

FLORIAN FREITAG

New World Demeters: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*

*Der Beitrag folgt der aktuellen Tendenz, Kanada- bzw. Amerikastudien als „comparative North American studies“ zu betreiben, und vergleicht das Frauenbild in (u.a.) zweien der bekanntesten Bauernromane der amerikanischen bzw. frankokanadischen Literatur, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) und Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914). Es wird konstatiert, dass die Protagonistinnen beider Romane durch ihre außergewöhnliche Opferbereitschaft dem im Genre des Bauernromans der jeweiligen Nationalliteratur üblicherweise propagierten Frauenbild entsprechen, es gleichzeitig jedoch transzendieren, indem sie durch den Dienst an der jeweiligen Nation, jede auf ihre eigene Weise, letztlich den Tod zu überwinden vermögen.*

Résumé

*Cet article suit la tendance actuelle de considérer les études canadiennes et américaines comme « études nord-américaines comparatives » en analysant l'image de la femme surtout dans deux des romans du terroir les mieux connus de la littérature québécoise et de la littérature américaine, *O Pioneers!* de Willa Cather (1913) et *Maria Chapdelaine* de Louis Hémon (1914). L'article constate qu'en faisant preuve de sacrifices énormes, les protagonistes des deux romans confirment l'image traditionnelle de la femme dans le genre du roman du terroir dans les deux littératures tout en dépassant cette image, puisqu'en se mettant au service de leur nation respective, chacune, à sa façon, réussit à transcender la mort.*

Introduction

In 1927, Joseph-Édouard Perreault, then Minister of Colonization of the Province of Quebec, gave a speech at a conference of the *Association des femmes canadiennes*. Seeking to promote the colonization of the Abitibi region, the speech, entitled *Maria Chapdelaine, l'épouse et la mère*, tells the (apparently true) story of a

mother of thirteen children, who after the death of her husband decided to take over the management of the farm, located in the said Abitibi region. Within eleven years, Perreault notes, this woman has not only managed to triple the family's land holdings, she also turned the pioneer farm into a model estate worth as much as \$42 313 (Perreault 1927, 20).

In his speech, Perreault repeatedly refers to this widow as "cette Maria Chapdelaine devenue épouse et mère" (Perreault 1927, 9). To Nicole Deschamps, who discusses the minister's speech in great detail in *Le mythe de Maria Chapdelaine*, Perreault's joining together the widow's story and the heroine of Hémon's novel appears not only as a serious distortion or misreading of the latter, but also as one important instance in the process of the mythification of *Maria Chapdelaine* (cf. Deschamps/Héroux/Villeneuve 1980, 21-37). From the perspective of a student of comparative North American Studies, however, Perreault's speech rather seems like an attempt to join together two character types created by French-Canadian and American farm novels, respectively: In *Maria Chapdelaine, l'épouse et la mère*, the typical image of French-Canadian farm women, the marrying daughter, as exemplified by Maria Chapdelaine in Louis Hémon's eponymous 1914 novel, has metamorphosed into the prototypical image of American farm women, the pioneer heroine, as embodied by Alexandra Bergson, the heroine of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913).

Pioneer Heroines and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

While the overwhelming majority of American farm novels is set on (some sort of) frontier and does depict pioneering ventures, not all of them actually correspond to the American frontier myth with respect to their depiction of women on the farm; that is, not all of them depict women as reluctant pioneers.¹ As Carol Fairbanks points out in a survey of women's prairie novels (cf. Fairbanks 1986), female frontier experiences are represented more positively in women's than in men's fiction: In fact, however, many women in American farm novels – be they written by women or men – appear only initially as reluctant pioneers, and in some novels the pioneer hero even is a pioneer heroine. Indeed, the main protagonists of farm novels such as Eleanor Gates's *The Plow-Woman* (1906), Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and *O Pioneers!* (1913), Edna Ferber's *So Big* (1924), Ole E. Rølvaag's *Peder Victorious* (1929),

1 The role of women within the traditional American frontier myth may, in fact, be twofold: On the one hand, the (male) hero may experience the land as essentially feminine, that is, to use Annette Kolodny's words, "as woman, the total female principle" (Kolodny 1975, 4), from which he seeks gratification either as a son or as a lover (cf. Kolodny 1984, 12). On the other hand, (white) women may appear as symbols of civilization, that is as angels of the log-cabin household, and, simultaneously, as reluctant pioneers, "uncomfortable and out of place on the frontier [...]: afraid of the wilderness, afraid of the Indians, homesick, and often physically or mentally sick" (Armitage 1982, 40).

and Isabel Stewart Way's *Seed of the Land* (1935) may be characterized as "Prairie Matriarchs" (Fairbanks/Sundberg 1983, 95) or pioneer heroines: In stark contrast to the reluctant pioneer of the American frontier myth, they are exceptionally enduring and brave and successfully manage their own farm, exchanging the domestic realm – the home as well as the small (kitchen) gardens that have been used as emblems of women's frontier experiences (cf. Kolodny 1984) – and housework for the open fields and traditionally "male" tasks (especially plowing). They also wear men's clothes, are regularly accused of being crazy because they refuse to conform to women's prescribed roles, and are single, either widowed or unmarried. Hence, not only does, as Karolides argues, a "parallelism [...] exist [...] with certain elements of the characteristics of the frontiersmen" (Karolides 1967, 83), one might even argue that American farm novels featuring pioneer heroines, in a way, replace the (male) pioneer hero with the American pioneer heroine – in fact, on the level of plot, the pioneer heroines quite literally take the role or place of a deceased or disabled husband or father. And they are conscious of doing so: In *The Plow-Woman*, for instance, Dallas Lancaster won't let her sister work outside the house because she thinks of herself as "the man" of the family (Gates 1906, 50).

The replacement of the male pioneer hero with the female pioneer heroine engenders a significant change in the nature of the relationship between the hero(ine) and the soil. On the one hand, this change is due to the fact that even those American farm novels that feature pioneer heroines still conform to the American frontier myth by depicting the land as female (cf. footnote 1; hence, they do not simply reverse the traditional gender roles). On the other hand, this change is due to the fact that these novels (along with the American frontier myth) also subscribe to what Adrienne Rich has identified as "compulsory heterosexuality" (cf. Rich 1980): In contrast to the pioneer hero, the pioneer heroine, as a woman, even though she may fulfill a traditionally "male" role on her farm, cannot seek sexual gratification from the "virgin" land by conquering or dominating it. Instead, the pioneer heroine identifies with the rural space, linking the fertility of the soil with her own power to give birth to new life, or, as Dorothy Jones terms it, viewing the land as "a space which represents her own life and in particular her body and her sexuality" (Jones 1984, 269).

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), for instance, not only shows Alexandra Bergson as a pioneer heroine whose life is represented by and in the soil she tills ("[...] it is in the soil that she expresses herself best"; Cather 1913, 32), the novel also directly links the fertility of the soil to the female body: Being "close to the flat, fallow world about her," Alexandra feels "in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (80)² – the pioneer heroine here appears as the land's "patron deity" (Ryder 1990, 110; see also Daiches 1971, 28). And at the end of the novel, Cather depicts the unity of fe-

2 Cather, Willa, 1913, *O Pioneers!*, New York: Dover, 1993. All subsequent page numbers, unless otherwise indicated, refer to this edition.

male body, soul, and soil in a triumphant image of death and reincarnation: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn [...]" (Cather 1913, 122).

Referring to the fact that it was developed from two previously written short stories ("Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree"), Willa Cather once characterized *O Pioneers!* (1913), her first novel to put Nebraska on the literary map of the United States and arguably also the novel in which Cather "found her way" as an author (Wagenknecht 1994, 50), as a "two-part pastoral" (qtd. in Murphy 1984, 113; see also O'Brien 1978, 157). The novel does indeed have two parts, although in a slightly different sense: The first quarter of *O Pioneers!* may be analyzed as the almost conventional story of an American pioneer's material success. The second part, comprising the rest of the novel, reveals this (material) success to be the result of an enormous personal sacrifice, apparently to the land itself, but actually to the dreams and chances of past and especially future generations. While it is true, then, that Alexandra's sacrifice inextricably links her with the land, to the extent that she and her story "cannot be understood apart from [her] place [...]" (Thacker 2003, 531), her sacrifice also makes it impossible to understand her and her story apart from her ancestry and her (spiritual) progeny.

In *O Pioneers!*, the pioneer's material success is mainly conveyed by the contrast between the descriptions of the Nebraska prairie in the first two sections of the novel, set in 1883 and 1890, respectively. Most of these descriptions are grouped together in the opening paragraphs of the two sections: At the beginning of the first section, set in deep winter, nature is depicted as overpowering, bleak, and almost hostile, while at the beginning of the second section, fittingly set in spring and summer, it is rather characterized as empowering, colorful, and fertile: The "howling wind" (1) of the first section, blowing over and under the buildings of the town of Hanover, later animates "light steel windmills" (29); the "gray" of the "wild land" (1) is replaced by the "green and brown and yellow" of "neighboring fields", the colors of "gayly painted farmhouses", "red barns", and "gilded weather-vanes" (29); and the "tough prairie sod" (1) now "yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear [...] with a soft, deep sigh of happiness"³ and produces harvests for which "there are scarcely men and horses enough" (29). Most importantly, perhaps, "order and fine arrangement" (32) have been imposed on the land – the chaos of the first section, in which "dwelling-houses were set about haphazard" (1), has given way to the geometric design of a "vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn" and "white roads, which always run at right angles" (29). Finally, human landmarks are no longer threatened to be overwhelmed by nature: The grass that in the first section "had, indeed, grown back over everything" (6) is now being cut (30).

3 This is probably the only time in *O Pioneers!* that the soil is described in more or less openly sexual terms. Interestingly, the only human beings appearing in this scene are male ("there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting", 29); Alexandra is not mentioned until the end of the chapter (32).

The drastic change in the country between the first two sections of the novel is expressed even more explicitly in the way the various characters perceive the prairie: To John Bergson, in the first section, the land appears as a “wild thing that had its ugly moods” (7), even as an “enigma” (8), and Lou Bergson believes that “this high land wasn’t never meant to grow nothing on” (23). By contrast, Carl Linstrum characterizes the very same country in the second section as the land of “milk and honey” (46). In fact, the only character to whom the prairie seems “beautiful [...], rich and strong and glorious” (25) and who “feel[s] the future stirring” in the land already in the first section of the novel is Alexandra Bergson.

The special relationship between Alexandra and the land, her “love and yearning” (25) for and identification with it, have already been touched upon and characterized as typical of the American pioneer heroine. Yet, this is by no means the only aspect in which Alexandra corresponds to this type: At her father’s request on his deathbed, she – rather than her two brothers – replaces him as the manager of the Bergson farm; she works outside – although she “must not work in the fields any more” (10), her “house is the big out-of-doors, and [...] it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (32) – and even wears men’s clothes (2); her experiments with new crops, innovative managerial strategies, and the latest farming techniques are frowned upon (especially by her brothers Lou and Oscar; at one point Alexandra jokingly predicts that she will be sent to an asylum for building a silo, 36). However, they turn the Bergson farm into “one of the richest farms on the Divide” (32). As early as in the first quarter of the novel and up until the end of *O Pioneers!*, then, Cather, the “lyrical voice of Manifest Destiny” (Stout 2000, 157), depicts Alexandra as an epic pioneer heroine who, not unlike her namesake, Alexander the Great,⁴ founds an (agrarian) empire that knows no boundaries: “On every side [of Alexandra’s farm] the brown waves of earth rolled away to meet the sky” (122). However, until almost the very end of the novel, Alexandra, like most other pioneer heroines, also remains unmarried (according to Emil, she even has “never been in love,” 59); and it is this aspect of Alexandra’s status as a pioneer heroine that Sharon O’Brien uses as one of the starting points for her intriguing analysis of Cather’s novel (O’Brien 1978).

Referring again to Cather’s own analysis of *O Pioneers!* as a “two-part pastoral” (see above), O’Brien analyzes the novel as a study of passion that contrasts “the insufficiency, even the danger, of [Marie’s] sexual passion and the opposing grandeur of [Alexandra’s] passion deflected from the personal to the impersonal object, [...] the creative passion of the artist” (O’Brien 1978, 158). No doubt sexual passion in *O Pioneers!* is depicted as dangerous and even deadly: Marie and Emil die a classic *Liebestod*, Frank degenerates into something “not altogether human” (117), and even the drummer at the beginning is symbolically “stabbed [...] with a glance of Amazonian fierceness” (3). It is also true that, as O’Brien argues, if Alexandra “could not regulate her passions she would never achieve the self-discipline necessary to

4 See, for instance, O’Brien 1987, 433; Ryder 1990, 107; Stout 2000, 113.

transform emotion into art" (O'Brien 1978, 167): Alexandra, personifying the Protestant work ethic, dedicates herself and her life fully to the soil, so that at the end of the novel Carl can safely say that she "belong[s] to the land [...]. Now more than ever" (122), and this is, in fact, the true reason for her material success: "[I]t was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors" (79). The key scene here occurs at the end of the first section of *O Pioneers!*: Discovering that she has "a new consciousness of the country," Alexandra feels "as if her heart were hiding down there [in the long grass]" (28) – Alexandra gives her heart to the land and, in fact, symbolically buries it in the soil. Her complete sacrifice to the soil, then, is also the reason for her extreme loneliness throughout the novel (indeed, her last words in the novel are "I have been very lonely, Carl," 122): "She had never been in love [...]. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows" (80).

By depicting Alexandra as an "artist" and her successfully turning the prairie into productive farmland as a "creative act" (O'Brien 1978, 168), however, O'Brien runs the risk of implying that for Alexandra the establishment of a successful farm is an end in itself. But whereas for John Bergson and also for Lou and Oscar, "land, in itself, is desirable" (8), for Alexandra the accumulation of property has no intrinsic value. Instead, her success and her sacrifice only make sense to her with respect to the past and the future, that is, if she can use it to realize the dreams and chances of the preceding and the following generations: "I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper," she says, "if it is only to take my friends away from me" (70). And Alexandra uses every chance of employing her material success for the benefit of the old and the young surrounding her: She "protects" Ivar (36) and gives "liberty" and comfort to old Mrs. Lee (36; 74); she helps the hired girls from Sweden, above all Signa, getting a start in the New World (33) and offers her niece Milly a chance by buying her a piano (40). Milly's piano is, in fact, the perfect example of how Alexandra dedicates her success simultaneously to the past and the future: The first time she thought of giving her a piano was when Milly "learned that book of old Swedish songs that [her] grandfather used to sing" (40).

Most importantly, however, Alexandra perceives her sacrifice to the land as the only way to fulfill the last wish of her father, who in his portrait "look[s] forward into the distance, as if [his eyes] already beheld the New World" (40), and as the only way to offer Emil "a chance, a whole chance" (45; to Alexandra these two motivations are, in fact, one and the same: "'I'm sure it was to have sons like Emil, and to give them a chance, that father left the old country,'" 45). By relegating Emil to the mere role of the object of Marie's passion and by analyzing Alexandra's sacrifice as the wish to create a self-sufficient piece of art, O'Brien obscures the fact that the two – Emil and Alexandra's sacrifice – are inextricably linked: The former motivates the latter. The very scene in which Carl actually calls Alexandra an artist ("'I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own,'" 45) is

highly revealing: Carl asks Alexandra how she achieved her success. Alexandra answers first by denying any agency in the creation of the farm ("We hadn't any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it," 45; one of the many instances in *O Pioneers!* in which the land is depicted as an agent), and then goes on to relate how she "went ahead and built this house. I really built it for Emil. I want you to see Emil, Carl. He is so different from the rest of us!" (45). Alexandra repeatedly states that it has been for Emil that she has worked so hard (cf., for instance, 45, 71, 94, 121), perhaps most clearly after his return from Mexico:

Yes, she told herself, it had been worth while; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world [...], and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt well satisfied with her life. (84)

Since both Alexandra's success and the sacrifice of her life do not make sense to her in themselves, but only in relation to Emil, who embodies the future, it is not surprising that after Emil's death Alexandra experiences the deepest crisis of her entire life: With Emil gone, she feels "[w]hat was left of life seemed unimportant" (113) and that "she had not much more left in her life than [Frank]" (118). Consequently, after Emil's death Alexandra's visions of her own death multiply: At the graveyard, where she goes to see her father's grave, she feels "heavy and numb," "so tired [she] didn't know how [she]d ever get home" and looks, in Ivar's words, "like a drowned woman" (111). Back on the farm, she longs "to be free from her own body" and "it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life" (112). Hence, she has become one of the "tired pioneers" over whom Emil's "blade [had] glittered" before his death (30). Most importantly, her "old illusion of her girlhood" (112) of being carried away by a strong, male being finally turns out to be a death reverie: "[F]or the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly [...]. [I]t was [...] the mightiest of all lovers" (112). In fact, her supposedly romantic fancy had been a death vision all along, not a "secret longing for dependence" from a man (Harvey 1995, 39), but a longing for independence from her body and "longing itself" (112): In the dream, the mighty being that carries her smells of the "ripe cornfields" (80) that will one day "receive hearts like Alexandra's into [their] bosoms" (122) and Alexandra herself is carried like the "sheaf of wheat" (80) in which her heart will be reincarnated (122). Finally, after each reverie she pours "buckets of cold well-water" (81) over her body, thus making it painfully alive again.

If *O Pioneers!* still ends on a note of fulfillment and even triumph, however, it is because at the end of the novel it becomes clear that neither Emil's nor Alexandra's death can ultimately deprive her life and her sacrifice of its sense. Already before visiting Frank at the prison, Alexandra feels "unreasonably comforted" by encountering a young student from Emil's university, who, like him, comes from a farm, and

she hopes "he will get on well here" (115). And in the closing scene, she notes that "though Emil is gone," she still loves the land (121) and that it "belongs to the future" (122): By sacrificing her life to the soil, Alexandra has enabled it "to give [hearts like Alexandra's] out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn," and, lastly as well as most importantly, "in the shining eyes of youth!" (122).

Marrying Daughters and Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*

In her 1982 analysis of the portrayal of women in the French-Canadian farm novel, Janine Boynard-Frot notes that in the *roman de la terre* wives and mothers – and virtually all wives in the French-Canadian farm novel are also mothers⁵ – have an alarmingly high death rate (cf. Boynard-Frot 1982, 99). For daughters or young unmarried women, in turn, marriage – which, consequently, implicates motherhood and an early death, although this is not depicted in the novels since they most commonly end with the daughter's marriage – seems to be the only option: "Ce qui caractérise le personnage féminin, dans le roman du terroir, c'est donc la transformation de son état de célibataire en phase initiale à celui de mariée en séquence finale" (Boynard-Frot 1982, 99). Boynard-Frot's analysis being mainly informed by feminist and Marxist literary theories, she analyzes this marriage as a power relationship and as a market exchange aimed at sustaining the patriarchal power system that dominates French-Canadian society, stressing the reification of the daughter within this exchange:

Le roman [de la terre] représente la relation d'amour, non sous la forme d'une communication entre deux sujets mais bien comme un rapport de force entre un sujet et un objet. (Boynard-Frot 1982, 162)

Un destinataire externe se substitue au sujet féminin, le père donnant sa fille en mariage au garçon. Ainsi, dans cette structure de l'échange, la femme n'est qu'un objet. (Frot 1977, 67)

In addition, Boynard-Frot argues in her analysis of women characters in French-Canadian farm novels from the 1920s and early 1930s that daughters may be classified according to their "obéissance," that is their willingness to cooperate with the project of marriage as conceived by their fathers: At the one extreme end of the spectrum, she notes, one finds the "femme-objet," the obedient daughter, ready to be married off to anyone whom her father selects for her and thus representing "l'état d'être idéal [...], sa force de production et de reproduction étant susceptible d'être exploitée au maximum" (Frot 1977, 62). Situated at the other extreme end is

5 Cf. Boynard-Frot 1982, 107: "Il n'y a pas d'histoire de femme mariée et non mère dans le roman du terroir." Boynard-Frot seems to have overlooked, however, the case of Donaldal Poudrier in Grignon's *Un homme et son péché* (1933).

the "sujet résistant," the disobedient daughter, who challenges the paternal power. Depending on whether they comply with the paternal power or not (that is whether they are obedient or disobedient daughters), Boynard-Frot observes, women in the French-Canadian farm novel are portrayed either as physically attractive, virginally pure and innocent, shy, quiet, charitable, hard-working, and self-sacrificing (in the case of obedient daughters; cf. Boynard-Frot 1982, 157-190) or as less attractive, selfish, "coquette," and as "cause[s] de désordre." The latter group, similarly to the mothers, is regularly eliminated from the novel (cf. Frot 1977, 67).

Without doubt the (dis)obedience of the daughter and her positive or negative portrayal in the novel are inextricably linked in the *roman de la terre*. Yet one might wonder whether this (dis)obedience is not merely one (albeit, perhaps, a very prominent) manifestation of a more general concept, one that not only informs the depiction of women characters, but also that of male characters and even spaces in the French-Canadian farm novel: namely, the concept of Agriculturalism, according to which the farm or the rural environment is the only site where French-Canadian culture may survive on the North American continent and according to which the mere geographical location of a character suffices to identify his or her stance on the French-Canadian cause, the struggle for cultural survival. Indeed, not only are married women, as Boynard-Frot notes, usually associated with enclosed spaces (the farm, the kitchen, and eventually, one might argue, the grave; cf. Boynard-Frot 1982, 107). Those whom she identifies as "femmes-objets," as obedient daughters, are also regularly depicted in (or as a part of) the French-Canadian countryside, whereas those whom she analyzes as "sujets résistants," as disobedient daughters, are usually linked to spaces which are somehow associated with the English (most importantly, the city), thus not only challenging paternal authority, but, more generally and more importantly, jeopardizing the survival of French-Canadian culture on the North American continent.

The concept of Agriculturalism, of course, also affects the marriage of the daughter: In fact, many *romans de la terre* do not simply contrast an angelic, rural, and obedient daughter with a coquettish, urban, and disobedient female character, but rather depict daughters who are torn between two spaces and two corresponding men: While at first they may be tempted to leave the rural space (literally and figuratively, by marrying someone from outside the rural space), they ultimately decide to stay (again, literally and symbolically, by marrying a local farmer or someone who is similarly devoted to the French-Canadian soil and cause), thus becoming "daughters of survival."⁶ For instance, Maria in Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914), Marie in Harry Bernard's *La terre vivante* (1925), Alma-Rose in Sylva Clapin's *Alma-Rose* (1925; a self-proclaimed sequel to *Maria Chapdelaine*), or Jeanne in Louis-Philippe Côté's *La terre*

6 Many French-Canadian historical novels from the nineteenth century depict women characters caught in a similar love triangle and who also ultimately choose the man who stands for "la survivance," for example Blanche in Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863) and Marie in Bourassa's *Jacques et Marie. Souvenirs d'un peuple dispersé* (1866).

ancestrale (1933) all refuse to marry men who collaborate with the English or intend to leave the rural space and/or ultimately marry someone who will assure the cultural survival of the French-Canadians. As in the case of the pioneer hero and the pioneer heroine in the American farm novel, then, French-Canadian farm novels featuring women as main characters replace, in a way, the prodigal son (as in Lacombe's *La terre paternelle*) with the marrying daughter: For her, too, there is a "fausse porte de sortie" (the marriage with a collaborator or a prospective emigrant) and an "espace original" (the paternal soil, accessible only via a marriage with a devoted farmer). Similarly to Cather's *O Pioneers!*, *Maria Chapdelaine* depicts Maria's decision to stay as an enormous personal sacrifice; a sacrifice, however, that will ultimately gain her immortality.

There is virtually no critical analysis of *Maria Chapdelaine* that does not begin by mentioning the fact that the novel's author, Louis Hémon, was not a French-Canadian, but a Frenchman, who only spent a few months of his life in Canada before he was killed in a railroad accident in Ontario in 1913. Some critics even consider Hémon's nationality as the key to an understanding of the novel: "Gerade weil Louis Hémon nicht Frankokanadier war," Uta Chaudhury notes, "hatte er einen Blick für die Besonderheiten des bäuerlichen Lebens in Quebec" (Chaudhury 1976, 131). And in "Culture and the National Will," Northrop Frye argues: "Only the outsider to a country finds characters or patterns of behaviour that are seriously typical. *Maria Chapdelaine* has something of this typifying quality, but then *Maria Chapdelaine* is a tourist's novel" (Frye 1957, 275). *Maria Chapdelaine* does contain a large number of generalizing remarks from the narrator about French Canada, its landscape and its climate, as well as about the French-Canadians and their society, customs, and language. In the following passage, for instance, the narrator explains the special connotation the verb "s'écarter" has acquired in Canadian French: "Le mot lui-même, au pays de Québec et surtout dans les régions lointaines du nord, a pris un sens sinistre et singulier, où se révèle le danger qu'il y a à perdre le sens de l'orientation, seulement un jour, dans ces coins sans limites" (117-118).⁷

Passages such as this one betray perhaps less the fact that Hémon was a Frenchman than that the novel was originally written for a French (and not a French-Canadian) readership: *Maria Chapdelaine* was published for the first time in a Parisian journal in 1914. More importantly, however, the narrator's sweeping remarks about French Canada and its inhabitants have led especially French-Canadian critics to ascribe to Hémon's work, above all, a "fonction documentaire ou ethnographique" (Biron/Dumont/Nardout-Lafarge 2007, 201): Some complained that the author merely uses the French-Canadians as the object of an anthropologic study (instead of considering them as potential readers; cf. Chaudhury 1976, 125), others, mostly in early analyses, criticized Hémon for his supposedly less-than-flattering depiction of

7 Hémon, Louis, 1914, *Maria Chapdelaine*, Montreal: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1990. All subsequent page numbers, unless otherwise indicated, refer to this edition.

the country and its people: “Ce roman nous représente à l'étranger comme un peuple de demi-primitifs [...]” an indignant French-Canadian reviewer remarked in 1922.⁸

Not unlike the French writings about New France from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries (cf. Laflèche 2008), then, *Maria Chapdelaine* was and still often is perceived as – as the original subtitle of the novel proclaims – a “Récit du Canada français” in the double sense of the term: a tale *from* French Canada (where Hémon wrote the novel) as well as a tale *about* French Canada. At the same time, *Maria Chapdelaine* was and still is analyzed not only as a novel about French-Canadians, but also as a French-Canadian novel, or, to be more precise, as a *roman de la terre*. In fact, it is hard to deny that Hémon's novel lends itself particularly well to an interpretation as a traditional, Agriculturalist French-Canadian farm novel – whether or not such a point of view may, as Fritz Peter Kirsch argues, ignore Hémon's original intention of “set[ting] up a monument to the Quebec village where he found shelter for a while” (Kirsch 2008, 145), and whether or not such a reading of *Maria Chapdelaine* may run the risk of turning Hémon's colonists into emblems of an ideologically colonized people: Indeed, the “petite bourgeoisie canadienne-française,” in their early reactions to the text, tried to “faire revivre à travers *Maria Chapdelaine* une idéologie de survivance qui prévalait au Québec dans le courant [du dix-neuvième siècle]” (Deschamps/Héroux/Villeneuve 1980, 187).

Featuring the stock female characters, place-based identities as well as the rigid, evaluative spatial system of the genre of the *roman de la terre*, *Maria Chapdelaine* thus almost invites being “terrorisé par le discours du pouvoir” (Deschamps/Héroux/Villeneuve 1980, 15) or, in more neutral terms, “le discours du terroir”: From the very beginning, the French-Canadians are depicted as an essentially agrarian, sturdy, and heroic people. Whereas the wintry, desolate landscape in the opening scene indicates “une vie dure dans un pays austère” (21),

les salutations joviales, les appels moqueurs lancés d'un groupe à l'autre, l'entrecroisement constant des propos sérieux ou gais témoignèrent de suite que ces hommes appartenaient à une race pétrie d'invincible allégresse et que rien ne peut empêcher de rire. (21)

Especially in comparison to the three French immigrants introduced in chapter 12, the French-Canadians appear well adapted to farming life in the Quebec landscape and climate. The French, by contrast, “n'avaient ni la force, ni la santé endurcie, ni la rudesse nécessaire, ni l'aptitude à toutes les besognes [des Canadiens]” (137). In addition, *Maria Chapdelaine* also features the stock female characters of the *roman de la terre*, with Laura Chapdelaine as the dead mother and Maria Chapdelaine, the

⁸ Qtd. in Deschamps/Héroux/Villeneuve 1980, 190-191. For similar reactions cf. Deschamps/Héroux/Villeneuve 1980, 188-204.

eponymous heroine, as the marrying daughter. Around the latter, Hémon carefully positions three suitors, who may all be analyzed as place-based identities and whose mere geographical location, again, is all that is necessary to identify their stance on the French-Canadian cause: Among the three, Eutrope Gagnon, the Chapdelaines' neighbor, is the only farmer, whereas François Paradis, a trapper, and Lorenzo Surprenant, an emigrant to the United States, are associated with the wilderness and the city, respectively. In fact, upon François's and Lorenzo's entering the novel, the very first question they are asked by father Chapdelaine already reveals their dissociation from the French-Canadian soil: "As-tu gardé la terre?" Samuel Chapdelaine asks François, to which he replies, not without delaying the answer for a while, "Non, monsieur Chapdelaine, je n'ai pas gardé la terre" (27-28). Likewise, right after meeting Lorenzo for the first time, Samuel wonders: "Il n'a pas envie de garder la terre et de se mettre habitant?" (70). Lorenzo, too, answers in the negative and even continues to defend his choice by enumerating the advantages of a life in the city (certainly not without trying to convince Maria to follow him). Nevertheless, from the Agriculturalist point of view, Eutrope appears as the only suitable husband for Maria, for he is the only one to stay on the French-Canadian soil and, hence, the only one to assure the survival of French-Canadian culture in North America, whereas François's and Lorenzo's refusing *la terre* almost immediately disqualifies them as possible marital choices. And in fact, true to the generic conventions of the *roman de la terre* and true to his name ("Gagnon" phonetically evoking "gagnant," "the winner"), it is Eutrope whom Maria ultimately decides to marry. *Maria Chapdelaine*, then, both the novel as well as its heroine, ultimately seem to adhere to the Agriculturalist system of values: As defined by "la voix du pays de Québec" (193), *la terre* appears to be "l'unique dépositaire d'un système de valeurs 'sacrées, intangibles'" (Servais-Maquoi 1974, 66), and Maria chooses Eutrope and, thus, *la terre* precisely because to her, "la terre paraît [...] devoir jouer un rôle déterminant dans l'évolution des destinées d'un peuple qui, obstinément enraciné à elle, calque sa permanence sur la sienne" (Servais-Maquoi 1974, 67).

However, while *Maria Chapdelaine* is certainly not the only *roman de la terre* in which the heroine sacrifices her personal ambitions and wishes to the needs of the cultural survival of her community, it is remarkable that she does so with surprising half-heartedness and a lack of fervency instead of enthusiasm. This, again, has been linked to Hémon's nationality: "Seul un nouveau venu, formé à l'extérieur de notre couvent national, pouvait se permettre de jouer aussi librement avec les mythes courants de l'époque" (Marcotte 1962, 9).

In fact, Maria chooses Eutrope neither because she loves him nor because she considers a life on a French-Canadian farm as superior to a life in an American city. When during a "veillée" Maria is for the first time confronted with all her three suitors, it becomes unmistakably clear that it is François whom she really loves, and indeed, the following day the two decide, in an admittedly allusive but also very touching and romantic dialogue, to get married the following spring:

– Vous serez encore icitte... au printemps prochain? – Oui. (81)

Yet before spring arrives, François Paradis is killed in a snowstorm; ironically the accident occurs at the very time that Maria recites, according to a French-Canadian custom, one thousand Hail Mary prayers to ask her patron saint, the Virgin Mary, to bring François safely back from the woods the next spring. Once Paradis is lost for Maria, she has to choose between Eutrope and Lorenzo (the possibility that she might remain single is not even once alluded to in the text). Yet for her, this is no longer a question of love: “L’amour, – le vrai amour, – avait passé près d’elle... Une grande flamme chaude et claire qui s’était éteinte pour ne plus revenir” (156).

Choosing between Eutrope and Lorenzo is less a matter of choosing between two men; instead, it is rather one of choosing between two lifestyles and two spaces (which are, however, inextricably linked with the two men): a farmer’s life on *la terre* (with Eutrope) or a worker’s life in the city (with Lorenzo): For instance, Maria almost refuses Eutrope’s offer of marriage not because she does not like him, but because “elle ne voulait pas vivre comme cela” (151). And when she finally decides to marry Eutrope, her choice of words again betrays the fact that she really chooses a space, and not a man: “Alors je vais rester ici... de même!” (195). In fact, it is her changed relationship to the French-Canadian rural space that almost makes her accept Lorenzo’s offer to live with him in the United States: After François’s “death by landscape,” Maria starts to hate the country she feels has robbed her of her true love: “Ce froid, cette neige, cette campagne endormie, l’austérité des arbres sombres, Maria Chapdelaine avait connu cela toute sa vie; et maintenant pour la première fois elle y songeait avec haine et avec crainte” (147).

It takes the *deus-ex-machina*-intervention of the Agriculturalist “voix du pays de Québec” to nevertheless convince Maria to choose *la terre* (and, hence, Eutrope). And this voice truly is an intervention by a *deus-ex-machina*: Whereas in *O Pioneers!* the Protestant work ethic only enters the novel indirectly through the ideology of the American Dream, according to which industry is commensurately rewarded with prosperity,⁹ *Maria Chapdelaine* makes the specifically Catholic component of French-Canadian Agriculturalism explicit. Here again, the keyword is “obéissance,” or, more precisely, “la soumission aux lois [...] de l’Église” (106): Both François’s and Laura Chapdelaine’s deaths, for instance, are accepted by the characters as God’s will: “Ça montre que nous ne sommes que de petits enfants dans la main du bon Dieu” (119), Samuel comments on the death of François; and Tit’Sèbe notes after examining the suffering Laura: “Si le bon Dieu le veut, elle va mourir” (172). Most importantly, however, the “voix du pays de Québec” is “à moitié un sermon de

9 The only characters in the novel who explicitly talk about their religious faith are Ivar and Marie. For a more detailed analysis of the depiction of Protestantism and Catholicism in *O Pioneers!* see McLay 1975.

prêtre" (193): By marrying Eutrope, Maria sacrifices her dream of escaping to the city simultaneously to the French-Canadian soil and to God's will, as interpreted by the Catholic Church, with the final sentence of the voice ("Au pays de Québec rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer..." 194) almost constituting an 11th commandment.

Note, however, that the way Maria's choice is depicted is a far cry from the enthusiastic decision to take up the fight for the French-Canadian cultural survival of, for instance, her namesake in Félix-Antoine Savard's *Menaud, maître-draveur* (1937). In the latter novel, Menaud's daughter has thoroughly internalized her father's desire to ensure the continuity of French-Canadian culture in North America – a desire that proves to be even more important to her than her own wish to "vivre icitte tranquille" with le Lucon:

"Vivre icitte tranquille... vivre icitte tranquille, ce serait plaisant, murmura-t-elle... oui! mais... il faut penser à tout le pays aussi... Alors, si tu as de l'amitié pour moi, tu continueras comme Joson, comme mon père!" (Savard 1937, 146)

By contrast, Maria in *Maria Chapdelaine* "[...] se fût résignée, avec un soupir [...], songeant avec un peu de regret pathétique aux merveilles lointaines qu'elle ne connaîtrait jamais et aussi aux souvenirs tristes du pays où il lui était commandé de vivre [...]" (195). Just as immigrating to Canada for Susanna Moodie, not emigrating from Canada is for Maria an "act of severe duty."

If *Maria Chapdelaine* still ends on a somewhat conciliatory note, it is not, as in Cather's *O Pioneers!*, because of a look into "the shining eyes of youth" of the future, but rather because of a look into the past: In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood comments on the ending of Hémon's novel: "Maria finally chooses to remain [...] and become an incarnation of her mother [...]. The bleak and confined life inside the wall [the mental garrison of Survivalism] is preferable to the threatening emptiness that lies outside it" (Atwood 1972, 218).

Early in the novel, a life like her mother's does strike Maria as rather "gris" (90), but after Laura Chapdelaine's death – which thus has a more important function in the novel than merely meeting a generic convention of the *roman de la terre* – Maria discovers "un aspect auguste et singulier" and "[des] vertus presque héroïques" in her mother's seemingly bleak life full of hardships: "c'était une chose difficile et méritoire, assurément" (188). Moreover, by repeating her mother's life and renouncing the beauty of the city, Maria Chapdelaine, like Alexandra Bergson, will ultimately triumph over death, just as – to quote a passage from the novel that has often been overlooked – the evergreen trees of the French-Canadian woods will triumph over winter, "[...] pareils à des femmes emplies d'une sagesse amère, qui auraient échangé pour une vie éternelle leur droit à la beauté" (97).

Conclusion

This article has taken a look at Alexandra Bergson and Maria Chapdelaine as representing and simultaneously transcending frequently recurring characters (or even as character types) of the genre of the farm novel in American and French-Canadian literature – namely, the American pioneer heroine and the French-Canadian marrying daughter. Comparing the two types, one may at first be struck by the differences between them: Whereas the American pioneer heroine typically remains single (or only marries once her mission is accomplished), her French-Canadian sister is defined by the very fact that she marries. Moreover, while the American pioneer heroine usually takes the place of a man in the family (her deceased or disabled father or husband), thus continuing his (self-given) task of building the farm, the French-Canadian marrying daughter rather fills the position of a woman (her dead mother), reproducing – metaphorically as well as literally – the French-Canadian society and thus continuing her task of assuring this society's cultural survival. In contrast to the French-Canadian marrying daughter, then, the American pioneer heroine, by assuming the traditionally male role of managing the farm, crosses the boundaries of prescribed gender roles and thus points to the culturally constructed nature of these roles – both on the farm and in general. The somewhat disturbing fact that American pioneer heroines mostly remain single (or do not marry until the very end of the novel) might, of course, be analyzed as simply stressing their newly gained independence and complete devotion or sacrifice to the soil. Yet at the same time it might also be regarded as underlining the outsider position these women occupy in a rather conservative rural society. French-Canadian farm novelists, by contrast, were apparently mostly unable or unwilling to imagine such unconventional outsider characters, taking the veil or death being the *roman de la terre's* almost only alternatives to marriage.

The differences between the American pioneer heroine and the French-Canadian marrying daughter should not, however, obscure the fact that there are also similarities between the two. Most importantly, both character types are farmers at the service of their respective nations. By dedicating their lives to the soil and staying on the land – that is by taking over and making prosper the husband's or father's farm in the one case and by marrying a devoted farmer and not leaving *la terre* in the other case – the pioneer heroine and the marrying daughter, each in her own way, actively participate in the "national" projects (as defined also, but not exclusively, by the farm novelists) of settling the country (in the case of the United States) and assuring the survival of French or French-Canadian culture on the North American continent (in the case of French Canada). With respect to the genre of the farm novel, both character types help to sustain the ideological discourses that underlie the American and French-Canadian farm novel, respectively: Similarly to that of the pioneer hero, the story of the pioneer heroine is a typically American story of progress and material success, while not unlike the figure of the prodigal son, the mar-

rying daughter affirms the cultural and spatial values of Agriculturalism. This is nowhere more apparent than in the two novels that have been analyzed more closely here, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*.

Published only one year apart from each other (*O Pioneers!* in 1913 and Hémon's novel in 1914), both works have been analyzed here as prototypical farm novels¹⁰ featuring exemplary female characters: Indeed, like other pioneer heroines and marrying daughters, both Alexandra Bergson and Maria Chapdelaine, again each in her own way, sacrifice their lives to the soil and thus assure the settlement of a country that had been thought unfit for settlement and the survival of a culture that had been (and still was or is) considered seriously endangered. Indeed, in both novels the dedication to the soil is depicted as an act of duty and an enormous personal sacrifice that is made with much less enthusiasm than in other farm novels from the United States and French Canada: Most importantly, their dedication to farming ultimately deprives both Alexandra and Maria of a "true" love – Alexandra's marriage to Carl Linstrum is based on companionship and friendship rather than love and due to François Paradis's death, Maria's love remains forever unrealized. (Nevertheless, one is justified in assuming that Alexandra and Carl as well as Maria and Eutrope will be at least reasonably happy with their marriages.)

At the same time, it is this sacrifice that makes Alexandra's and Maria's lives not only seem even more heroic, but in the final analysis also allows them to overcome death. For both Alexandra's and Maria's motives for sacrificing their lives to the soil are inextricably linked to each woman's past and each nation's future: Alexandra takes over the Bergson farm in order to realize her father's dream of a pioneer success, on the one hand, and to assure the future of the following generation (represented by, for instance, her brother Emil and her niece Milly), on the other hand. Likewise, Maria does not leave French Canada lest she should deprive her mother's life of its sense, on the one hand, and lest French-Canadian culture should not survive, on the other hand. Consequently, just as Alexandra's heart will be given out again "in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (122), Maria will herself become "un témoignage" (194). Hence, through their lives both women will (or have already) become a part of the soil they have dedicated themselves to and thus become immortal.

Alexandra Bergson and Maria Chapdelaine, then, are more than simply farm women: They are women coming from, dedicating their lives to, and thus living on in the farm; they are, like all pioneer heroines and marrying daughters in American

10 Due to the fact that Samuel Chapdelaine is a "défricheur" and not a "habitant," Aurélien Boivin, of course, asserts that *Maria Chapdelaine* "doit être perçu comme un roman de colonisation et non comme un roman agriculturiste ou du terroir" (Boivin 1996, 26). Note, however, that both Samuel and Laura Chapdelaine seem to come from families that have been farmers for several generations. In addition, especially Laura can be seen as a typical "habitante" (or at least as yearning for the life of one).

and French-Canadian farm novels, New World Demeters, North American goddesses of agriculture building countries and defending garrisons.

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