I uncover the ways in which the nonhuman elicits a counter-narrative in Willa Cather's works, providing a counterpoint to the domineering impulses of men. This counter-narrative, however, does not cancel out the author's enthusiasm for the accomplishments of civilizations. Rather than a defense of pastoralism as sole remedy against the ills bred by industrialization and capitalism, Cather's post-America is a thought experiment which aims at bringing the reader to a critical decentering.

Keywords: Willa Cather; anthropomorphism; pathetic fallacy; evolution; nonhuman; animals

The idea of "reading Cather backward," as surprising as it may sound, is not entirely new. It was accredited by the author herself, perhaps unwillingly but no less unavoidably, when she turned to her Virginian childhood for inspiration as she wrote what was to be her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). This belated reclaiming of her Southern identity—from a writer who had long been associated with the Midwest—suddenly seemed to shed new light on her preceding work. In particular, the novel's depiction of slavery, which might make today's readers uneasy, forces us, as Joseph Urgo argues, to pay attention to those similarly "uncomfortable" passages in her previous fiction. Thus a later text becomes the key to understand earlier ones. By reading Cather backward, I similarly want to read her both in reversed chronological order and against the grain. Starting with one of her posthumous short

stories will allow me to unearth a covert narrative running through her oeuvre, in which she is not so much a writer of settlement and colonization as a writer who suggests an alternative history for America, in which the land imposes its law on men and not the reverse. The "post-America" that thus seems to emerge—an America sans imperialism and destructive appropriation of the land—is one in which humanity loses some of its supremacy and another, nonhuman perspective is adumbrated. As is perhaps evident from my cautious formulations, I do not want to negate the obviously imperialist outlook of some of Cather's fiction (as shown most convincingly by Fischer). Rather, I would like to emphasize the equally important resistance that her texts offer to any narrative of domination. Janis Stout's words about Death Comes for the Archbishop could just as easily apply to all of Cather's writings about America's settlement: "Was she glorifying the political and religious process of appropriation she chronicled? I believe so. But her glorification was not without misgivings." (237) I would add that the environmental, anti-capitalist critique that becomes perceptible in Cather's texts could paradoxically be read as a corollary of her conservatism. In her refusal to equate industrialism and consumerism with progress, Cather might even more accurately be labeled "antimodern" rather than conservative, as Mathieu Duplay convincingly proposes, borrowing the term from Antoine Compagnon (106-108).

To my knowledge, no critic has explicitly used the category of the nonhuman to study Cather's fiction. However, the continuity she tends to establish between the human and the nonhuman has been underlined by many scholars, whether they study her treatment of animals (Buisson; Calder 57-58), look into the ways in which a character fuses with the landscape—the most spectacular example of which being the Panther Canyon episode in *The Song of the Lark* (Moseley, Sivils)—or explicitly work within an ecocritical framework (as in the articles gathered in Rosowski 2003). My particular argument here will also lead me to touch on the old literary question of pathetic fallacy. Like others before me (Levinson 656; McLane 114-117), I would like to identify in this convention-laden trope a means to shift discourse away from conventional categories, rather than a hegemonic way of seeing the world in our image (as suggested by the attacks against the spuriousness of anthropomorphism formulated by John Ruskin or Paul de Man).

Escaping a Broken World: From Utopia to Dystopia

In this regard, "Before Breakfast," a short story published in the posthumous collection *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), proves an excellent case study to illuminate the rest of Cather's work. It deploys the New World narrative of "voluntary simplicity" which, after

Thoreau's striking expression of it in *Walden*, has become a staple of American literature (Buell 145-156). It takes place on an island in the North Atlantic most likely inspired by Grand Manan, the Canadian island where Cather and her partner Edith Lewis owned a cottage. Written in 1944 (Woodress 498), the story might have been prompted by a sense of loss, both collective and personal. Firstly, the war made it impossible for the two women to vacation there (Woodress 480, 496). Secondly, like many of her contemporaries, Cather felt as if she were living through the end of the world, as European cities were being destroyed by bombs. In a letter to a friend she wrote,

"Why should the beautiful cities that were a thousand years a-making tumble down on our heads now, in our short lifetime? What is the sense of it? We saw one war, and there was sorrow aplenty. But why do we have to see our world destroyed? [...] Sir James Jeans said in a lecture I heard him give: "Next to man's longing for personal immortality, he longs to feel that his world is immortal and will go on indefinitely as he has known it." This has been the feeling of human beings in all ages. Why on earth do we, in all the countless stretch of years, just in our little moment, have to witness everything laid waste?"

(Letter to Viola Roseboro', February 12, 1944, Cather, 2013 631, underlining by Cather)

The sense of doom expressed here, of accelerating history ("beautiful cities [...] a thousand years a-making," "everything laid waste" "just in our little moment"), bears an uncanny resemblance to today's atmosphere of ecological catastrophe. She concludes her letter saying, "Of course, we have brought it all on ourselves—or, rather, our smart scientists have brought it on us" (632). Based on her fiction, it is obvious that the accusation she levels here at science must be aimed at industrialism and capitalism as well. Her attitude to progress, be it technological, social or economic, is always ambivalent. Whereas she praises Alexandra Bergson's modern agricultural practices in O Pioneers!—which allow her to farm land that had always been seen as hopelessly sterile, thereby granting her enviable economic success—she also feels the need to cast her story in romantic terms, depicting the Nebraskan landscape as a "great, free spirit," or "the Genius of the Divide," a lover who has been waiting for the heroine's gaze to become alive (I v 64). The imperialist dynamic of settlement is thus mitigated by the territory's voluntary submission to Alexandra's benevolent rule. As Alex Calder puts it in his study of The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop, this strategy amounts to "coordinating and simplifying a complex relation to the history of settlement into something more like wakening to a gift" (71), thereby obscuring the violence of this conquest.

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¹ Part and chapter appear before the page number.

In "Before Breakfast," the "escape to [the] island" (401) is both made necessary and rendered possible by American capitalism. Henry Grenfell, the story's center of consciousness, has bought a cabin on an island in order to be able to spend some time alone a few months every year, away from city and family life. From the very first lines of the story, his relationship to the land is expressed in terms of both ownership and escape: "his own cabin, on his own island, where nobody knew that he was senior partner of Grenfell & Saunders, and where the business correspondence was never forwarded to him" (396, my emphasis). This solitary retreat comes after a long trip via coal-fueled means of transportation, which are marked by their impending obsolescence: "The trip up from Boston was long and hard, by trains made up of the cast-off coaches of liquidated railroads, and then by the two worst boats in the world" (396, my emphasis). The journey is a trip back in time, first using older technology and then reaching a destination where the technology is pre-industrial. Everything in the text makes it clear that the island is a world preserved from the ravages of modernization. The two evocations of modern life that appear on the first page are both kept in brackets, as if to isolate them from the narrative's utopia. The sentence I have just quoted is in parentheses, as well as a passing mention of the absence of running water in the cabin: "[Grenfell] went to his walnut washstand (no plumbing)" (396). The term "utopia" is apt as Grenfell acknowledges that the island is "one of [his] happiest illusions; the escape-avenue he kept in the back of his mind when he was at his desk at Grenfell & Saunders, Bonds" (398). Here the use of the term "Bonds" in the firm's name is of course symbolic, framing his office job as a kind of disguised slavery.

Yet the sense of peace Grenfell usually finds on the island is troubled by his encounter with a "Professor" who tells him, while they are sailing to the island, that "that bit of wooded rock in the sea" is "a hundred and thirty-six million years" old (398). The thought keeps him awake all night and, in the morning, nags him again as he tries to put eye-drops in his eyes and stops to gaze at a bright star in the sky. Marveling at the beauty of the planet Venus, he thinks to himself, "Serene, impersonal splendour. Merciless perfection, ageless sovereignty" (397). But the vision turns into a nightmare as he realizes humanity's insignificance on a cosmic scale.

Grenfell rejected his eye-drops. Why patch up? What was the use . . . of anything? Why tear a man loose from his little rock and shoot him out into the eternities? All that stuff was inhuman. A man had his little hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to his endurance. If you took that away from him you left him spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything. He himself was, he realized, sitting in his bathrobe by his washstand, limp!

(399)

Grenfell's sudden nihilism, as it turns out, can only be remedied through renewed contact with his environment. Earlier, Grenfell had anthropomorphized a hare that regularly hops past his house, calling it "he" and characterizing it with human adjectives like "puzzled" and "furtive" (396). Suddenly, the hare seems to be the only thing that can make him feel less lonely while he is faced with such a symbol of immortality: "The poor hare and his clover, poor Grenfell and his eye-drops!" (397). The parallelism underlines the proximity of the two creatures, human and animal, whose world can only make sense when it is confined to their respective scale.

Pulling himself together, however, Grenfell reaffirms his mastery over the universe: "immortal beauty . . . yes, but only when somebody saw it" (403, Cather's emphasis). This bold statement sounds like a desperate attempt to negate the Copernican revolution and to put man and man's perceptions back at the center of the cosmos. In a forceful proprietary gesture, Grenfell then leaves the cabin to "find his island" (403-404, my emphasis) and, in another parenthetical aside, the narrator reminds us that "He wanted all this glorious loneliness for himself. He had paid dearly for it" (404). Again, the enjoyment of a supposedly unadulterated nature is made possible by capital, the same capital which, on a global scale, is irreversibly altering ecosystems.

However, human ownership seems fragile compared to the apparent "eternities" of geological and cosmic history. In the course of the hike that Grenfell then takes through the island, he feels the need to cling to all forms of terrestrial life as to so many companions in misfortune. He salutes a "giant spruce tree" out loud, calling it "Grandfather" (404). As he tries to "twitch off a twig as he pass[es]," the twig "snap[s] back at him like a metal spring." The old tree thus becomes a fellow aging man who, like Grenfell, is keeping strong. It is also likened to "an animal skeleton long exposed to the weather" (404), further blurring the boundaries between the mineral ("a metal spring"), vegetal, animal, and human. Grenfell then congratulates the tree in direct speech: "Well, Grandfather! Lasting pretty well, I should say. Compliments!" (404) He also reconnects with his environment through body memory, and this reunion with an apparently eternal nature, whose steadfastness is anchored in sonorous, alliterative language, is attended with a sense of awe: "The spruces stood tall and still as ever in the morning air; the same dazzling spears of sunlight shot through their darkness. The path underneath had the dampness, the magical softness which his feet remembered." (404) The light that pierces through the trees points to the miraculous adequateness of the terrain, its "magical softness" which seems to have been expressly made to provide comfort to the hiker's feet.

This sense of absolute adequation between the land and the man who explores it, however, is a fiction belied by the scientific knowledge that was imparted on a reluctant Grenfell earlier in the story. On the boat, the Professor had explained that "the two ends of the island belonged to different periods, yet the ice seemed to have brought them down together"

(398). Cather thus offers a reflection upon mankind's contingency on the planet, where life is just the most recent precarious layer at the surface of a much older world.

Finding Comfort in Nonhuman Lives

Cather nonetheless attempts to make this contingency meaningful by underlining the endurance and strength that characterize all forms of life.

Nothing had changed. Everything was the same, and he, Henry Grenfell, was the same: the relationship was unchanged. Not even a tree blown down; the stunted beeches (precious because so few) were still holding out against a climate unkind to them. The old white birches that grew on the edge of the cliff had been so long beaten and tormented by east wind and north wind that they grew more down than up, and hugged the earth that was kinder than the stormy air. Their growth was all one-sided, away from the sea, and their land-side branches actually lay along the ground and crept up the hillside through the underbrush, persistent, nearly naked, like great creeping vines, and at last, when they got into the sunshine, burst into tender leafage.

(405)

Grenfell tries to convince himself that life might be strong enough to counter the irresistible force of entropy. He finds reassurance in thinking that he might be as resilient as the trees. The human adjectives and verbs ("hold out," "tormented," "hug," "kind"...) are not so much the symptom, I would argue, of an anthropocentric perception of the world as proof of the common condition shared by humanity and all other lifeforms on Earth. When Grenfell remarks to himself that "the relationship was unchanged," he means that he has found again that link with nature which will prevent him from losing himself in the contemplation of "eternities." The feeling of man's superiority over nature, which pathetic fallacy is often seen to convey, is absent here. Rather, Grenfell seems to identify a struggle similar to his own in the way the trees adapt to the terrain and the harsh climatic conditions. He himself has been fighting a particularly crippling form of dyspepsia all his life and has chosen to "liv[e] rough" (403) so as not to let this affliction dictate his life.

As he walks around the island, his appreciation of nature's beauty is bound up with an acute awareness of its fragility: "The soil-surface was very thin. Almost anywhere on the open downs you could cut with a spade through the dry turf and roll it back from the rock as you roll a rug back from the floor." (404-405) This precariousness is what unites all forms of life, characterized by their transience: "One knew that the rock itself [...] must be very ancient. But that fact had nothing to do with the green surface where men lived and trees lived and blue flags and buttercups and daisies and meadowsweet and steeplebush and goldenrod crowded one another in all the clearings." (405) The repetition of the conjunction "and" in this long

enumeration precludes any impulse to hierarchize: all lifeforms are juxtaposed in a common fate, which is to occupy for a very short while the Earth's thin crust.

This absence of hierarchy is made abundantly clear through a sudden reversal, where a person is described in animalistic terms. As Grenfell espies a young woman on the shore, he compares her in his mind's eye to a clam: "She opened her robe, a grey thing lined with white. Her bathing-suit was pink. If a clam stood upright and graciously opened its shell, it would look like that" (406). This comparison, which evidently is not devoid of erotic connotations, is surprisingly followed by musings of a more philosophical nature. The way the young woman braves the cold water to take her morning swim reminds Grenfell of the invigorating strength of youth. On his way back, he no longer needs the support of the grandfather tree: "As he passed the grandfather tree he waved his hand, but didn't stop. Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age." (407) This whole episode awakens a sense of pride in him, but it is not the selfsatisfaction of the dominant species that manages to conquer all obstacles (including icy water). This pride is rooted in the feeling of being part of the miracle of evolution, which peopled the world with so many wonderful beings. The short story thus ends on a surprising remark in direct speech, where Grenfell finds a source of comfort in another scientific fact, which eclipses the geologist's revelation about the island's distressing antiquity: "Anyhow," he says to himself, "when that first amphibious frog-toad found his water-hole dried up behind him, and jumped out to hop along till he could find another—well, he started on a long hop." (407, concluding lines of the story)

Here, Willa Cather includes natural history in her narrative in a way that most environmentally concerned texts do not.² Her attentiveness to nature does not negate or try to forget culture. It is both informed by scientific knowledge (such as the professor's facts about the island's geology, which unsettle Grenfell at first but which he then manages to assimilate) and colored by culture in a broad sense, namely by intertextuality and mythology. In the story Venus is at first the name of a "planet" (397) that shines like a star in the night sky; but it is soon conflated with the goddess after whom it is named, and personified ("she seemed to wait," 397), heralding the erotic description of the young woman on the shore. Identifying with various plants and animals and drawing parallels between human form and the natural world, Grenfell is "testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium," which produces a much deeper

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² Buell talks of "naturism" in his study of the "environmental imagination" rather than "naturalism," in order to avoid suggesting a scientific approach that most writers do not adopt (431). Rosowski (1995) shows how the sciences, botany in particular, had an undeniable impact on both Cather's views regarding agriculture and her descriptions of landscapes.

reflection on humankind's place within the world than the "facile sense of harmony, even identity, with one's surroundings" which, according to Scott Slovic (4), characterizes cruder kinds of nature writing.

The short story's final reframing of life on Earth as a collective, interspecific adventure invites us to re-read Cather's previous works to find traces of an attentiveness to the continuity, rather than the differences, between man and animal. This continuity is often associated with the characters' homes, described in animalistic terms, reversing the anthropocentric logic of pathetic fallacy. In Cather's first novels, set on the prairie, the immigrants' dugouts often give rise to comparisons to animal dwellings. Dug into the earth because building materials were expensive and hard to come by on the Frontier, these houses become two-sided signifiers. To most of the characters, they mean poverty and dirt; but to some who maintain a close relationship with nature and animals they are a way of merging with the land and its animal life, in a movement contrary to the settlement of the West. Instead of making their mark on the territory, building railroads and towns, these characters are happy imitating animals and leaving as little trace of their passage as possible. So-called "Crazy" Ivar in *O Pioneers!* (1913) is a case in point:

But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done.

(I III 39-40)

Similarly, in *My Ántonia* (1918), the narrator Jim and his family regard the Shimerdas' dugout as a pitiable substitute for a house. Jim's grandmother says: "It's no better than a badger hole; no proper dugout at all." (I III 20) And in winter one of the family's farmhands remarks: "They seem awful scared of cold, and stick in that hole in the bank like badgers." (I x 68) However, Ántonia, who will become a successful farmer at the end of the novel and will show a true connection with trees ("I love them as if they were people," she will say [V I 329]), turns the badger comparison inside out and prides herself on sleeping in a small hole in the wall with her sister: "this is warm like the badger hole," she explains (I x 73).

Similar images of nesting abound in Cather's works. They crop up in particular when she evokes human habitations perched on rocks, a motif she constantly returns to in her novels and stories. First, there are the cliff-dwellings of ancient civilizations present in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *The Professor's House* (1925). In *The Song of the Lark*, the cliff-dwellers are described as "A timid, nest-building folk, like the swallows" (IV III 332). In *The Professor's*

House, the town Tom Outland finds on the Mesa "h[angs] like a bird's nest in the cliff" (II IV 211) and Tom and his companions call a group of houses "the Eagle's Nest" (II IV 212), because it is particularly inaccessible. But Cather does not only apply the image to vanished civilizations. In *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), Hector Saint Cyr, who wonders why people would want to settle on the rock of Quebec, notes that birds do the same, building nests on the steep faces of cliffs. He concludes: "This headland was scarcely more than that; a crag where for some reason human beings built themselves nests in the rock, and held fast." (V III 258-259)

These images, I would argue, are not mere literary tropes. They aim to tell us something about life. They ask the reader to feel his or her proximity with the animals these images conjure up. For instance, *Shadows on the Rock* has rightly been seen as a meditation on the human need for shelter (Stouck 151; Romines 151)—which, we can add for the sake of our argument, is shared with all animals. Tellingly, the city is compared to "layers and layers of shelter" (III VI 183). These people "holding fast" to a rock present the image of a humanity that is still nature's plaything, kept at its mercy. Confronted with man's power to destroy, made plain by the First World War, Cather presents the reader with alternative forms of life, where valor is not proven through combat or empire building but through a brave persistence in a hostile environment. Nesting images thus signify both life's precariousness and its resilience. As Bachelard notes: "A nest—and this we *understand* right away—is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*." (102, his emphases) The nest could thus stand for the hubristic desire to build a fortress that would isolate oneself from the environment. The fortress, Cather seems to tell us, is never as solid as we might think, and no dream of perfect isolation is ever attainable.

A Thought Experiment

While the technological superiority of the white man might have made him think he could own and shape the territory in his image, Cather reminds us that Frontier communities and pre-Columbian civilizations shared a similar experience. Faced with a vast hostile land—in particular in the American West—they had to find ways to survive. From the examples I have analyzed, there is little doubt as to the kind of strategy she favored. In this sense, her fiction could be called proto-ecological, since it suggests alternative, less invasive ways of making one's home in a territory.

Nevertheless, this does not come without limitations or contradictions, not the least of which being that such respectful reunion with nature is often only made possible by money. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg stays in Panther Canyon because her rich friend Fred Ottenburg knows someone who owns a ranch there. In "Before Breakfast," Grenfell can afford

his trips because he is a successful lawyer. In *Shadows on the Rock*, Quebec's survival relies in part on the ships that connect it to France. Moreover, Cather cannot help admiring the spirit of enterprise of the Frontier. Although Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* seems to approve of the way the Navajo erase any sign of their passage when they are traveling ("it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air" [VII IV 246]), he feels the need to build a cathedral in Santa Fe to leave his mark on the territory.³

These reservations aside, what I would like to emphasize in conclusion is that, to twentyfirst-century readers, Cather's fiction suggests the possibility that our civilization, and even our species, might disappear, as the cliff-dwellers did; and yet that life may very well endure in different forms and find ways-however crooked or stunted (like the trees on Grenfell's island)—to "hold fast" even when we are gone. Whatever happens, our little rock and the stars in the sky will still be there, unaware and indifferent. In those passages where plants, animals, and natural elements seem to be endowed with agency, we are offered a glimpse into an alternative world, in which humankind is absent. That we are able to understand this world however phantasmatic this might be—is in itself a powerful way of pushing us to envisage the continuity between these lifeforms and ourselves. Cather manages to make us feel how connected our lives are to the environment we live in. Through pathetic fallacy, she reduces the distance between ourselves and the rest of the natural world, making palpable a universal lifeblood running through both humans and nonhumans. It is not surprising, therefore, that she should have kept the crimes of colonization well hidden in the background. Her tendency to universalize the experiences she describes leads her to assimilate the movements of history to universal cycles of life and death, prosperity and decay, which individual agency has very little to do with. It would therefore be naïve to expect Cather to articulate a sophisticated critique of America's past. What she does offer, however, are repeated attempts to shift the usual focus of narration from an anthropocentric perspective to a more encompassing one, which postulates agency and sentience where traditional narratives do not.

In doing so, she departs from the Romantic *topos* of man's union with nature and offers a more critical encounter with the natural environment, one that unsettles her characters and forces them to go beyond the categories that first come to their minds. The burrow turns out to

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³ As Dooley convincingly argues, while frequently wavering between a "biocentric" or "hands-off" "preservationist" approach to nature (the Navajo) and a "homocentric" or "wise-use" "conservationist" one (Alexandra Bergson or Ántonia Shimerda), Cather most often sides with the latter (65).

⁴ For a succinct presentation of this Catherian theme, see Slote 93-95.

be a comfortable place to sleep in, even when you are a little girl. Whereas humanity likes to imagine itself as the master of nature, Cather makes it plain that the forms our habitats adopt are dictated by the environment, even though we may like to think our houses are the ones reshaping it. As Glen Love remarks, "the silence and emptiness of the Cliff City reminds us that we cannot culturally construct the world any way we choose" (22). Thus resilience may sometimes prove to be a better concept with which to approach the history of civilizations than expansion, domination or conquest.

Accused of escapism by her more socially-conscious detractors, Cather reclaimed the term as a kind of banner for her aesthetic creed (*On Writing* 18-29). But her escapism is never idle or mindless. It provides an opportunity to put the constructs of civilization to the test of our most basic needs, namely—in the words of another American writer of her generation—"food and shelter" (London 299). In her writings, she roughs out the contours of a post-America in which one would live on an equal footing with nature and sense what Emerson famously called the "suggestion of an occult connection between man and the vegetable" (11). This post-America, I believe, is meant to remain a thought experiment, escapism recast as a form of fasting for the soul which, though salutary, eventually needs to be broken. Grenfell effectively embraces the comforts of civilization as he comes back from his walk, and his communion with nature is quickly forgotten, "drowned" by the more human pleasures of which his domestic is already partaking: "The door of the dining-car kitchen stood open, and the smell of coffee drowned the spruce smell and sea smell. William hadn't waited; he was wisely breakfasting." (407)

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