"Shoring up the House of Faith": The great buttress of Pope Innocent VI on the south wing of the Palace of the Popes, Avignon.
Building the House of Faith:
“Hard Punishments,”
the Plan and the Fragment

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Willa Cather first visited the old Provençal city of Avignon in September 1902, accompanied by her friend Isabelle McClung. The two women had travelled third class by train from Lyon on a sweltering day, sharing a compartment with five women “of the soil,” a baby that gnawed continually on Cather’s suitcase, and a German girl in need of a bath. The hostelry they escaped to at the end of their journey seemed an earthly paradise, and by the end of her stay, the historical papal city had become for Cather the climax of her introduction to Europe; as Edith Lewis writes: “[O]ne place fascinated her above all others—Avignon” (56), and its palace “stirred her as no building in the world had ever done” (190). So much so, continues Lewis, that Cather “went back . . . many times. It ‘teased her over and over for years,’ to use Miss [Sarah Orne] Jewett’s words. She always wanted to write a story about Avignon; it was the subject of her last, unfinished story” (56–57), which she called “Hard Punishments.” Cather’s finished story about Avignon remains the travel sketch she composed in 1902 and sent back to the Nebraska State Journal with similar reports of her trip abroad from Liverpool to Arles.
This early sketch, “The Old City of the Popes,” reveals both youthful enthusiasm for the picturesque and a naïve view of Avignon’s history, one Cather would correct prior to undertaking the story she left unfinished. Avignon’s picturesque aspects anticipate the Acoma setting in Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) and, more precisely, the Quebec of Shadows on the Rock (1931). “At the north end of the town,” Cather writes, “there rises an enormous façade of smooth rock 300 feet above the Rhône. This sheer precipice, accessible from the river side only by winding stone stairways, is crowned by the great palace of the popes” (World 2:936–37). Her description of Avignon’s gardens confuses the papal ones that once enhanced the east side of the palace with the modern Promenade du Rocher des Doms, distinguished by Thomas Okey (her eventual source on Avignon) as “a miniature Pincian” (305). It is from this park that one can enjoy the “unfolding” view of “the valley of the Rhône and what lies beyond it” that prepped Cather for the spectacular New Mexican sunsets in the Archbishop. In Avignon, the Alps rather than the Sangre de Cristos reflect the sun: “[T]hey were a pale, pinkish-purple, as though all the lilac blossoms that had ever been since the world began had been heaped up there against the hot, blue sky. The smell of them, even, seems to blow to one across the plain” (World 2:937).

Cather is quite perfunctory about the events leading up to the papal abandonment of Rome for this French outpost, merely reporting that it was “because of political complications Pope Clement V left Italy [and] chose Avignon as his residence seat” (936). Had she not known of the notorious conflict between Pope Boniface VIII, Clement’s Italian predecessor, and Philip IV (“the Fair”) of France, who seized and humiliated Boniface when the pope tried to assert dominion over secular authority and then arranged for the Archbishop of Bordeaux to become Clement V, pack the curia with French cardinals, and move the papacy to Avignon? Had she not made the connection between these “political complications” and their vehement condemnation by Dante at the end of Purgatory? Also, in describing the Italian style of the gardens, Cather wonders
if the popes “occasionally grew homesick for Italy” (937), as if unaware that all the Avignon popes were Frenchmen. While it is true that one of the garden-building popes, Urban V, built a gallery in the upper garden and called it Roma, “since deep in his heart he always had a longing to return and reign in the Eternal city” (Gagnière 107), none of these popes was homesick for Italy, and Cather’s reference to “those Italy-loving popes” (937) is a misrepresentation. It should be noted, too, that popes (albeit anti-popes) reigned in Avignon until 1403, although Cather has the correct date, 1377, for the end of Avignon’s history as legitimate papal seat and center of the Catholic world.

What was the appeal of this place to Cather? Love for the picturesque and rich history explains her youthful enthusiasm, but, as Lewis indicates, Cather was teased all her life by Avignon and returned there again and again. Her interest, then, runs deeper than youthful enthusiasm, and its key might be in Lewis’s account of their visit to Paris in 1920, when Cather “wanted to live in the Middle Ages” (119). At the time, Cather was in the midst of One of Ours (1922), which has little to do with the Middle Ages; however, a culture was collapsing for her, a water hole drying up (to use the image in one of Cather’s last completed stories, “Before Breakfast” [1944]), and the medieval world represented a second water hole. From the perspective of six centuries, corruptions could be cleansed enough to reveal virtues, and the Middle Ages became for Cather, as they had earlier for Henry Adams, a well-ordered spiritual refuge and a necessary context for art. Cather’s correspondence reveals that she had read Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, that paean (arising from an increasingly chaotic and godless modernism) to what Adams perceived as a culture that sought and achieved integration. Adams had printed his book privately in 1904 and again, with revisions, in 1912, when he authorized a trade edition to be published by Houghton-Mifflin the following year. In a 1914 letter to Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton-Mifflin, Cather thanks him for the Adams book and informs him that in her enthusiasm she has been telling her friends about it.
Adams concludes *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* with an elaborate metaphor tracing the philosophical perimeters of his medieval refuge (and later Cather's) and celebrating Saint Thomas Aquinas as its master builder. Negotiating a series of architectural challenges, Adams's Aquinas creates a cathedral of the Trinity in which humanity is linked to God and placed at the center of the universe. The structure is pertinent not only to Cather's proposed Avignon story but to the "Catholic novels" and *The Professor's House* (1925).

God as "an intelligent, fixed Motor, ... a concrete fact proved by the sense of sight and touch" (332), is the cathedral's foundation, but to satisfy Church dogma, this foundation needs to become both the unity behind creation's multiplicity as well as multiple itself. Put metaphorically, Thomas must build the Trinity upon the unity as a central (transept) tower upon a solid foundation. Confronted with the domna of direct creation, he must vault the nave of his cathedral without horizontal breaks for the weight to fall directly to the foundation, thus accomplishing the "evolution of the Finite from the Infinite" and making the whole universe "a simple emanation from God" (338). Then, to keep this house of faith from collapsing on the humanity it would shelter, Thomas must balance the thrusts in its arches, or (to interpret the metaphor) establish the interdependence of soul and body. In his solution the soul becomes individualized and is given permanence through contact with matter. Perhaps the greatest architectural challenge involves defining human free will within the context of divine determinism. This Thomas skillfully negotiates by reducing free will to reflex action allowing choice within certain limits. Adams uses the cathedral belfry tower to illustrate the solution: "The square foundation-tower, the expression of God's power in act,—his Creation,—rose to the level of the church façade as a part of the normal unity of God's energy; and then, suddenly, without show of effort, without break, without logical violence, became a many-sided, voluntary vanishing human soul[spire] ..." (356).

The elaborate metaphor doubtlessly helped Cather comprehend a universe where all the lines are perceived as converging, a world in
which humanity and human action are connected to God and thus possess meaning and mystery. "As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals . . . was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God," explains Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor's House, "life was a rich thing. . . . And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives" (55). Also, the metaphor elucidates the concept of the cathedral in the Archbishop and the well-ordered universe of the nuns in Shadows on the Rock. Bishop Latour initially conceives of the cathedral as his, a personal monument, "a continuation of himself and his purpose" (183), but responding to Father Vaillant's reservations, he connects it to an inclusive tradition, extending it both forward into the future and backward into the ecclesiastical past. After linking the rock from which it would be constructed to the similarly colored "old Palace of the Popes, at Avignon" (252), he explains to his vicar: "[T]he Cathedral is not for us . . . We build for the future—better not lay a stone unless we can do that" (254). Finally, to the dying archbishop, the cathedral becomes (if still personalized) a "harbour" and a "sea-wall" (285), a structure of medieval design protecting its congregation from cosmic chaos. Cather employs a similar church metaphor in Shadows when describing the intellectual construct sheltering the nuns of Quebec from the Canadian wilderness:

[T]hey had the . . . well-ordered universe about them: this all-important earth, created by God for a great purpose, the sun which He made to light it by day, the moon which He made to light it by night,—and the stars, made to beautify the vault of heaven like frescoes, and to be a clock and compass for man. And in this safe, lovingly arranged and ordered universe (not too vast, though nobly spacious), in this congenial universe, the drama of man went on at Quebec just as at home, and the Sisters played their accustomed part in it. There was sin, of course, and there was punishment after death; but there was always hope, even for the most depraved; and for those who died repentant, the Sisters' prayers could do much,—no one might say how much. (78)
The penultimate clause in the long first sentence compares the listed items to fresco depictions in a decorated church, like Padua’s famous Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, upon the walls and ceilings of which Giotto painted the entire Christian story, from the lives of Joachim and Anne (the Virgin’s parents) to a Last Judgment surmounted by angels rolling back a scroll of sky to reveal the mystery beyond it.

This “world of the mind” could be interpreted as Cather’s reply (intentional or not) to the passionate estimate of Thomas Aquinas in the final pages of Mont Saint Michel and Chartres. “Saint Thomas . . . gave much,” concludes Adams; he supplemented a moderate amount of free will with “immortality hereafter and eternal happiness.” His “God watched over man’s temporal welfare . . . anxiously . . . and assigned him space in the Church.” He “placed Man in the center of the universe, and made the sun and the stars for his uses” (354). Of course, unlike Cather’s passage, this is a lament. The essence of Aquinas’s structure, what Adams refers to as its “despotic central idea” (357), organic unity, was dropped as a dogma, he claims, when the lines of the universe were perceived as running in every conceivable direction rather than as converging. But in tracing subsequent disintegration from the fourteenth century to his own, Adams makes a somewhat wistful statement that illuminates Cather’s fascination for dramas rooted in this “despotic central idea”: “Truth, indeed, may not exist; science avers it to be only a relation; but what men took for truth stirs one everywhere in the eye and begs for sympathy” (358). While her interest (initially, at least) may have been less in truth than in sympathy, Cather was sufficiently teased by the world of Avignon to reach beyond its picturesque qualities for a subject worthy of the ideals (however diluted) that world represented.

**The Matter of Avignon**

Willa Cather never completed her Avignon story, but Thomas Okey’s *The Story of Avignon* deserves a place next to William J. Howlett’s life of Bishop Machebeuf, Abbé Scott’s life of Bishop
Laval, and Francis Parkman's France and England in North America volumes as a major historical source of her creative imagination. Edith Lewis tells us that Cather brought this book with her on their last (1941) trip to the West, and that "she often spent her mornings on the open roof garden of the Fairmont [Hotel in San Francisco], walking to and fro, and reading in this book. It was probably then that she planned the general outline of the Avignon story" (190). George Kates, whom Lewis allowed to peruse Cather's marked copy, adds that "Okey's little guidebook became a breviary" (479). This book, first published in 1911 and revised in 1926 (the edition Cather owned), is not "little" but contains over 400 pages, including maps, graphs, and illustrations. The Okey material establishes Cather's awareness of medieval corruption and violence as well as devotion and faith; specifically, it is the repository, rich in the negatives and positives of a colorful history, from which emerged the outline and fragment of the unfinished story. Okey's book instigated Cather's most concerted plunge into the medieval world that generated her youthful enthusiasm and eventually became a refuge. Its culture is at the heart of Shadows on the Rock and Death Comes for the Archbishop, and it impacts My Mortal Enemy (1926), The Professor's House, and significant aspects of other novels. Indeed, it permeates Cather's Quebec and American Southwest and provides the counterweight in her fiction to the matter of Nebraska. Yet methodically approaching Cather's work through the Middle Ages (that is, through chronological history from the Avignon story to Professor St. Peter's) presents the challenge of beginning with an outline and a fragment (or, to borrow from Adams, of raising a cathedral from a piece of foundation) needing to be fleshed out with Okey's guidebook, which for Cather provided construction details of the Papal Palace as a way to flesh out the metaphorical structure of Thomas Aquinas.

The Story of Avignon is divided into two parts. Part I (about 300 pages) is a history of the city, concentrating mainly on the period of legitimate papal residence (1309–77); Part II–The City (the last 100 pages) gives details on edifices and their contents. The first four chapters of Part I survey Avignon's history prior to the arrival of
Pope Clement V in 1309. Okey begins with a description of the Provençal country Cather loved, its Sahara-like plains, Spanish-hued architecture and white roads, limestone cliffs, alternately dry to torrential rivers, and its mistral (master wind) blowing from the Massif Central to parch the land. Medieval chronicles begin the story of Avignon at the Deluge, making its founder a chief of Noah’s son Japheth. The legend continues with Saint Martha arriving in A.D. 35 with her sister Mary and brother Lazarus, slaying a local dragon, and building a church on the rock (Notre-Dame-des-Doms); Saint Rufus, son of Simon of Cyrene (who carried Christ’s cross), then became Avignon’s first bishop. According to less miraculous accounts, the city had evolved into a major cultural center by the sixth century and grew in prominence as a military stronghold and fortress. Its importance was confirmed in 1206 with the construction of the only bridge over the Rhône between Lyon and the sea, the Bridge of Saint Benezet (a ruin described by Cather in her 1902 sketch). The legend of the bridge is typical medieval hagiography (like the story of Edmund of Canterbury that Cather borrowed for Shadows and the appearance of the Virgin to Juan Diego she included in the Archbishop); in it the boy saint is directed to build the bridge by Christ’s voice and an angel, and helped by a miracle to secure the local bishop’s aid.

Okey’s next six chapters (5 through 10) record the establishment of the papacy at Avignon and events leading to the sale of the city to the Church. When Boniface VIII, an Italian, attempted to assert dominion over secular authority, Philip “the Fair” of France had him seized and humiliated. Soon after Boniface’s death in 1303, Frenchman Bertrand de Goth was elected as Clement V and worked a deal with Philip to pack the curia with French cardinals and take up temporary residence in Avignon in 1309. However, Clement’s successor, John XXII (Jacques d’Euse), contemplated a permanent papal seat there, due to political threats to Church holdings in Italy, and created additional French cardinals to defend his papacy against the Italians. John became one of the great builder popes of Avignon, developing the old episcopal residence there into the Papal Palace that so impressed Cather in 1902. However, insecurity, superstition,
and judicial cruelty also characterized John's pontificate, and Okey includes a scene in which the Bishop of Cahors, convicted in a plot to poison the pope and use witchcraft against him, was tied to the tail of a horse, dragged through the streets, flayed, and roasted to death—a scene recalling for Cather readers the horrors of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt described in the Acoma section of the Archbishop. In 1334, Pope John was succeeded by another Frenchman, Jacques Fournier, Benedict XII, an austere man who took his job seriously and challenged secular princes. Benedict was one of the chief architects of the palace but as a Cistercian monk had a contempt for luxury and confined his efforts to making it a place of defense and prayer.

Chapters 11 through 13 present the final decades of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism. By the election of Etienne Aubert, Innocent VI, in 1352, anarchy and the loss of papal territory in Italy had increased the vulnerability of the popes to secular rulers. But during the pontificate of Innocent's successor, Urban V (Guillaume de Grimoard), Italy seemed safer than Avignon, and in 1367 the pope attempted to reestablish in Rome. However, the devastation he and his cardinals met there—St. Peter's, the Lateran, and the Vatican were in ruin—as well as their feeling of being aliens caused Urban to retreat to Avignon three years later. Urban was succeeded in 1370 by the last Frenchman to occupy Peter's throne, Pierre Roger de Beaufort, Gregory XI. This pope experienced constant pressure both from the Italian cardinals to return to Rome and from Saint Catherine of Siena, who came to Avignon in 1376 to mediate in the conflict between Florence and the papacy but stayed for three months to fulfill what she understood as a divine mission to reform the Church. Gregory complied early in 1377 but entered Rome supported by 2000 mercenaries rather than as the lamb of peace Catherine envisioned. Then, with the controversial election of the Italian Bartholomeo Prignano as Urban VI following Gregory's death, Robert of Geneva, a relative of France's Charles V, set up court at Avignon as Clement VII and further divided the well-ordered universe celebrated by Adams and Cather: Flanders, Poland, Hungary, and England and its French provinces stayed with Urban; Germany
divided its allegiance, and Cyprus, Naples, Castile, and Portugal supported Clement. The two popes vied with each other, seeking to validate their titles by bribery and butchery. One eyewitness of Urban's violence (Theodoric of Niem) describes suspect cardinals being chained and tortured on the rack and strappado as Urban paced above them proclaiming the Divine Office (Okey 193).

The remaining chapters (14 to 18) of Part I focus on the building of the Papal Palace, contrast its splendor with life among Avignon's lowly (material of particular interest to Cather), and take the city's history into the nineteenth century. In 1335, under the supervision of two masters of works, Benedict XII began papal construction around the old episcopal residence adjacent to Notre-Dame-des-Doms. He then enlarged the chapel, built Angels' Tower (housing the papal bedchamber, library, treasury, and guardroom on four floors), and in 1338 a grand reception hall (where Saint Catherine of Siena most likely had her audience with Gregory XI). He then began an east wing (completed in 1341) containing a conference center, a state dining room, and a kitchen with a funnel chimney purportedly the vent of the Inquisition torture chamber. Benedict had several buildings demolished to make space for lodgings enclosing the cloister, and his last undertaking was the tallest tower, the Tour de Trouillas, not completed until 1347, five years after his death. Clement VI hired a new master of works and added wings to the south and west: a vast chapel and justice hall in the south wing (considered the most beautiful), and a series of offices in the west wing (the present façade of the palace). (These additions were not completed until 1357, during the pontificate of Innocent VI, whose task it was to finish the towers and shore up the weakened south wing with a great buttress.) After detailing the urban squalor surrounding this magnificence, Okey lists the proclamations of the secular court administering justice during the papal era. Crimes ranged from blasphemy against God and the Blessed Virgin to violations of the city curfew and the swindling of customers. Punishments included tongue removal for blasphemy, foot amputation for aliens returning to the city after being expelled, hand amputation for a second offence of forgery, and whipping for a first offence of thievery.
CATHHER'S SELECTIONS

Awareness of the range of materials offered to Cather in The Story of Avignon makes the passages she noted informative regarding her interests and creative process. George Kates arranges her markings according to what he presumes to be her themes; however, since I have summarized Okey's book in its chronological sequence, I have considered the passages below in their original order.

In Okey's opening chapter, Cather marks the modern railroad traveler's introductory view of Provence: "At Valence the dark cypress and her spire—that sentinel of the south—comes into view; the mulberry, the oleander, the myrtle, the ilex and the stone-pine, tell of summer skies. Even the common flowers of the north are transfigured under the magic of the bright, translucent sky . . ." (5). The description is reminiscent of several in Death Comes for the Archbishop, especially in the Prologue, and one wonders when Cather acquired her Okey. The edition she owned came out in 1926, the year before her novel, and this passage, others, and her juxtapositioning of ardent faith and clerical corruption tempt me to view this source as an influence on both the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock.

In Okey's third chapter, which contains the legend of the boy Saint Benezet and the building of his bridge, Cather emphasizes "a community of Friars [of which Benezet appears to have been the superior] . . . founded . . . to establish ferries, build bridges, and give hospitality to travellers along the rivers of Provence" (25). She checks on the same page that the Pont Saint Benezet was for a century and a half "the only stone bridge between Lyons and the sea" and that "the importance it conferred on Avignon may easily be conceived." Cather confirms this importance two chapters later (5), marking the election of Clement V "[o]n June 5, 1305, after eleven months of obscure intrigue and patent discord" (44),—it was Clement who, as the unfortunate pawn of Philip the Fair, brought the papacy to Avignon four years later. In chapter 6, where Okey implicates Pope John XXII in the torture and death of an enemy cardinal, Cather notes that the pope's marshall (sheriff) was an
Englishman by the name of Walsingham (66). Later in the same chapter, she indicates interest in what Okey calls Pope John's "marvellous activity," which "may be seen in the 65,000 letters relating to his reign on the Vatican registers" (71).

Cather's next special interest seems to be Benedict XII, the subject of Okey's chapter 7. She circles a page (88) where a chronicler describes the pope as "a big man and malto corpulento." Benedict was also "a most holy man," continues the chronicler; "he went about seeking good and efficient clerics, and honoured them much because he found so few." This page also contains an episode in which Bonifice scolds a jolly Benedictine abbot for singing and dancing at wedding feasts and festivals: "Is it meet that an abbot of the venerable monastery of St. Paul should be a buffoon? Away with thee!" On the following page Cather notices the triumphal arrival in 1340 of an embassy from Alphonso of Portugal and Alphonso of Castile after victory over the Moors. Red-robed cardinals welcomed the crusaders with their captives and loot, and "a solemn pontifical mass was celebrated by Benedict himself, who preached a fine sermon" (89). Benedict's complexity and strength obviously intrigued Cather. Staunchly opposed to nepotism and pluralism and a stickler for clerical devotion to duty, Benedict was likewise, according to his clerical biographer, "avaricious" and "a mighty toper and ... 'Bibamus papaliter'-let us drink like a pope—became a proverb in his day" (Okey 93). Cather also reveals interest in Urban V, the devout and righteous pope who tried unsuccessfully to return the papacy to Rome. Her note inside the back cover calls attention to Okey's estimate of Urban as an educator and liturgist and to the city of Toulouse as a music center: "He loved learning, founded colleges and bursaries for poor students; he cared for the amenity of the services of the papal chapel, and sent a music master and seven boys to study music and singing at Toulouse" (170).

Cather now turns her attention to the Papal Palace itself. She marks in Okey's chapter on its construction (14) that the medieval concept of luxury was rather uneven, "that the windows of the rooms in the palace were unglazed" (218), and that records indicate windows in both the papal and emperor's rooms covered with linen
cloth. She also notices the great stone conduit that drained kitchen waste into the river Sorgue (220), the storage of silver vessels and papal scarlet in the basement of the Bell Tower (Tour de la Campane), and “[t]he pontifical bell, which from its silvery tone was known as the cloche d’argent” (221)—yet another reminder of the Archbishop. She is intrigued that Clement VI’s master of the works is paid “for carving four apes of stone in human form to be placed . . . over the portal of the palace” (223)—a reminder of the ape story in Shadows on the Rock. Details of the palace gardens interest her (as did Rocher des Doms gardens in 1902), “their clipped hedges, avenues of trees, flower-beds and covered and frescoed walls”; she checks that “John XXII maintained a menagerie of lions and other wild and strange beasts; stately peacocks . . . whereof six are white” (229). She is preoccupied with the luxury of palace life and checks Okey’s catalog of expenditures for ermine, silk, and brocade as well as his list of precious papal utensils: “jeweled cups, flagons of gold, knife handles of jasper and ivory, forks of mother of pearl and gold” (236). Cather marks the detailed description of a state dinner given to Clement V in 1308, several months before he settled in at Avignon:

The meats were built up in fantastic form: castles, gigantic stags, boars, horses, &c. After the service, the cardinals offered his holiness . . . two gold rings, jewelled with . . . sapphire and . . . topaz . . . . After the fifth service, a great tower with a fount whence gushed forth five sorts of choicest wines was carried in. . . . Then followed a concert of sweetest music, and dessert was furnished on two trees, one of silver, bearing rarest fruits of all kinds, and the other loaded with sugared fruits of many colours. . . . [T]he master cooks . . . executed dances before the guests. (237–38)

Immediately after this she checks Okey’s reminder that such luxury had, by modern standards, “strange defects of comfort” (239), like unglazed windows and carpetless rooms strewn with rushes.
As Kates indicates, Cather "has carefully worked over" (486) the whole of Okey's chapter (15) on life and justice in the medieval city—which begins with the question: "But what of the little folk of Avignon—the merchant, the shopkeeper, the craftsman, the day drudge?" (240). She notices that the city was policed by armed guards, the condition of prisoners, and Okey's catalog of punishments (242). She marks specific punishments for use in her story: the burning of heretic Jean de St. Jean, whose tongue was torn out with red-hot pincers, and the cutting out of the tongue of a person identified as "G" for "swearing by the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary" (243). She checks twice Okey’s comment that the city's statutes, “[p]romulgated by a papal government, . . . naturally begin with penalties against the denial of God, or of the Virgin Mary, or blasphemy against these or God’s saints, or profane swearing at play or in taverns or the public streets . . ." (244).

In Okey's Part II Cather singles out the description of modern Rocher des Doms Park, now "a miniature Pincian," and the magnificent view of four French departments from its belvedere, embracing the famous bridge of Saint Benezet, the mountains of Languedoc, the ruins of Villeneuve, and "far in the background . . . the square tower of Chateauneuf des Papes [sic]" (305). The last item Cather picks out, like her first, concerns vegetation: "a tall hedge of laurel 'high as a pine tree'" (348).

**THE STORY PROPOSED**

The particular interest Cather had in this material is obvious in the brief sketch we have of the story she was working on before her death in 1947. Titled "Hard Punishments," it is set in 1340, during the pontificate of Benedict XII. The account Edith Lewis provided Kates about the opening scene and flashbacks is rich in suggestion. Pierre, a dull boy whose hands have been ruined by torture for thievery, is weeping atop Doms Rock and looking across the river toward home while the magnificent entourage of Alfonso of Castile makes its way to Benedict for an indulgence. Pierre is interrupted by another boy, André, who is, according to Lewis, "spirited, intelligent,
well-born” (Kates 483), yet also the victim of medieval justice: he has had his tongue torn out with red-hot pincers for blasphemy. As a member of a revolutionary group involved in subversive activities against the Church and state (they are the same here), André tried to outdo his companions in reckless talk. “A scene is given,” continues Lewis, “in which an old blind priest, who had been André’s friend and confessor . . . comes to him after his ordeal . . . comforts him, fortifies him, and absolves him.” Lewis speculates that Cather “meant the deep root of the boy’s despair to be . . . his sense of personal dishonor—of having irretrievably betrayed something sacred in himself, thereby making the future impossible” (Kates 483–84). The compassionate old priest is able to restore André’s life “on a new plane,” to transform disability into challenge and make the poor peasant boy, Pierre, “part of this challenge.” André “set out to succor, perhaps to rescue, one even more unfortunate than himself” (484).

A story of this kind presumes the essential mystery of humanity inherent in the Thomistic world’s “despotic central idea” of lines converging in God and penetrates surfaces to approach and expose that mystery. According to Flannery O’Connor in Mystery and Manners (1969), the writer of such a story as described by Lewis would “be interested in characters . . . forced out to . . . act on a trust beyond themselves” (42), would view “violence [in this case mutilation] . . . as the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially . . .” (113), and consider “the greatest dramas [those that] naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul” (167). O’Connor argues that such a writer would be no mere “naturalist,” but one who “lives in a larger universe” (175), one whose fiction confirms “that the world came . . . into being and continues to come by a creative act of God . . .” (156). Cather reveals herself as such a writer directly—and with reference to Dante—in a 1936 letter to Edith Lewis from New Hampshire describing (in my paraphrase) how Jupiter and Venus hang together in the October afternoon sky for an hour . . . Then silver Venus slips into the rose-colored twilight to be close to the departed sun, and Jupiter now hangs
alone in the sky, going down about 8:30. It surely reminds us of
Dante's "eternal wheels." I can't believe that all this beauty and
majesty, these unfailing and fated arrivals and exits, are nothing
more than mathematics and horrible temperatures. If they are,
then human beings are the only wonderful things—because they
can wonder.

Wonderment over creation is a theme in the few pages of the
Avignon story surviving Lewis's attempt to honor Cather's wishes
that the unfinished manuscript be burned. These pages (now at the
University of Virginia's Alderman Library) provide evidence that
Cather's story would have satisfied O'Connor's prescription for "the
greatest fiction," in which faith expands vision to guarantee respect
for mystery (31). That faith dimension allows Cather to dramatize
the operation of grace, which in her story follows the Thomistic for-
formula at the heart of all O'Connor stories. The major theme is the
renewal or confirmation of faith in Father Ambrose and the congrega-
tion and the conversion of André during Christmas mass. The
scene seems intended to follow the one where André is comforted
and absolved by the priest. The boy's transformation and commit-
tment to Pierre would have already begun but probably climax here.
The setting is the "Old Chapel" of Benedict XII, a long rectangular
room with broken barrel vaulting and gothic windows. Developed by
Benedict from Avignon's old episcopal residence and dedicated in
1336 (four years prior to the setting of Cather's story), this chapel
was replaced by Clement VI's larger one and housed the archives of
Vaucluse department at the time of Cather's visit. Father Ambrose
and the two boys would not be located in a loft but near the chancel
behind the high altar, which is implied by their proximity to other
worshippers.

THE AVIGNON FRAGMENT

Since there are legal restrictions on the publication of the Avignon
fragment, I have paraphrased the surviving paragraphs in the left col-
umn; and in the right, my analysis of the original text includes some
of Cather's words.
From his position near the choir, Father Ambrose could see little of the splendor filling that long white chapel. But in the darkness he could see points of light from the many candles and a halo in the haze around each. He could hear the choir, for his ear was sensitive and well trained. And he could feel on every side something more beautiful than either the choir or the candlelight: an emotional kindling of faith, of belief, of imagination. Something is born during Christmas mass in all kinds of improbable people: lazy pages, swineherds, scruffy cooks.

In the opening paragraph the "kindling" of the virtue of faith and the clustering of it with "emotion," "belief," and "imagination" suggest the mystery of an experience referred to as "a miracle." Saint Thomas's faith theology, evident throughout the fragment, illuminates this cluster, which might have had its source for Cather in the "Faith" entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia she began consulting during the writing of the Archbishop. The entry, signed by Hugh Pope, quotes Aquinas's definition of faith as a double grace experience: "the act of the intellect assenting to a Divine truth owing to the movement of the will, which is itself moved by the grace of God" (5:756). Listing "emotion" first in the cluster could be Cather's nod to the claim in the entry that for "many outside the Church . . . faith is regarded as an emotion" (759), but more likely it reflects the entry writer's clarification that the will's assent can only be "motivated by charity or love of God." To this he appends a quotation from Saint Augustine: "Every true motion of the will proceeds from true love. . . . [T]o believe in God . . . is to love Him by believing" (757). Emotion, then, may be interpreted as a vehicle for something beyond the subjective. Father Ambrose's sense of the quickening of the congregation at mass, of a "heart beating" beneath his hand qualifies emotion as a prompting of faith and belief. Cather concludes her cluster with "imagination," the power to apprehend the unseen.
The Chapel of Pope Benedict XII (presently the Vaucluse Department Archives), the setting of the surviving scene of "Hard Punishments."
As the priest from Toulouse intoned the mass in his tenor voice, Father Ambrose shut his eyes, giving up the little sight he had to concentrate more intently on the beautiful words and music. In the priest’s singing he sensed the awe of the congregation—could feel it like a heart beating beneath his hand.

Father Ambrose’s failing eyesight and, in the second paragraph, his closing his eyes against the physical scene, convey such prompting. The author of the entry quotes Augustine again on levels of seeing and the relationship between physical sight and faith: “You ought not to see in order to believe, you ought to believe in order to see; you ought to believe so long as you do not see . . .” (757). Cather focuses this theme specifically toward the incarnation of God in Christ, of the unseen in the seen, which Christmas commemorates and the mass itself perpetually re-presents under the physical appearance of bread and wine in the Eucharist. The birth taking place in the “unlikely people” suggests Christ’s rebirth in each of them (their being born again in Christ) during the mass. This kind of rebirth is articulated in the postcommunion prayer at Christmas dawn: “May the birthday newness of this Sacrament ever give us new life, O Lord: Since it is His Sacrament, whose wonderful Nativity overcame the oldness of our human nature” (St. John’s 140). The experience is “more beautiful” than the candlelight because it reveals that the symbol of Christ as light (embodied in the candles) refers to the light (of faith) being born in these people. The theme of traditional Nativity masses is echoed here in “is born” and its Latin equivalent, Natus est (repeated several times in these liturgies). The gospel reading for the Christmas daytime mass is from the first chapter of John’s Gospel (1–14), in which Christ’s life becomes the light “the darkness did not comprehend.” The prayer (from Psalm 97) introducing this reading celebrates this “sanctified day . . . a great light hath descended upon the earth,” and the
He asked himself if there was anything in the universe as wonderful as wonder itself—wonderment? That which the noble and the beautiful evoke in all but the utterly barren. That emotional surge which at once allows us to exalt, be humbled, and triumph—triumph over what we cannot know. Were there other creatures in the universe able to respond to the heavens in this way, with the heart and the mind, able in their littleness to rejoice in this immensity? Perhaps the angels were. But the Creator of all was not, for to wonder and rejoice as men do would be self-worship. Wondering who it was opening (introit) prayer of the dawn mass begins: “A light shall shine upon us this day, for the Lord is born to us” (St. John’s 142, 137).

In Cather’s third and longest paragraph, Father Ambrose grapples with the “wonder” generated by what he senses happening in him and the others at mass. Cather again uses “emotion,” this time an emotional “wave,” to define an experience she equates with “humility,” “exaltation,” and “triumph.” The passage then takes up the theme of Cather’s letter to Lewis, “wonderment” over the stars and the human ability to experience awe, the ability of “littleness” to “rejoice” in “immensity.” Such contemplation, which here includes the wonder of God’s act of incarnation in the mass, in Ambrose himself, and in the others, now poses a dilemma. God’s wonderment and rejoicing in the Creation would amount to “self-worship,” but the inability to worship another would seem to reduce “any being” to “a stone,” to eternal “blindness” and dumbness. The reading from John’s Gospel is relevant here as a response to this dilemma, for it distinguishes Christ, the Word of God (Logos)—in whom divine nature coexists with the human power to “wonder” and “rejoice”—as the Creator: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was made nothing that was made...” (1:1–3). Father Ambrose contributes a solution that separates “great creators” (artists), including “human” ones, from lesser beings. Such creators were “satisfied—partly” with their creations, but they were not “admiring.” Cather than includes in Latin the recurring phrase from the first
God worshipped was frightening, for not being able to worship—to exalt and be humbled in admiration—would reduce any being to a stone, to eternal dumbness and blindness. God, who could create the ant and the bear and the stars, could not wonder at them. Such is the way of the great creators, even human ones. They made, were satisfied, and passed on—but did not wonder. Et vidit Deus quod esset bonum.

chapter of Genesis, And God saw that it was good. This entire speculation has its source in the Hexameron, or Six Days of Creation (ca. 387), a series of homilies by Saint Ambrose, and explains the choice of the priest's name. Addressing creation as the co-operative act of the Father and the Son, Ambrose writes:

And so you read both “God spoke” and “God created,” in which both Father and Son are honored with the same name of majesty. “And God saw that it was good.” He spoke as if speaking to one who knew all the wishes of His Father. He saw as if He knew all that His Son had accomplished, acting with Him in community of operation. “He saw that it was good.” He did not, of course, recognize that of which He was ignorant. Rather, His approval was given to what gave Him pleasure. The work did not please Him as something unknown, just as the Father, who was pleased with the Son, was not like one unknown . . . (63)

In other words, due to foreknowledge, God was not astonished at what He created, nor did He “rejoice” or experience “wonder”; he merely approved, “satisfied—partly.”
The tenor priest intoned the final words: *Natus est*—born here, among the people and within them. Father Ambrose was assured of this in his heart, and beside him he felt delight shudder through André, his pupil. Also, he heard a sob from the poor boy with the ruined hands. Yes, to us is born the Lord, who gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and the dumb speak, and who offers to all generations release from bondage, moments of becoming truly living souls.

The final paragraph of the fragment dramatizes the direct communication between God and humanity that Henry Adams depicts as the unbroken line from foundation to vaulting achieved by Aquinas in his cathedral. In Cather’s first sentence, *Natus est* is repeated in Latin (it appears in English near the end of the first paragraph) and in the fourth sentence explicitly applied to Christ—“He” who “made” the blind see, the lame walk, and the dumb speak. The birth is located both “among” (in the Sacrament on the altar) and “within” the people and confirmed by Father Ambrose’s testimony: he knew it “[i]n his heart.” The climax of the paragraph (and, indeed, of the entire fragment) is the “shudder” Ambrose senses running through André. Like Saint Ambrose, who had instructed Saint Augustine during his conversion, this Ambrose directs a sinner toward conversion—a sinner he had absolved of blasphemy and revolutionary activity against the Church. André’s shudder and Pierre’s moan suggest that they, like the others at mass, are experiencing this birth, a process involving will and intellect that Adams puts in mechanical terms when discussing free will as reflex action: “an increase of energy from the Prime Motor [God], which enables [the conductor—in this case André] to attain the object aimed at [God]” (352). Father Ambrose interprets the process as “release” and extends it from the lowly, “unlikely people” gathered here to “all . . . generations” in the “future.” Christ, the priest concludes, has bequeathed enough time (“hours”) for each soul to escape its “bondage” (social, perhaps, as well as sinful) and enjoy its “moment” of birth into the light of faith.
DOOMED SETTINGS

Stories like Pierre and Andre’s emerge from particular cultural traditions and systems demanding settings favorable to mystery, like O’Connor’s rural South or Hawthorne’s colonial New England. What remains of “Hard Punishments” presumes the Dantean well-ordered universe that survives in the minds of the nuns in Shadows on the Rock, the construct of an age memorialized by Godfrey St. Peter in his put-down of science, when peasants and kings gathered in cathedrals to participate in an ongoing contest of good and evil for their souls. To illustrate such a vertically charged system, the fragment’s setting is, admittedly, a bit off center; as a modernist Cather refused to conform to the historical ideal in either time or place. Fourteenth-century Avignon would be associated more likely with the disintegration of this system. Although the popes were tireless in their efforts to hold the system together, the events leading to their removal from Rome and almost seventy years’ residence at Avignon marked a period of decline that continued into the Reformation.

In selecting the matter of Avignon for her proposed story, Cather revealed an ongoing penchant for challenged societies reflecting values she considered under siege on the eve of the Atomic Age. The Anasazi culture of Mesa Verde had been wiped out; Acoma had suffered conquest, as had the Mexicans of the Southwest. In the Epilogue of Shadows of the Rock, Quebec in 1713 seems a safe refuge from flux, yet in less than half a century it would fall permanently to the English. In choosing the challenged medieval world and Avignon as a setting, Cather linked her work to Dante’s, not in any imitative way or as an echo, but by tapping material Dante had used in The Divine Comedy, an epic at once celebrating the Thomistic cathedral and condemning its destruction by corruption and power politics. Clement V’s subservience to Philip the Fair and removal to Avignon angered Dante as an Italian partisan bent on salvaging the papacy. Near the end of Purgatory (canto 32), the pilgrim watches a tableau depicting the transformation of a chariot (the Roman Church) into a monster upon which sits an “ungirt whore” (the
papacy). A jealous giant (Philip) kisses the whore, then beats her, and hauls monster and whore into the woods (toward Avignon):

Then in a jealous fit the brute untied
the monster from the tree, and dragged it off
into the woods, far toward the other side,

until between me and that doxie queen
on her weird beast, he made the trees a screen. (157–61)

* * *

Life is not well ordered, and flux rather than stasis rules. Humanity is too imperfect (or, for some, too intelligent) to accept any "despotic central idea" willingly. Orderly universes exist merely in historical idealizations like Godfrey St. Peter's, or they exist in the communal mind, as the narrator of Shadows observes of Quebec's nuns. Yet Cather was intrigued and perhaps comforted by certain times and places in which humanity struggled to sustain, however ineffectively, constructs believed to mirror life beyond.
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