



Cather, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Art of Enchantment
Richard C. Harris

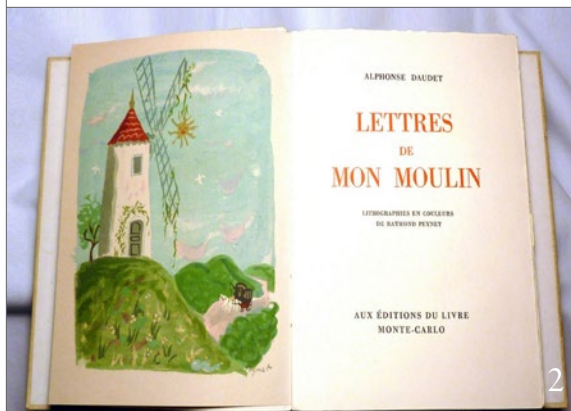
In “Daudet country” and a child’s garden

In “homesick songs” and the legacy of “The Man Who Wrote Narcissus”

Finding another Cather

Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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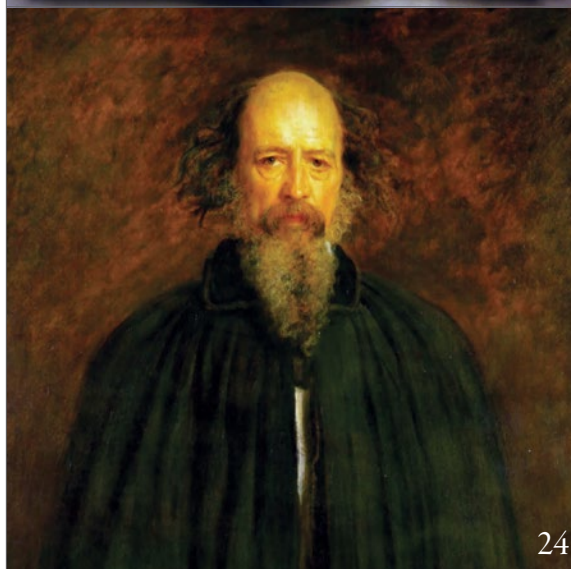
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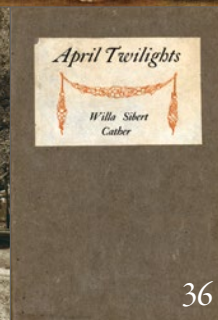
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On the cover: Edward Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus*



Letter from the President Susan Maher

December is a transitional moment in the year. For many thousands of years, humans believed that the passage into winter brought the spirit and material worlds closer. Because of this long-held belief, the telling of ghost stories at this time of year—Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* being among the most famous—is traditional during the winter months. Winter is also the beginning of longer days. It may seem ironic. Until the winter solstice, the days grow shorter and the nights longer. Yet after the solstice, days begin to lengthen, and thus winter is also a time to celebrate the light, the return of sunlight that will herald spring and the re-emergence of life.

Cather is a writer who is particularly attuned to transitions. A book that will be celebrated state-wide in 2013, *O Pioneers!*, opens with a bleak winter scene that foretells later tragedy under blooming white mulberry trees. Working against the current of tragedy, Alexandra Bergson strives to cultivate order, light, and life. In Cather, winter is Janus-faced, a fusing of past and future, of darkness and light, of birth and destruction. Alexandra’s desire to champion forward-thinking, life-breeding forces, especially after the death of her father and then the death of her brother, is not delusional and futile. Her efforts make her heroic. The year’s

cycle represents the many facets of choice and fate, life and death. Cather wisely presents a comprehensive understanding of the natural world and its connection to human journeys.

Pursuing a different pattern in the first part of *My Ántonia*, Cather gives us a celebratory Christmas scene in the Burden’s home countered by the tragic suicide of Mr. Shimerda. One would think this terrible event would blight and haunt the young heroine’s life. Yet Cather dramatizes Ántonia’s resilience, her genius for life and love, and purposefully concludes the book in summer when Jim breaks a journey home to visit his old friend. No young death in this rendering, but a fruitful burst of childish energy from a root cellar. Still, the representation of winter in both great novels indicates the author’s finely tuned understanding of myth, symbol, and seasonal resonance. Transitions can lead to many paths and contradictory fates.

For me, this winter means a transition into a new role as Past President. I have been honored to lead a distinguished group of board members, to help the fabulous staff in Red Cloud under Leslie Levy’s executive direction, and to serve the Foundation’s larger educational mission. I have enjoyed communicating with all of you with my occasional essays. Replacing me will be Tom Gallagher, who enters at a pivotal moment in the Foundation’s history. We are within grasp of a National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud. Thank you all for your continued support of the Foundation, through all of the months and seasons, and stay tuned for great things in 2013!



Letter from the Executive Director Leslie C. Levy

December kicked off with celebrations of Willa Cather’s birthday, December 7th, as Cather fans from around the country celebrated her birthday with an array of festivities: friends, enthusiasts, and new recruits gathered to participate in cocktail parties, gallery walks, afternoon teas, readings at bookstores—and lots of birthday cake—as a way to honor Cather’s lasting legacy. As we celebrated Cather’s 139th birthday, it was the perfect time to reflect on the many wonderful ways that Cather still influences our decisions, inspires our lives and lifts our hearts.

Earlier in 2012, Spring Conference reminded us that there is still much to learn about Cather from her earliest published works. This revelation continues as we eagerly await the publication of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, edited by Andrew Jewel and Janis Stout. Cather’s penned thoughts and these letters (many to be shared with the public for the first time) will enrich our perception, not only of Cather, but of our shared values. We look forward to the thought-provoking scholarship

that will be inspired by this new goldmine of information.

As we welcomed new friends and old acquaintances through the Foundation’s doors this year, we were reminded again of Cather’s impact as some 10,000 visitors made their way to Red Cloud this year, representing more than 40 states, as well as Canada, France, Japan, Mexico and Taiwan. As I write this, we are hosting visitors from Minnesota who made a special stop on their return trip from Colorado; they had taken a life-long-learning class in the fall and had read Cather for the first time.

There is no denying Cather’s influence as we look forward to our centenary celebrations of *O Pioneers!* next year with numerous activities and events. We hope that you will join us either at Spring Conference in Red Cloud or at the International Cather Seminar in Flagstaff. Be sure to join us online as events are posted, and updated, on our website and Facebook pages.

It has been truly wonderful to visit with our benefactors this year! Their excitement is unmistakable as they realize the opportunities to create lasting memories and pay tribute to Cather’s legacy by opening their hearts and generously giving to the Foundation. We are continually honored, and humbled, by the gifts of time and treasure that are bestowed because of Cather’s inspiration.

Thank you for another marvelous year!



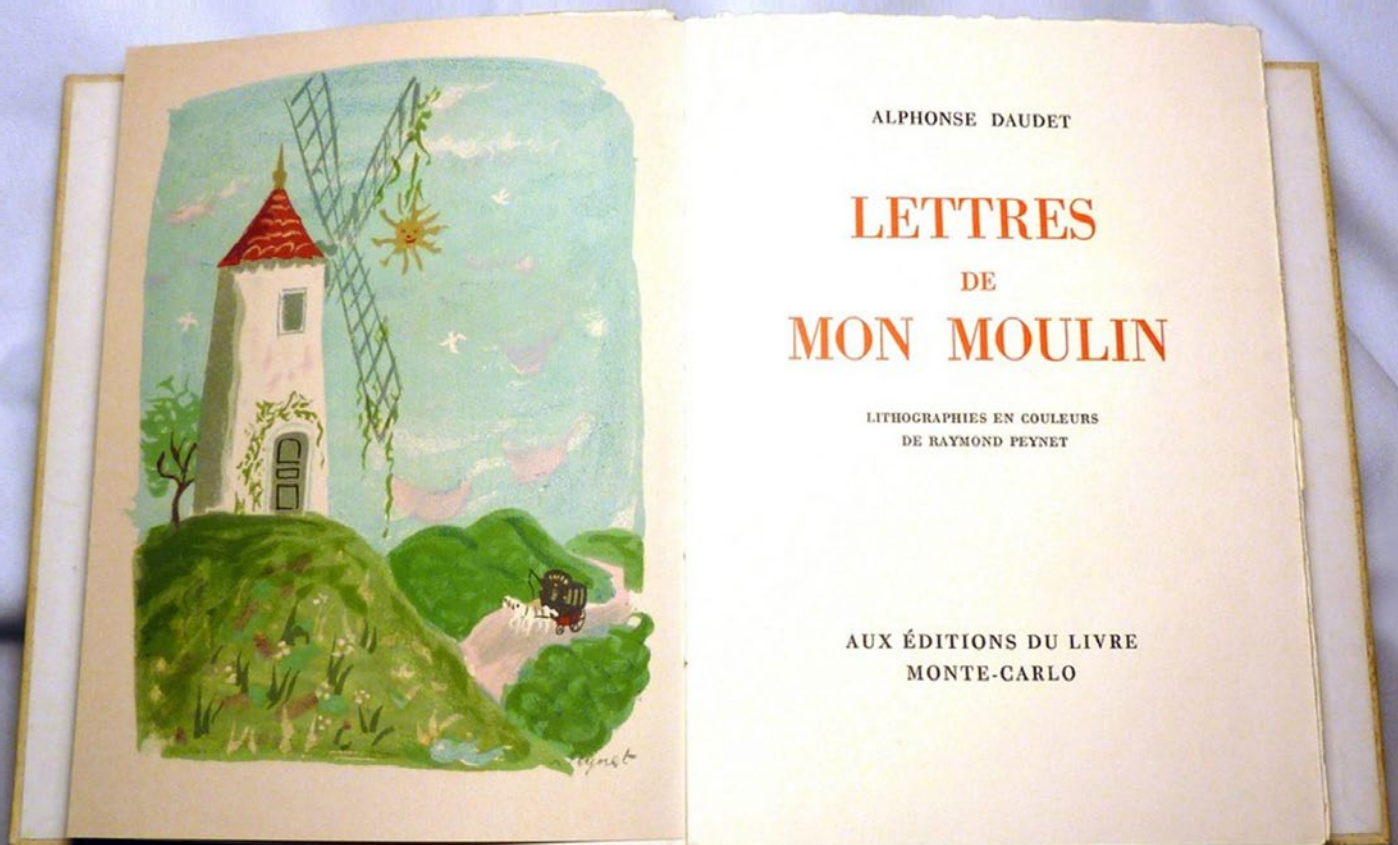
Scenes from Provençal Life: The Influence of Alphonse Daudet

Diane Prenatt | Marian University

On the subject of Willa Cather “making herself born” as a writer, I am interested in how a brash young Nebraskan with four semesters of college French brought forth the Old World sophisticate of *One of Ours* (1922), *The Professor’s House* (1925), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Two poems in particular from *April Twilights* (1903) shed light on Cather’s appropriation of the material we identify with her mature work. “Lament for Marsyas” and “Provençal Legend” grew out of Cather’s experience in Provence on her first trip to Europe, with Isabelle McClung, in 1902. As Bernice Slote states in her studious introduction to the reissued 1903 *April Twilights*, “Lament for Marsyas” was inspired by a relief sculpture in the amphitheater at Arles dating back to the first century CE (xxvii). The sculpture (currently housed in the Arles museum of antiquities while the amphitheater undergoes restoration) depicts the flaying of Marsyas in punishment for the hubris of challenging Apollo to a music contest. “Provençal Legend” is based on the story of Faustinus, a young shepherd killed by the

Romans when he delivered flowers instead of gold and silver for ransom. Both poems, then, draw upon the stories of the ancient Roman past of France, the vestiges of which are so apparent in Provence, and can serve as starting points for enlarging the meaning of Cather’s first visit to Provence and the significance for her of the writer she identified with that area, Alphonse Daudet.

Cather’s six-week stay in France was a “deeply moving artistic and literary pilgrimage,” in the words of her biographer James Woodress (161), and her report for the *Nebraska State Journal* of the time she spent in Provence is almost rhapsodic. She twice calls the area “Daudet’s country” (*The World and the Parish* 946, 947), a reference to the Provençal writer whose collection of short stories, *Letters from My Windmill* (*Lettres de mon moulin*, 1869), she first read in her French classes at the University of Nebraska (Lewis 56). Loosely organized around the conceit that the writer is jaded by Paris and has returned to his native Provence to restore his spirit, these anecdotes and character sketches fall squarely within the French equivalent of the local color tradition—*la*



A 1948 edition of Daudet’s *Lettres de Mon Moulin*, with lithographs by Raymond Peynet.

littérature rustique or *folklorique*—popularized by George Sand. In her travel articles for the *Journal*, Cather refers to Daudet several other times in describing Provençal culture and uses one of his better-known *Windmill* stories, “The Pope’s Mule,” to sketch the local scene in Avignon. Some of Cather’s readers were no doubt familiar as well with another, “The Girl from Arles,” rewritten by Daudet for the stage (1872) with incidental music by Georges Bizet, who later expanded his composition into a symphonic suite, *L’Arlésienne* (1874). Daudet’s stories of Provence are vivid and entertaining, often broadly comic, sometimes mildly moralistic or sentimental. From their earliest appearance, they were published in small books of extracts used for French instruction in the United States. They were Cather’s introduction to Provence and remain the material by which Daudet is usually known today—if he is known at all.

The fact that Daudet *isn’t* very well known today seems curious, for with the publication of his first novel *Fromont and Risler* (*Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, 1874), he “became immediately the most widely read and successful author of the day” (Davies 13) and remained “the most successful novelist in France” until about 1890 (Davies 9). His many subsequent novels include *Jack* (1876), *The Nabob* (*Le Nabab*, 1877), *Numa Roumestan* (1881), and *Sappho* (*Sapho*, 1884).¹ Among other works are a collection of stories about the Franco-Prussian War, *Monday Tales* (*Contes du Lundi*, 1873), the *Tartarin* adventure series (1872-90), memoirs of his Bohemian days in Paris, several plays, and a journal of the chronic pain he suffered from tertiary syphilis, published posthumously in 1930. He was a friend of Flaubert, Zola, and the Goncourt brothers, and with them was engaged in the formulation of literary Realism and Naturalism. He was admired by Dickens, Turgenev, and Henry James, who pronounced *Numa Roumestan* “a masterpiece; it is really a perfect work; it has no weaknesses; it is a compact and harmonious whole” (Davies 15). In her definitive critical biography, Anne-Simone Dufief contends that Daudet’s reputation was diminished after his death as his name became increasingly identified with that of his son, the conservative journalist Léon Daudet. Léon controlled his father’s literary estate and granted permission to publish his works very selectively, as they promoted his own reactionary agenda. Daudet’s sketches of Provence, in particular, served his son’s ultra-nationalist ideals; the innovative narratives of his mature years, which made his critical reputation in his own lifetime, were eclipsed and Daudet, cast as a mere local colorist, fell from critical notice.²

In Cather’s early years, then, Daudet was known as a more complex writer than his reputation as the sunny Provençal might suggest and, by the time she arrived in Provence, Cather had already

explored some of his complexities. In his 1949 reminiscence of Cather’s years in Pittsburgh, George Seibel reports that Daudet’s *Artists’ Wives* (*Les femmes d’artistes*, 1874) was the first of many works that Cather read when she “came to the Seibel home once or twice a week to ‘read French’” beginning in 1896 (196). Seibel describes the book as a collection of “short stories bubbling with malicious delight in feminine foibles” (196); more accurately, these stories are united by a theme announced explicitly in the prologue, “the loss or degradation of one’s talent” (4) that results when an artist marries. In almost every one of the dozen stories that follow, a male artist is driven to unhappiness by his involvement with a woman who does not understand his commitment to high art, who seeks only the status of being married to a well-known man, or who wants the comfortable bourgeois lifestyle available to the commercially successful artist. Thematically, these cautionary tales have much in common with stories in Cather’s early collection *The Troll Garden* (1905) and those later collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1922), and with the novels *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935).

Cather also read Daudet’s later novel, *Sappho* (1884), a fairly explicit novel of sexual adventure and personal betrayal to which she reacted in typical Catherian fashion: In an 1891 letter to Mariel Gere, she wonders why Mariel would buy “the disreputable Sappho” and characterizes Katherine Weston’s loaning of the novel to a woman from church as “depraved”; by 1896, she is asking Mariel to retrieve her copy from Sarah Harris (Stout 4, 21; her paraphrase); in 1898, she writes that “when [Daudet] wrote *Sappho*. . . he gave the world his best. . . It is through that book that he will live” (*W&P* 575); and in a 1900 review of Clyde Fitch’s adaptation performed in New York, Cather calls *Sappho* “Daudet’s greatest novel” (688). Her 1896 review of Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (1848) reveals that Cather has read Daudet’s memoir *Thirty Years in Paris* (*Trente Ans de Paris*, 1888) (294). In addition to the influence of A. E. Housman, Bernice Slote discerns in the mythical material of *April Twilights* some trace of Daudet’s *Kings in Exile* (*Les rois en exil*, 1879) (xxviii), which Cather had praised as a “masterly exposition” (340) and declared his “most popular work” among readers of English (575). (It could hardly have been more popular than it was in France, where it went through 58 editions in its first four years.) When Daudet died in 1897, Cather paid him tribute in more words than she had devoted to any other single subject in her journalistic career, except perhaps John Ruskin (572-76).

In an essay for the second volume of *Cather Studies*, James Woodress outlines some of the biographical similarities, common subject matter, and writing practices shared by Cather and Daudet. He also suggests—rather than argues—that Cather’s reading of



Artists' Wives and of *Sappho* may have contributed to forming her view that marriage was incompatible with the life of an artist and perhaps even influenced her “explicit decision to remain single” (163). Nothing further seems to have been written about Cather and Daudet since the 1993 publication of *Cather Studies* 2, yet the subject of “. . . the writer Cather loved the best, the writer she quoted from, paraphrased, and wrote about the most” (Woodress 156) hardly seems exhausted by Woodress’s essay.

The biographical similarities between the two writers are striking. Woodress notes that both Cather and Daudet were born in the South (Daudet at Nîmes), transplanted at the age of nine because of their fathers’ financial reversals, briefly taught school, achieved early success with a volume of poetry before turning primarily to fiction, and were avowedly disinterested in politics (158). Dufief comments that the trajectory of Daudet’s early life can be seen as that of the prototypical Second Empire French writer who arrives in Paris from the provinces (22)—perhaps an illuminating way to think about Cather’s life! Woodress asserts that an “arresting biographical parallel” between the two is their “movement from rural beginnings to the metropolis” (158). More specifically, Daudet felt much the same kind of tension that Cather did between his love for his childhood home in the country and the stimulation that the city offered. Like Cather, Daudet never returned permanently to the hometown he so

often and so vividly wrote about; he would no more have taken up residence in an abandoned Provençal windmill than Cather would have in a Nebraska barn. He spent his adult life mostly in and around Paris, as Cather did in New York, all the while maintaining what one of his translators has called “his deep, almost umbilical attachment to Provence” (Davies 14). Like the young Cather, Daudet as a youth was one of those on whom nothing was lost: “How porous and penetrable I must have been,” he wrote in a late reminiscence. “[I]mpressions, sensations enough to fill a pile of books, and all with dream-like intensity” (Davies 19). And like Cather’s, his early impressions became the source of his art; like Cather, who said, “Life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember” (Sergeant 107), Daudet said of himself that “to invent for him was to remember” (Davies 19).

It is difficult to determine how much Cather knew about Daudet’s “making himself born” as a writer—how much his biography might have influenced her own creative development; her writing on Daudet doesn’t especially address his artistic formation. But she lived to see his critical reputation diminished and, uncannily, she endured much the same fate for a time. Woodress notes that both writers at different times have been considered “too simple and uncomplicated” for critical attention (160). Very much like Cather, whose post-World War I fiction was sometimes criticized by her contemporaries for its lack of political consciousness, Daudet found his work often dismissed by French critics because it lacked the social critique of the new Naturalists. His unwillingness to enter the public conversation about the Dreyfus Affair, and his private opposition to Zola’s stance, exacerbated the criticism and even led to allegations of anti-Semitism (Dufief 28, 87). Despite his intense and discerning engagement with the discourse surrounding the new social novel in France, Daudet felt limited by the formulaic quality of Naturalist novels, viewing them as only documented studies, in which imagination was subordinated to the observational methods of the social sciences. Like Cather, who asks in “The Novel *Démeublé*” whether “the banking system and the Stock Exchange [are] worth being written about at all? Have such things any place in imaginative art?” (46), Daudet asks whether Zola’s accumulation of statistics about life in the mines adds anything to the beauty of *Germinal* (Dufief 31). His novels about *la belle France* of old came to be viewed as merely nostalgic and quaint, the sort of art that Cather defends in “Escapism” in opposition to social propaganda. His stories of Provence, especially as they outlasted his mature novels, cast him as a local colorist in much the same way—if for different reasons—that Cather’s accessible early fiction formed her reputation as a Nebraska writer.



Daudet’s windmill in Fontvieille, France, built in 1814 and restored in 1933. Photo by Przemysław Sakrajda, Creative Commons license.



But it is precisely the local color tradition, which Daudet deepened and complicated enormously, that shaped Cather's experience of Provence. Daudet is no more and no less a local colorist than Van Gogh painting in Arles or Gauguin in Pont-Aven. *Letters from My Windmill* conveys the "deep map" of his *terre natale*, his native country: that description of landscape that reveals as much about chronological time as it does about geographical space, that discerns the historical past in the remnants of material culture.³ Daudet excels in this branch of cartography, describing the landscape of the Camargue, for instance, as "that pampas-like corner of Provence where the oxen and wild horses are allowed to go free" (37), or the Provençal seasonal cycle of sheepherding, ending "with the first chill of autumn, [when the sheep] come down again to the farms to browse on the little grey hills, scented with rosemary" (45), or sketching a Provençal character like the "excellent old lady" who talks to him "of 1815, of the invasion and the great joy of all mothers at the fall of the Empire, of the dancing, the bonfires in the town squares, and the handsome Cossack officer, wearing the robe of a member of the French Academy who made her skip like a goat, dancing the farandole all night long on the bridge of Beaucaire" (34)—to cite just a couple of examples. Even simple descriptions of landscape features like "the pale green of the olive trees" (206) and "tufts of absinthe" (101) evoke local history and culture, which in this part of the world goes back to the days of Roman colonization, *la France gallo-romaine*. In his biography, Woodress states that when she finally went to Italy in 1908, Cather saw the landscape "just as Virgil described it in the *Georgics*" (199), but I would argue that Cather first saw ancient Rome when she went to Provence. She followed Daudet's deep map as she made her way through Provence; his descriptions of the country had prepared her for the history she would find there—the "splendid brown" women of Arles with their "Moorish" and "strangely Roman" beauty (*W&P* 948-49) and "the Rhone, the great highway to Italy" (937). "What an active and vigorous life the colonists must have lived in their Arelate [Arles]," she marvels. They "had a sort of Chicago-like vehemence in adorning their city and making it ostentatiously rich" (950). With this leap into fantastic and yet utterly apt simile, Cather reveals her early, perhaps intuitive glimpse of the "hidden way" in which "something in the Provençal landscape that deeply stirred her . . . linked itself with the American West" (Lewis 56). Daudet's work had alerted her to the kind of cultural and geographical layering that allowed ancient Rome to surface in contemporary Provence; thus trained, she read the deep map of the American West. In her later novels, she transferred her own perceptions to characters like Tom Outland, who thinks



Alphonse Daudet in an 1865 photograph by Felix Nadar.

of a Cliff City Indian woman, dead for centuries, as his own ancestor; Father Duchene who sees something of Crete in the pottery of the cliff-dwellers; Claude Wheeler, who learns about the sacred German traditions behind Mrs. Erlich's Christmas baking; Bishop Latour, who can hear the Moorish silver in a bell tolling in the American Southwest and can feel the centuries of crustacean-like endurance in the landscape at Ácoma—all of these, as Cather writes of *Shadows on the Rock*, "a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past . . ." ("On *Shadows*" 15).

Cather also learned a great deal from Daudet about narrative technique. Although she does not state that specifically, no close reader of Cather can fail to see the similarity between the two writers. In his comparative study, Woodress seems only to gloss what he calls "striking parallels in literary technique": both writers, he states, "are able to create memorable characters"; both write "loosely episodic" novels; Cather may have picked up her "appreciation of style" from Daudet; both writers occasionally shift to the present tense in



a narrative that is otherwise in the past tense (159-60). Perhaps because Woodress mistakenly characterizes Daudet as someone who was not the technical “experimenter” Cather was, he fails to see more significant similarities between the two. As Dufief demonstrates throughout her study, Daudet’s narrative choices are not random though they are many and diverse. He was constantly experimenting, casting about for the most authentic ways of representing reality; reflections on the nature of reality and the imagination fill his correspondence and journals. *Letters from My Windmill* demonstrates a veritable catalog of narrative technique. Although the stories are all collected by a single narrator, the purported windmill inhabitant whom Daudet in his preface identifies as himself, they are presented to the reader in a variety of ways. Only one is truly a letter; two are conventional first-person narratives for whom the reader is the primary audience; six are framed stories, told to the narrator by another character; two are narrated to a character in the story; two are reported as the contents of a manuscript or book and two more as having been written first for another purpose; and two are the narrator/author’s reminiscences. Compared to the technical unity of typical short story collections in the nineteenth century, the diversity of Daudet’s tales is remarkable; indeed, it is only the fact of the collector’s residence in the windmill that provides narrative coherence. We might think of the many framed and embedded stories in Cather’s fiction, from brief anecdotes like the courtship of Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and the death of the tramp in the thresher in *My Antonia* (1918) to “Tom Outland’s Story” in *The Professor’s House*. More memorable than narrative technique strictly defined, however, is the sense that accrues in Daudet’s *Letters* of the circumstances of the telling of the tale—the gathering of people around a table or a fire, the sharing of coffee or wine among the listeners, the comfort of being inside where the heat, the cold, the mistral, the rain cannot enter. Cather’s acute sense of interior and exterior—realized in the Harling house scenes in *My Antonia*, the party at the Olivares house in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the Auclair hearth in *Shadows on the Rock*, and many other domestic settings for lively conversation and the telling of stories—surely owes something to Daudet.

Lastly, Daudet presented a model for one of Cather’s most refined narrative techniques, that of the narrative filtered through the consciousness of a secondary character, as Antonia Shimerda’s story is represented through Jim Burden’s memories, Marian Forrester’s through Niel Herbert’s observation of her in *A Lost Lady* (1923), and Myra Henshawe’s through Nellie Birdseye’s reminiscence in *My Mortal Enemy* (1926). Daudet makes highly effective use of this device in *Sappho*. The story of

Fanny Le Grand is a third-person narration of the relationship between Fanny, a Parisian *femme légère*, and Jean Gaussin, the naïve young Provençal who loves her and whose growing awareness of Fanny’s character drives this story of her sexually adventurous life. What interested the seventeen-year-old Cather in *Sappho* was undoubtedly the depiction of the demi-monde of fin-de-siècle Paris, a story of Bohemia similar to George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894), which she found captivating, and *Wormwood* (1890) by Marie Corelli, whom she professed to scorn (although she may have read the Cather family copy of *Wormwood*). Fanny, nicknamed Sappho because she posed for a sculpture of the poet, has been the mistress of artists as well as their model. The lurid tones of Toulouse-Lautrec color this novel: a close friend of Fanny’s was a circus-rider at the Hippodrome who “used her horsewhip in a way much sought after by men of the ring” (83).

But something more substantial earned Cather’s lasting admiration, her declaration that *Sappho* was the “greatest” of Daudet’s novels. In her review of the 1900 American play *Sappho*, but apparently referring to the character in Daudet’s novel, Cather writes “this character involves shades and semitones and complex motives, the struggling birth of things and burnt-out ghosts of things that it baffles psychology to name” (*W&P* 688). The novel refers to a lesbian sexual experience in Fanny’s past, and, in his study of Cather and Daudet, Woodress tentatively asks whether the novel “help[ed] Cather come to a conclusion about her sexuality”; he quickly retreats, however, to conclude, “One may only speculate and the answer must remain moot” (163). In Daudet’s novel, Fanny’s lesbian affair serves only to mark her profligacy and to deepen the horror of the naïve Gaussin. She has had many lovers—including a woman!—and she is a liar and a thief to boot. In her discriminating appraisal of Fanny as a character possessed of both complexity and incompleteness, Cather identifies qualities that will define two of her own most inscrutable characters, Marian Forrester and Myra Henshawe. The early promise that never comes to fruition, the failure to thrive, the impulse toward self-destruction—these are traits that for Cather elude psychological explanation. As in these later novels of Cather’s, in Daudet’s *Sappho*, the narrator’s fall from innocence is at least as significant as the degradation of the idealized main character. Fanny eventually disappears into South America, just as Marian Forrester would.

There is much to suggest that Cather’s early reading of Alphonse Daudet remained with her throughout her writing life. They shared a profound dedication to the eternal problem and the eternal joy that was the play of the imagination upon reality, as well as a deep affection for the Rhone countryside. In a



preface to his friend Edmond Lepelletier's short story collection *Les morts heureuses* (1886), Daudet wrote, "Il ne s'agit pas d'avoir vu mais de faire voir"—"It's not a question of having seen, but of making [the reader] see" (Dufief 31). In making the young Cather see Provence, Daudet provided her with a map for the rest of her writing life.

NOTES

1. Like "Jack" and "Sapho," "Numa Roumestan" is the name of a character; the eponymous title remains unchanged in the English translation. It is worth noting, however, that in French, the name of the poet from Lesbos is spelled with one p, while in English, of course, it is spelled with two. Cather uses both spellings in referring to Daudet's novel, and it is difficult to tell whether she is deliberately using the spelling variants to distinguish between the French novel and its English translation and, therefore, whether she first read the novel in French or English. As Daudet's works were translated very quickly for readers of English, she might have done either, at least by the time she was reading French in college. Clyde Fitch's American play based on Daudet's dramatic adaptation of his novel, which Cather reviewed in 1900, retained the French spelling.

As an illustration of Daudet's imperturbable good humor, the story circulated that when the first copy of *Sapho* went to his American publisher for translation, the publisher telegraphed to him, "*Sapho* is objectionable." Daudet is said to have puzzled over that judgment for some time, appearing not to understand what the problem with his sexually explicit novel might be, then finally to have wired back his permission to "spell it with two p's" (de Kay, n.p. "Notes & News," n.p.).

2. "Durant la première moitié du siècle se construit l'image d'un Daudet conservateur. . . C'est une époque où l'on confond, sans trop examiner, les idées de Léon avec celles de son père qui pourtant n'apporta jamais aucun soutien à l'Eglise, ne fut nullement partisan de la monarchie et dont l'œuvre n'est en rien une glorification de la vie rurale." ("During the first half of the century the image of a conservative Daudet was constructed. . . This was a period when, without too much examination, the ideas of Léon were confused with those of his father, who never gave any support to the Church, was not a monarchist, and whose work was nothing like a glorification of rural life" [Dufief 13; my translation].)

3. The term "deep map" was first popularized by William Least Heat-Moon in his 1991 study of Chase County, Kansas, *PrairieErth (A Deep Map)*.

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April Twilights (1903): Echoes from a Child's Garden

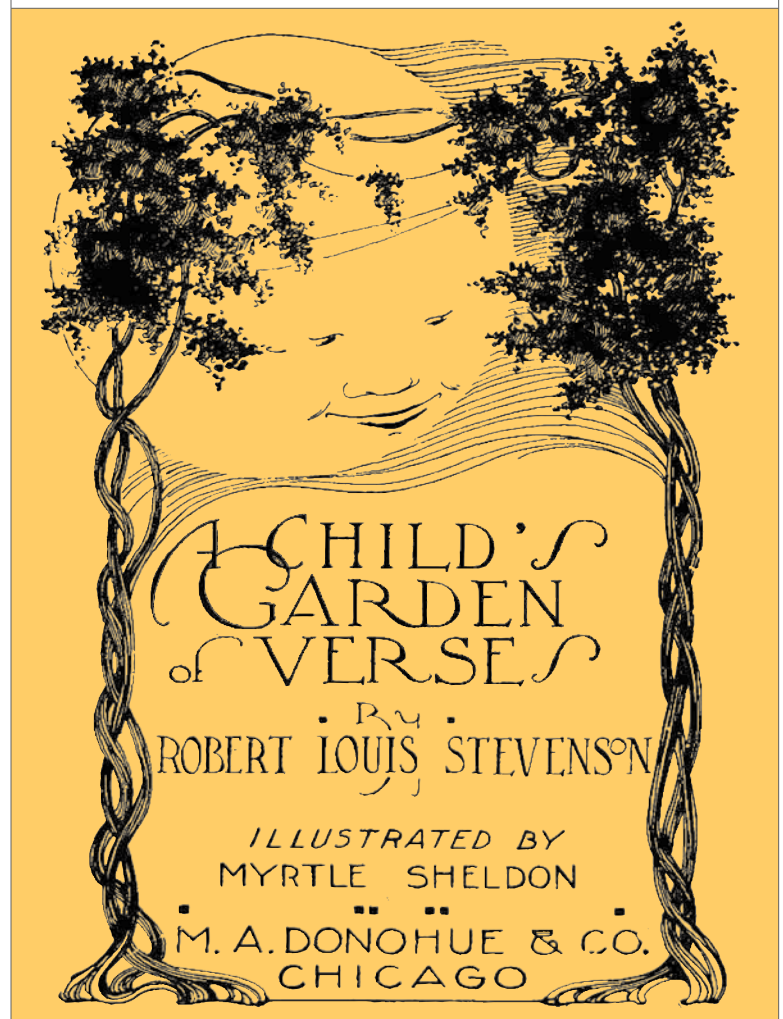
Elaine Smith | University of South Florida

Both title words “April” and “twilight” suggest liminal times, when spring changes into summer, and daylight becomes darkness. One way of reading the collection of poems in Willa Cather’s first book is to see that one of its major themes is the space between being a child and being adult. As we all know, these poems were written by an extremely bright, gifted, and ambitious young woman in her early twenties, fresh out of college, on her first job, far from home, and struggling mightily to “make good” for the people back home, but much more importantly, to live up to the high goals she had set for herself.¹

As more than one critic has noted, many of the poems in *April Twilights* reflect the literary fashion of the time (especially the French symbolists), and include Cather’s homage to her favorites—Housman, Swinburne, and Baudelaire. These poems employ archaic diction and constructions that sound artificial and falsely “poetic” to contemporary ears, and are replete with references to both Europe and the Classical world. Bernice Slote (ix) and James Woodress (166), among others, argue that these early poems look forward to her later fiction, and that this is their main interest for Cather scholars. The poems of *April Twilights* do, of course, suggest her future work, but they also look back to Cather’s immediate past, to her childhood. Willa Cather’s first collection of poems and other poems she wrote during those early years in Pittsburgh for the *Home Monthly* suggest the power home and family had over her at this time.² One way of demonstrating this backward-looking strand in this forward-looking book is to read Cather’s poems of home in conjunction with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, a book she quoted from, by an author she admired.³ If we read the “home” poems of *April Twilights* with Stevenson’s *Verses* in mind, we see more clearly the complex nature of Cather’s ideas about children and childhood at that crucial point in her life when she realizes she is leaving childhood farther and farther behind, that it is slipping inexorably into the past. It is a truism of our modern understanding that childhood, aside from the biological fact that we all begin life as young and vulnerable, is a constructed concept. These poems show that Cather accepted and exploited that idea.

A Child’s Garden of Verses and *April Twilights* were written for different audiences; they serve different purposes. Stevenson writes for and about children. His most beloved poems (“My Shadow,” “The Swing,” “The Land of Counterpane”) describe the world from a child’s point of view. We become acquainted with

this child as we read. Cather would recognize him—a loved child with an imaginative turn of mind, brought up on story-books. He’s the hero enacting with his playmates thrilling dramas in far-off places; tales of conquest, adventure and romance in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott, Kipling, and Dumas. Battles are fought, castaways rescued, but the children are always back in the nursery in time for tea. Stevenson’s *Garden* describes a bourgeois childhood of the late Victorian era.⁴ The arrangement of the book frames the child’s world in the vision of the adult looking back. The adult-poet expresses the wistfulness, but not tragedy, of the fact that other children now play in the garden, sending their toy boats down the river, that once grown up one can never be a child again. Cather’s adult-poet looking back on the irretrievable past sounds a more sober note. The grandiosity of past dreams becomes a daunting standard by which to measure present success.



A 1916 edition of *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

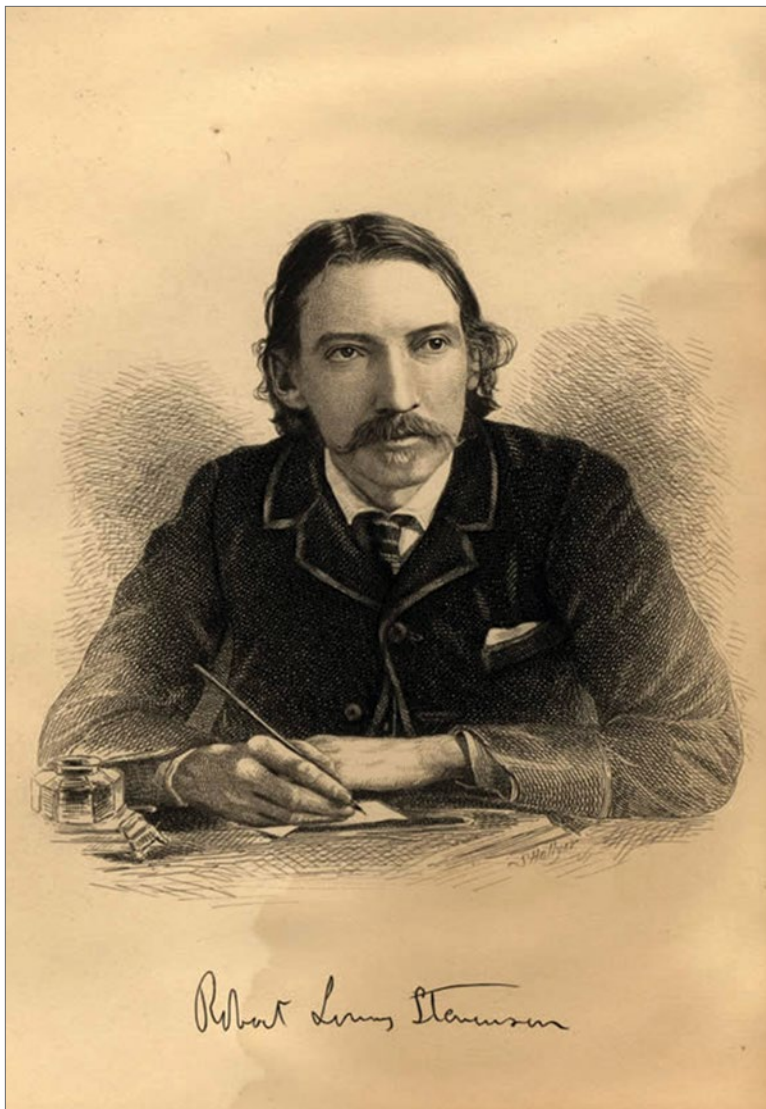
Bernice Slote identifies four poems in *April Twilights* (1903) as inspired by “family and home-life” (xxxix).⁵ Of these only “Grandmither, Think Not That I Forget” was reprinted in the later collections although themes and motifs in the other three—“The Namesake,” “Dedicatory,” and “The Night Express”—all reappear in Cather’s later fiction. Each of the poems echoes Robert Louis Stevenson. And in the Appendix to this volume, Slote includes with other light verse “a group of children’s poems (most of them with personal reference to children in her own family)” (59). Cather leaves these poems out of *April Twilights* probably, as Slote suggests, because they were too slight and perhaps because they were too personal, too revealing of fear and weakness. These “children’s poems” include “Jingle: Bobby Shafto,” “My Little Boy,” “Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender,” “My Horseman” (these four all published in the fall of 1896), and “Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?,” written and published in 1900. As editor of the *Home Monthly*, Cather worked at a furious pace; in her letters she claims she was putting out the magazine almost entirely by herself.⁶ Although these poems were written as filler, dashed off quickly to meet space requirements and publication deadlines, they tell us something about her methods of working and her state of mind during those early Pittsburgh months. For example, the slightest of these, “Bobby Shafto,” (Cather herself dismissively labels it a “Jingle”) is a cheeky rewrite of an old nursery rhyme [“Bobby Shafto’s gone to sea / He’ll come back and marry me”] in which Cather changes the “bright and fair” old Bobby into a fussy little girl, “fat and fair,” who throws a fit every morning as her mother brushes out her yellow hair. At the poem’s turn Cather conflates two of Robert Burns’s poems, and our new Bobby Shafto finds that a mouse has nested in her ringlets.⁷ Thus, we find Cather when pressed for time appropriating anything at hand: copying rhythm, rhyme scheme, and ballad form, keeping the name and the golden hair; but making the jingle her own, she changes the gender of both Bobby and the speaker, and she shifts the meaning of the yellow hair, setting a moral for naughty children and taking a dig at the prissy blonds she had no use for.⁸ This bit of doggerel is signed “John Esten,” her little brother Jack’s given name, a pseudonym Cather often used to disguise her own contributions to the *Monthly*. Another of these early uncollected poems, “My Little Boy,” is also signed “John Esten”; one is dedicated to “J.E.C.” and all are addressed to a little boy by a speaker who is homesick and far away.⁹ By switching the author’s gender, Cather changes the relation between the adult speaker and the child, but it doesn’t seem to matter if the speaker is imagined as man or woman, each misses home and a little brother.¹⁰

The images of childhood in these poems about her family are very like Stevenson’s—full of imaginative, story-book

adventuring. Tellingly, they are all written in ballad form. Ballads come out of a folk tradition; they are easy to sing partly because of their adherence to strict patterns of rhythm and rhyme scheme. The rhythmic line of a ballad is usually short—tetrameter or trimeter alternating with tetrameter, and thus requires less breath than the more graceful and sinuous iambic pentameter. Its incantatory beat can be found in Mother Goose Rhymes, Robert Burns’s poems and John Wesley’s hymns. Furthermore, ballads usually use exact or true rhymes (rather than off-rhymes or slant rhymes), again making amateur participation easier because once the pattern of true rhymes has been established, the audience anticipates the coming rhyme, and receives a jolt of pleasure as it snaps into place at the end of a line. A ballad’s on-going rhyme scheme and rhythmic pattern are varied so rarely that the exceptions within the text are notable. Other poems in *April Twilights* testify that Cather had mastered other forms, but almost all her poems about children and childhood are written as ballads, as if Cather, like Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*, when tired and stressed, turns from art song to folk-song to rest her mind and her voice.

These uncollected poems express in different ways how much Cather missed home. The most sentimental of the poems, “Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender” has a female speaker, Emily Vantell. Its title and first line, taken from a song written in 1882,¹¹ set up a “Bobby Shafto”-like switch in that Cather establishes an expectation and then changes the situation.¹² Though the poem begins as a love song, this speaker is not pining for a sweetheart, but for the absent child who misses her: “When the loneliness is heavy, / And the dark is coming on, / Your dear eyes look out and tell me / That you’re sorry I am gone.” Cather personalizes the well-worn Victorian trope of the child as moral savior of one who “doubts and wanders.” In “My Little Boy” a male speaker this time again pines for the “far-away” child, the thought of whom brings him comfort. Specific details from Cather’s life particularize the portrait: John Esten talking all day long, holding “my” hand, telling Romances “that never came out of a book,” crawling under the bed to hide when the older children had hurt his feelings. In “My Horseman,” the poem inscribed in the family scrapbook to her brother Jim, Cather employs ballad conventions such as the set of directives in the well-known “The Gypsy Rover:” “O, little boy in the West Countree, / Up with the sun to-day! / Get out your little ‘trabbling’ hat” . . . “Get out your little Browney horse” . . . “Then never mind the rivers wide, / Or miles between that be, / But jump upon your steed and ride / Across the hills to me” (AT [1903] 68). Here again ballad conventions are mixed with realistic details of this particular boy’s life: “traveling” is given a child’s lisping spelling, “trabbling”; the steed is a hobby horse (“A





horse without a mane or tail, / A horse with legs but three”); the big boys have hidden the new buggy whip from him. In the last three stanzas Cather sets the brave horseman out on a ride as wild and Romantic as Schubert’s *Erlking*. Like Schubert’s, Cather’s rhythms (iambic tetrameter, alternating with a trimeter line that begins with an anapest followed by two iambs) echo a galloping horse: “Soon falls the night on those wide plains, / And the winds are swift and cold, / But what can fright that gallant steed / And my dashing horseman bold?”

The fourth of these early family poems, “Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?” is signed with Cather’s initials, but the speaker is identified by pronoun as male. Cather may be speaking in her own voice here; she is certainly describing her own attic room in the house at Cedar and Third in Red Cloud.¹³ Cather had left the *Home Monthly* by the time this poem was written, but it was printed twice in 1900 in both the *Library* and the *Courier*.¹⁴ Cather again uses ballad form with its true rhymes and short lines alternating tetrameter and trimeter. The first and last lines of each stanza repeat, except for the poem’s very last line,

and that variation at the end of the third stanza is important. Once again Cather borrows the beginning words; this time from a nursery song. In the first two stanzas the speaker sees his own past in his little brother’s present. “Are you sleeping, little brother, / In the room that once was mine, / Where the night winds sing in summer / Haunting legends of the Rhine? / Does the aspen by the window / Whisper still of high desire, / Of the tread of Roman legions / And the purple pride of Tyre?” Both physical objects within the room and heroic dreams once were the speaker’s. The second stanza repeats the pattern established in the first: “Are you dreaming, little brother? / Olden dreams that once were mine, / Glorious dreams of kingdom sacking / Where the tropic planets shine?” The turn comes in the third and final stanza when the speaker remembers not just his heroic plans, his dreams of “high desire,” but something more precious, a joyous attitude toward life: “Are you loving, little brother? / As another used to do / Just the rose because it’s crimson, / Just the sky because it’s blue?” The many pleasures of a Nebraska summer (emblems of Cather’s home and happy childhood)—“larks at morn,” glistening dew, tassels of corn—are no longer available to the failed and discouraged speaker. Although couched in the language of story-books (“One whose coward lance is rusted,” “One who never took a kingdom, / One whose knightly dreams are fled”), the last question the speaker asks his brother and himself is serious: Without these shining hopes and ambitions am I still worth loving?

The longing for home expressed in these uncollected poems is a theme repeated in three of the four “home” poems that did appear in *April Twilights*. “Dedicatory,” “The Namesake,” “Grandmither, Think Not I Forget” and “The Night Express,” all ring changes on a similar dramatic situation: a young person has gone out from home into the world with high hopes, following a bright dream. What happens next? The different answers to that question, I believe, give us insight into Cather’s shifts in mood and attitude as she contemplates her own foray into the world. “Grandmither, Think Not I Forget” and “The Night Express” are both about returning home. “The Night Express,” as many have noted, foreshadows the action of Cather’s 1904 story, “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” but the poem lacks the peevish bitterness of the story. In the poem the unidentified narrator sees one set of boys at the depot waiting the return of their friend’s body, and imagines his own return home after he has fought the “fierce fight” himself. The energy of the poem goes into the description of the night train and what it means to small-town boys who listen to the whistle challenging them to leave “the plow and herd-whip” and “dare the world of men.” The boys leave, the speaker says, “To . . . see if men of coast or mountain were better

men than we.” His friends who haven’t left appear in an imagined future: they’ve become grown men who will in their turn wait at the depot siding to receive the speaker’s tired body: “Then may the wheels turn swiftly behind the eye of fire, / And may the bell ring gaily that brings me my desire. / The boys I used to watch with will all be there to see, / When I come home to rest me in the ground that nurtured me.” Even though the speaker returns to be buried, the return is neither sad nor bitter for he imagines the cycle repeating itself: a new set of boys listening to the call of the train and eager to be out in the world: “And youths will watch with burning to seek the world of men, / And thrill to hear the whistle that brings me home again.” The seductive call of the night train is as circular as the wheels, as permanent as the tracks.

I would also argue that desire for home is the emotional center of “Grandmither, Think Not I Forget.” As in “Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?” Cather recreates a safe and loving place from her own childhood, in this case her grandmother’s arms, her grandmother’s bed where she can go to feel safe and be comforted. The speaker remembers her grandmother’s love, and seeks in that memory a respite from adult troubles, specifically, illicit love. Cather employs the conventional trope of love as an illness; the speaker is burning with fever, sick unto death. Lovesickness and homesickness alternate within the stanzas. The grandmother’s care is described both in conventional terms (“Ye gave me cakes and lollipops and pretty toys a score”) and with personal precision: the “little lass afeard o’ dark” is allowed to creep into bed to sleep with grandmother.¹⁵ But that infant desire takes a macabre twist as the adult speaker expresses a wish to sleep once more with the grandmother, dead and in her casket. Robert Louis Stevenson meets Edgar Allan Poe. The gifts she now begs from the grandmother—her “still, white hands,” her “sightless eyes,” “clay-cold heart,” are attributes of a corpse. The unfeeling stillness of the dead is contrasted with the speaker’s frenzy: “[M]ine [hands] do beat the dark all night and never find me rest; / They grope among the shadows and beat the cold black air.” Cather seems to be telling herself and us, “You can’t go home again, you can remember it, and remember the love there, but the only sure respite from present distress is death.” The Scottish dialect she uses here seems beside the point *except* as a distancing device, like the archaic poetic phrasings (“wander the old ways again an’ tread them up and down”) that reinforce a romantic distance from both Nebraskan grave¹⁶ and Pittsburgh desperation¹⁷ which are realities behind the poem.

Like “Grandmither” and “The Night Express,” “The Namesake” deals with the relationship between dead and living, between youth and adults.¹⁸ “The Namesake” is dedicated to one of her mother’s brothers, William Seibert Boak, who died

at the age of nineteen in the Civil War at Manassas. The speaker, a young man who clearly identifies with his uncle, describes both war and death with admiration in heroic and romantic terms: [He] “flung his splendid life away.”¹⁹ He tells the dead uncle he would have made the same choice, to abandon childish play, friends, and sweetheart for a “bed of glory,” that he is glad to have inherited the “proud blood” which burns and bites; and he promises “I’ll be winner at the game / Enough for two who bore the name,” declaiming his sense of responsibility for the past;²⁰ in military terms, he picks up the standard to carry it forward. Stevenson too has a poem about a buried soldier. “The Dumb Soldier” like “The Namesake” uses the 4/4 time and trochees of a military march. Cather begins: “Two by two and three by three / Missouri lies by Tennessee; / Row on row, an hundred deep, / Maryland and Georgia sleep.” We hear the echo of Stevenson: “Under grass alone he lies, looking up with leaden eyes, / Scarlet coat and pointed gun, / To the stars and to the sun.” Stevenson’s child-poet-speaker buries his soldier in a “hole in the turf,” abandoning him for a season to the sun and the stars. This child also identifies with the soldier who has done, “[j]ust as I would like to do,” and he imagines the grenadier’s experiences both real (stars, flowers and grass) and magical (fairies and talking bees), but the lead like the dead remain dumb: “Not a word will he disclose, / Not a word of all he knows,” leaving the child to give him voice just as the poet-speaker in “The Namesake” must take up the cause and give voice to the dead uncle.

Similar parallels can be drawn between Stevenson’s “Keepsake Mill” and Cather’s “Dedicatory.” For Stevenson, as for Cather, the river is an important touchstone of childhood memory,²¹ signifying both time and place, both a place of childhood adventures and imaginings, and time—ephemeral and eternal. As Stevenson writes of the mill race: “Years may go by and the wheel in the river / Wheel as it wheels for us, children, to-day / Wheel and keep roaring and foaming forever / Long after all of the boys are away.” In her poem “Dedicatory” Cather duplicates the same dramatic situation Stevenson has imagined in “Keepsake Mill”—children come back, grown-up, to a place that in their childhood symbolized romantic adventure: “Home from the Indies and home from the ocean, / Heroes and soldiers we all shall come home.” “Here shall we meet and remember the past.” With this poem Cather dedicates her first major success, her first book, *April Twilights* to the older Cather brothers, Roscoe and Douglass who were the writer’s playmates, and lifelong friends. For Cather their imagined meeting is more tenuous than Stevenson’s; she creates a sense of a possibility, a hope rather than a surety; “Let us gather,” rather than “we shall.” She works here in unrhymed iambic pentameter, blank



verse rather than the steady beat of Stevenson's ballad with its certainties of rhyme and rhythm. She gradually introduces the language of romance ("Let us gather from the world's four quarters") into her description of a particularized April night which combines realistic detail ("moths," "naked oak and beeches") with painterly, impressionistic light and color. Cather's adults, her former playmates, her brothers, are "grosser selves," re-enchanted by moonlight into "happy shadows" of the children they used to be: Under its magic they become again "three who lay and planned at moonrise, / On an island in a western river, / Of the conquest of the world together." Magically for one night the moon transforms them, but it is as grownups²² (adult happy shadows) that they meet and toast old memories with amber wine.²³ *Salve et vale*: Hail and farewell. They salute and say good-bye to the "wonder-tales," the romantic imaginings of their shared childhood: "To the memory of our vanished kingdom, / To our days of war and ocean venture, / Brave with brigandage and sack of cities." The sense of comradeship created by the word "together" ("[We] planned . . . the conquest of the world together") is reinforced by the word "our" repeated in each of the next three lines. These children were a group, a band of brothers (and one sister). They planned the conquest of the world "together," and they were to have conquered it "together." One note in the tone of sadness here is the loneliness and hardship of having to make one's way not in a jolly band but by one's self.

There is a final parallel, implied rather than explicitly stated, between this poem and Stevenson's. Both Stevenson and Cather imagine the ways in which their books will be received in the world; both couch the communication between book and reader in terms of magic. For example, the memories that the adult "shadows" toast with "amber wine" are like the shadows themselves, created out of remembered moonlight. *April Twilights*, the book, holds them—shadows, memories, the children they used to be—and gives them a literary, if not literal, reality by making them reappear to Cather and to us. *A Child's Garden of Verses* ends with a section titled "Envoys" in which Stevenson sends his book as if it were a letter to various readers—playmates and adults who shared his childhood, to his cousins "Willie and Henrietta, who will be his best readers because "You two . . . and you only" "in a garden green / With me were king and queen, / Were hunter, soldier, tar, / And all the thousand things that children are." In separate poems he thanks "Mother," "Auntie," and his nurse, Alison Cunningham. In his envoy "To Minnie," the poet evokes a whole world vanished: "The great day nursery, best of all, with pictures pasted on the wall" pictures of "the wars around Sebastopol," "the grinning

guns," "the escalate," "the plunging ships," (and then in startling juxtaposition) "the bleating sheep," and children happily wading. Like those who gathered in *April Twilights*' "Dedicatory," these children come back as ghosts: "Our phantom voices haunt the air / As we were still at play, / And I can hear them call and say: / 'How far is it to Babylon?'" Minnie now lives in India, but her image (a photograph?) sits in a "quaint Indian cabinet" full of exotica from "the gorgeous East" that had made that faraway country seem familiar terrain for the imaginative Scottish children. For Stevenson as for Cather, physical objects are touchstones of memory,²⁴ "port-keys." Stevenson ends the poem with surreal whimsy that suggests how the book and their imaginations create a continued connection between himself and Minnie—"Be this a fable," he says, calling attention to the fanciful nature of his invention, and its impossibility. "Me in the parlour as of old, / And Minnie just above me set / In the Quaint Indian cabinet! / Smiling and kind, you grace a shelf / Too high for me to reach myself. / Reach down a hand, my dear, and take / These rhymes for old acquaintance' sake." With art, imagination, and memory Stevenson collapses the seemingly rigid dictates of time and space. Stevenson repeats this idea in his last "Envoy" which is addressed to us, "To Any Reader." The past and the child the speaker once was live only in art of the book. The book, the poem, serves as both a link of mutual understanding and a barrier—inexorably separating reader from author, as adult-author is separated from his former self. Author and reader look together through a glass—the classic iconography of magic—at a child, living in its own present, representing the past.

As from the house your mother sees
 You playing round the garden, trees,
 So you may see if you will look
 Through the windows of this book,
 Another child, far, far away
 And in another garden, play.
 But do not think you can at all,
 By knocking on the window, call
 That child to hear you. . . .
 He does not hear; he will not look,
 Nor yet be lured out of this book
 For, long ago, the truth to say,
 He has grown up and gone away.

Neither author nor reader can tangibly connect with the child in the garden: "It is but a child of air / That lingers in the garden there." As we have seen in "Dedicatory," Cather also

employs the equation of art and magic, but her home poems emphasize the stark loneliness of the speaker rather than a shared vision with the imagined reader.

The last poem in *April Twilights* uses the word “envoi” in its specialized literary meaning: “a short concluding stanza of certain French verse forms, such as the ballade, originally serving as a postscript dedication of the poem to a patron and later as a pithy summation of the poem” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 438). Her parting word is not as Stevenson’s envisioned as a letter, or package, a messenger, or ambassador sent. It is not “art,” “love,” “memory,” but “death.”²⁵ In “*L’Envoi*” she calls death by its many names: “Darkness,” “Silence,” “Night,” “Loneliness,” and “Sleep.” Like Whitman’s bird in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” over and over, the poem says “death.” The hard, implacable fact of mortality is the only sure companion one can rest with when one is alone and closes the door.

There is evidence that Cather never mistook romance for reality. Her childhood was as safe and well-loved as Robert Louis Stevenson’s, but she had from her earliest days a deep awareness of mortality. In her own family, of her personal knowledge, beloved sisters, aunts, and sons and daughters died from typhus, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and unknown causes. Cather’s other and actual namesake, her father’s little sister Wilella died of diphtheria. She travelled west with a dying aunt, identified by Janis Stout as

Virginia (Jenny) Cather Ayres (171); Jenny’s death left her cousin Alfretta (Retta) an orphan. Another aunt, Alverna Cather Clutter Payne left two orphaned cousins Kyd Clutter and Wilella Payne.²⁶ One final poem from *April Twilights* which is about children indicates that from an early age Cather had absorbed into her psyche knowledge of life’s injustice and brutality. In what seems like a simple rhyme with overtones of Blake and Wordsworth, Cather describes the horror of a child murdered and tortured to death. “Provençal Legend” tells of Faustinus the shepherd’s son, brought like a sacrificial lamb (“Comeliest his of sacrifice, / Youth and tender April day”) before the Roman authorities where he testifies to his faith. For this he is punished, given the impossible task of bringing as ransom “Gold enough to pave the way / From the temple to the Rhone.” When the child returns with gold mustard-blossoms instead of coin, he is tortured to death and buried on the hillside where he had played. Using “gold” as a value marker, Cather suggests the distinction between heavenly and earthly treasure. Years go by and the buried child yearns to play again, especially in springtime: “Golden play days came: the air / Called him, weanlings bleated.” Roman boys “fleet with spring” who run callously or unknowingly over the grave, do not bring poor Faustinus, “shorn of [his] youth and usage fair,” “hope” or “hilltop days.” But, every Easter, shepherd children come bringing spring flowers to decorate the grave. In their remembrance and in



“... three who lay and planned at moonrise, / On an island in a western river, / Of the conquest of the world together.” *Moonlight on the Platte*, circa 1910.



their play, the child martyr Faustinus has both “hope” and “hilltop days.” With that phrase Cather emphasizes the horror of what happened to a child and of the childlike nature of faith.

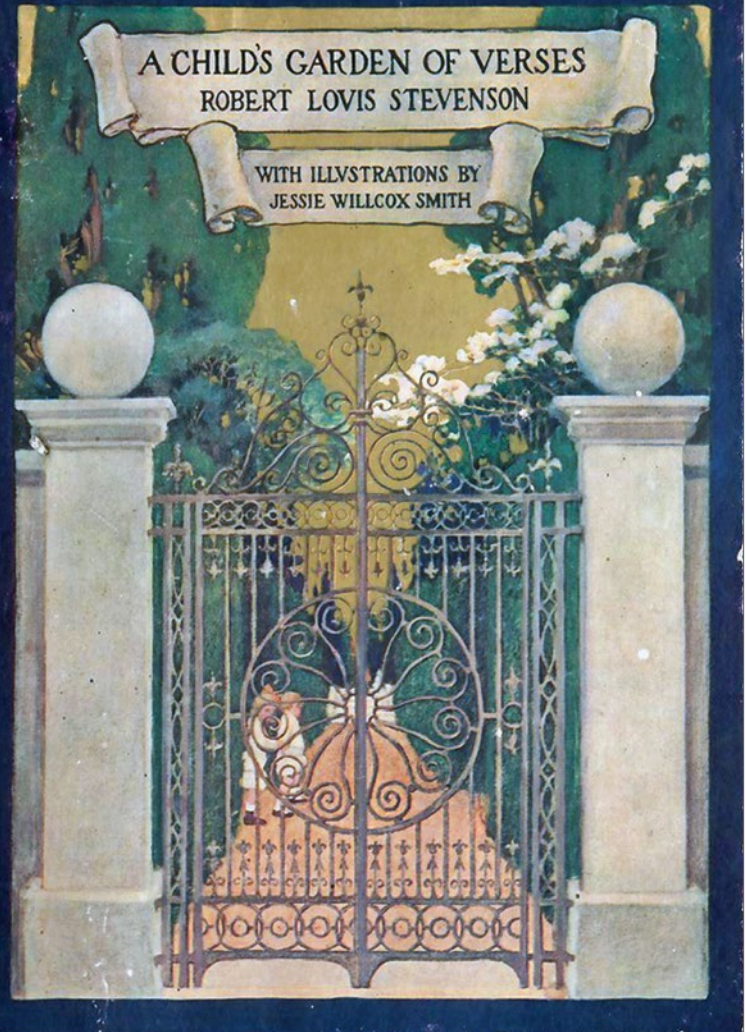
“Provençal Legend” is yet another poem in *April Twilights* that looks toward Cather’s future fiction; in this case, to the last, lost novel *Hard Punishments*, fragments of which have so recently been made available to scholars. From George N. Kate’s 1956 article scholars knew that the central characters in *Hard Punishments* were tortured and mutilated children (482-3). In “Toward Completing a Triptych: The ‘Hard Punishments’ Fragments” John Murphy suggests ways these fragments align with the rest of Cather’s work, discussing her long fascination with French culture and questions of faith, and commenting that the setting, “the Papal Palace and Avignon had teased her mind for a very long time” (2-8).²⁷ To these continuities he might have added her continued juxtaposition of high and low culture, her fascination with torture and mutilation, and the deaths of children. Unlike Faustinus, the martyr child who is innocent, Jean and André, the heroes of this projected book, seem to have been authors of their own tragedies. (As Murphy points out, one of the issues Cather struggles with in the story is the question of free will.) Though the boys have been silenced and made grotesque, Cather seems to project the possibility of love and redemption through the pain.



Working on the *Home Monthly*, writing for that particular pious and sentiment-seeking audience, Cather would have been keenly aware of that image of childhood as a construct while at the same time she was desperately lonesome for home and unconditional love, especially of her little brother Jack. There is one strain in late Victorian culture that projects children as innocent and childhood as an idealized state. Both Cather and Stevenson knew this was never a reality. Childhood can be a disaster, and unspeakable things can happen to children. But Cather continually uses children, childhood, youth to represent some of humankind’s best qualities—beauty, hope, and bravery.²⁹ Like the island in “Dedicatory” or “The Enchanted Bluff,” childhood as a place is always there in memory. Remembering childhood can recall a better, more noble self. In the next iteration of *April Twilights*, Cather leaves out the poems closest to her own childhood. With the publication of *April Twilights* (1903) Willa Cather is ready to leave a child’s garden of verse and enter a garden of trolls.³⁰

NOTES

1. The letter Cather wrote 2 May 1896 from Red Cloud to Mariel Gere, her college friend in Lincoln, expresses some of



A 1917 edition of A Child's Garden of Verses with illustrations by Jessie Willcox Smith.

the anxiety she felt at having to live up to expectations of her family and the community (Nebraska State Historical Society; hereafter NSHS). Bernice Slote describes her in 1896 as “a brilliant, forceful, intense, and richly gifted girl who—everybody knew—would of course do something in the world” (xxi). Thea Kronborg mirrors some of this passionate ambition when she tells Dr. Archie that she “only want[s] impossible things,” and that “If I fail . . . I’ll be one of the worst women that ever lived. I’ll be an awful woman!” (SL 243-4).

2. In her article on Cather’s poetry, Janis Stout analyzes five poems that Cather herself had singled out in 1923, and finds in them a “linkage of art with home.” (Willa Cather’s Poetry 171). None of these poems appear in *AT* (1903). I am discussing a much earlier link between her poetry and “home.”

3. Cather uses verses from Stevenson’s “Where Go the Boats?” as chapter headings in the 1902 story, “The Treasure of Far Island” (265,276). For admiring comments on Stevenson see KA (232-3, 310-16, *passim*).



4. The critical lenses we use today—post-colonialism, Orientalism, racial analyses—were not yet in play as Stevenson wrote his verse. With hindsight's wisdom, we watch this child practicing the attitudes and bravery of the British raj before the brutality and blood become realities.

5. James Woodress identifies these same four poems as arising from “personal experience” (167).

6. In her introduction to *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, Mildred Bennett describes “[Cather's] first hectic weeks as editor at the *Home Monthly* when she was pouring out fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in a desperate effort to fill the magazine's pages” (xxviii). Peter Benson describes Willa Cather during this period as one who could who “could take over the whole show at a moment's notice—and edit, write, proof, even typeset entire issues by herself” (229). Yet, as Tim Bintrim has usefully and correctly pointed out, Cather's actual workload was probably much less than her letters home suggest. As we all know, she was prone to creative description, not to say exaggeration, especially when she was herself the heroine of the story she was writing about in her letters. It is probable that she was both supremely confident and at times frightened that she would fail.

7. Kari Ronning reminded me at Spring Conference that the family nickname for Cather's sister Elsie was “Bobbie,” perhaps another family reference. (Spring Conference, May 31, 2012)

8. Like her hero George Elliot, Cather had little sympathy for ultra-feminine blonds. See Jessica in “Tommy the Unsentimental,” Lily Fisher in *The Song of the Lark*, and Fairy Blair in *Lucy Gayheart*.

9. “My Horseman” is probably written with her eight-year-old brother Jim in mind, but the other two and “Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?” refer to Jack (Slote 78, 80). In a letter to Mariel Gere written in May 1896 Cather describes Jack in words that echo her exact language in these poems: the “little chap's big gray eyes have a power of consolation in them” and “He is just made to love people.” In a letter written to Mariel's mother in July 1896 when she was newly arrived in Pittsburgh, Cather betrays the homesickness revealed in the poems: “I would give anything just to see Jack ten minutes. I dream about those big tender gray eyes of his every night,” again associating home and love with her little brother and using language she duplicates in the poems.

10. I recognize the difficulties in making such an assumption, but for the purposes of this paper, if the poem is signed with a woman's name I take the speaker's gender to be female, unless the poem indicates otherwise.

11. The opening lines are: “Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender / Sang a poet long ago.” “Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender” was an art song written by Eduard Lassen in 1882.

12. The Baptists' prodigy in *The Song of the Lark*, Lily Fisher, uses a similar ploy at the Christmas concert (SL 60-63).

13. I was told by Cheryl Wilson, one of the many knowledgeable docents at the Cather Foundation, that Jack was the only one allowed to sleep in her room when she was away from home. This in a house where space was at such a premium!

14. See *AT* (1903) 75-88 for publication details of this and other *AT* poems.

15. Stevenson's dedicatory poem, inscribed to his nurse, “To Alison Cunningham From Her Boy,” contains this same feeling of a child being cared for and comforted by a loving adult. “For the long nights you lay awake / And watched for my unworthy sake: / For your most comfortable hand / That led me through the uneven land: / For all the story-books you read: / For all the pains you comforted: . . . / [G]rant it, Heaven, that all who read . . . / May hear it in as kind a voice / As made my childish days rejoice!” (ix)

16. Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak, died in 1893 and is buried in the Red Cloud cemetery.

17. See Note 6.

18. See Slote (xlii) for a discussion of Cather's “elegiac strain” and her succession of heroic youth dying young, which is, of course, a powerful strain in Romantic literature.

19. In *AT* (1903) the dedication reads: “To W.S.B. of the Thirty-third Virginia.” In its first publication in 1902, the dedication had read “To W.L.B. of the Thirty-fifth Virginia” (Slote 81). The two battles fought over this ground are called Bull Run by Yankees.

20. Here Cather asks a question which recurs often in her later work: what does one owe the past? What obligation do we have to those who have gone before and whose stories we carry forward (or not)? The theme is expressed in her later poem “Macon Prairie” as well as by Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*.

21. See Slote (xxxix-xli) for a discussion of the recurring motif in Cather's work of the island in the river.

22. Like Cather, Roscoe and Douglass have assumed adult responsibilities, Roscoe teaching country school until illness forced him to quit, and Douglass helping as he could, later taking a responsible position with the railroad (Woodress 68, 136).

23. At the Spring Conference in Red Cloud in 2010 David Porter delivered an eloquent explication of Cather's use of the color yellow in all its forms and its association in Cather's writing with life and happiness.

24. Two excellent elaborations of this idea can be found in articles by Janis Stout and Mary Ann O'Farrell in *Willa Cather and Material Culture*.



25. Several places in his book *On the Divide* David Porter argues that Cather views death as “evil,” but I would suggest that she was rather more hard headed, reserving the moral judgment implied in “evil” for human activity and seeing death as a fact of nature, our ultimate limitation (177, 181-2, e.g.).

26. I wish to thank Kari Ronning for helping me make this point accurately (see Bennett 228). Cather’s 1923 poem “Macon Prairie” is relevant here, as the speaker-poet remembers being held in the arms of a dying aunt. The structure of this poem suggests the way the child-Cather is inserted as a character at the end of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

27. Murphy’s explication of the Catholic elements of the fragment considers other themes such as the class differences between the two boys, the problems of sin, free will, and redemption, and places this last story in a continuum with Cather’s two other stories of French Catholic culture, *Shadows on the Rock* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Murphy’s description of Cather’s use of Thomas Okey’s *The Story of Avignon* is particularly enlightening.

28. Richard Giannone (28-30) discusses children’s enchanting, ephemeral, ennobling effects in two of Cather’s early stories, “Jack-a-Boy” and “The Treasure of Far Island.”

29. The tortured child in the poem “Street in Packingtown (Chicago)” (AT&OP 60-61) and the precocious artistic children pushed beyond their abilities and endurance might serve as continuations of this theme.

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Poems from the Prairie: The Crack in the Air

A collection of poems by members of the 5th Annual Prairie Writers’ Workshop is available from The Willa Cather Foundation. *Poems from the Prairie: The Crack in the Air* makes an excellent gift or last-minute stocking stuffer, or treasured keepsake for Santa when he stops for milk and cookies at your house.

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Cather, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Art of Enchantment

Richard C. Harris | Webb Institute

Anyone who has read about young Willa Cather's years in Lincoln and Pittsburgh in the 1890s and has read at least some of her journalistic pieces from that decade must be charmed by her fascination with the artistic world she was in the process of discovering, impressed by her knowledge and insight, and astounded at her sheer audacity. Her newspaper pieces, the earliest written, we must not forget, when Cather was only twenty years old, reveal a remarkable breadth of knowledge, an incurable passion for learning, and, of course, a very healthy ego. During this period, her literary mentor was Henry James, her favorite composer was Wagner, and certainly one of her favorite painters was Edward Burne-Jones, whom Cather called the "master of all English painters" (*The World and the Parish* 914).

It was during that formative decade, of course, that Cather was entering into the "kingdom of art," or we might say, the kingdom of the arts, since her knowledge included painting and music as well as literature. We know from various accounts that from a young age Cather was a serious reader and that especially while at the University she had many opportunities to see musical and dramatic performances. How then did Willa Cather from Red Cloud and then Lincoln, Nebraska, gain the knowledge of *painting* she had by the time she was in her early twenties? How did she, at age twenty-one, come to know enough about the subject to be invited to lecture on art at the

University and to begin to write articles on painting, as well as other topics, for the *Nebraska State Journal*? Like many young people, Cather probably first encountered significant art in engravings and lithographs on the walls of her home and other homes in Red Cloud. In 1932, remembering her love for the house of Mrs. Fannie Wiener, the prototype for Mrs. Rosen in "Old Mrs. Harris," Cather would say that a house like Mrs. Rosen's "was the nearest thing to an art gallery and a museum" that many Midwesterners would normally see. Young Vickie Templeton in that story loves to take "a soft pillow and lie down on the soft carpet and look up at the pictures in the dusky room" (*Obscure Destinies* 87-88). Cather also would have been exposed to a number of articles and illustrations in magazines such as *The Nation*, *Century*, *Scribner's*, and *Harper's*, which because of improvements in printing techniques, were able by the 1890s to provide readers with quality images of art works from all over the world.¹ Also, as Polly Duryea notes, in Lincoln, parents of Cather's University friends "provided an entirely new milieu for the world of Art," and the University library held art books "that reproduced paintings from Botticelli to Burne-Jones, and from Piranesi to Puvis de Chavannes" (3).

One especially significant event in Cather's developing knowledge of art was her March 1895 trip to Chicago. Those interested in Cather's developing love of *music* often note her



The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon



exhaustive schedule of attendance at operatic performances during that week, but Cather's niece, Helen Cather Southwick, said she knew Cather "was surely dying to get to" the Chicago Art Institute on that trip, and James Woodress said he was almost certain that Cather did visit the museum while there (Duryea 7). The Art Institute would become Cather's favorite museum. In a lengthy 1901 *Lincoln Courier* article on the museum, Cather would declare, "It is not unlikely that the Chicago Art Institute, with its splendid collection of casts and pictures, has done more for the many people of the Middle West than any of the city's great industries. Every farmer boy who goes into the city on freight train with his father's cattle and every young merchant who goes into the city to order his stock, takes a look at the pictures. There are thousands of people all over the prairies who have seen their first and only good pictures there" (*WC&P* 842-43).

In addition, Cather's move to Pittsburgh in 1896—with a stopover in Chicago to visit the Art Institute again—coincided with the opening of the Carnegie Institute Art Galleries (now known as the Carnegie Museum of Art), and with the museum's first exhibition of modern international paintings. There Cather might have seen works by a number of the most important artists of the day, among them the Edward Burne-Jones paintings *The Merciful Knight*, which was exhibited in November and December 1896, and *The Wedding of Psyche* (see page 20), which was exhibited in November and December 1897.²

Duryea notes that as a journalist in Pittsburgh Cather would have had the opportunity to meet a number of prominent artists such as Mary Cassatt, William Merritt Chase, John Singer Sargent, and Puvis de Chavannes (9). At one event in October 1897 Cather also met Will H. Low, a painter and art historian, who

had just completed a year-long series of articles on nineteenth-century painting for *McClure's* magazine. In an article that appeared in the *Lincoln Courier*, she says that she had "bribed the hostess to ask Mr. Low to take [her] to dinner" (*WC&P* 513). During the 1890s Cather continued to write on art for the *Home Monthly*, the *Library*, and the *Index to Pittsburgh Life*.

While spending several months in Washington, D.C., in 1899, she visited art museums there, writing reviews of two shows at the Corcoran Gallery.

An especially important event in her developing knowledge of the world of art was her 1902 trip to Europe with Isabelle McClung, and their meeting with Dorothy Canfield, Cather's friend from University days. This trip was, both personally and artistically, one of the most important events of Cather's life. She later told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "In 1902 I was really young and had never been anywhere" (*WC to ESS*, 2 June 1912). And she would write to Dorothy Canfield Fisher twenty years later that she had felt terribly naïve and inexperienced during that journey, much as her "sensitive redneck" Claude Wheeler of *One of Ours* feels when he first sees Europe (*WC to DCF* [April 1922?]). In London Cather saw the collections at the British Museum, the National Gallery, and perhaps the Tate Gallery, which had acquired Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* in 1889 and Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* in 1900. Duryea says it "seems highly probable" that Cather did visit the Tate and notes that Cather also might have seen Burne-Jones's *The Golden Stairs*

there (102). In Paris Cather visited the Louvre, the Luxembourg, and the Cluny. Thus by the time she was writing the poetry that would appear in 1903 in *April Twilights*, Willa Cather had seen either first or second hand a wide variety of paintings and had demonstrated a keen sense of artistic and critical acumen.



King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid

During this period Cather was especially taken by the works of the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements. The Pre-Raphaelite movement began in 1848 with a secret “brotherhood”—simply abbreviated PRB—created by three young Royal Academy artists: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As the name of the movement suggests, these artists saw in European painting, specifically Italian painting before Raphael, a quality of honesty and fidelity to nature that became the key to their aesthetic, “not only a style more direct, and therefore more realistic, than that of their own contemporaries, but also a natural humility in its simple delineation of objects that was imbued with genuine religious [i.e., spiritual] feeling” (Rose 5). The daring of these artists in forming a secret art society, as well as their criticism of currently “acceptable” British paintings, led to the artistic establishment’s denunciation of the group, though they were defended repeatedly by John Ruskin, who with Walter Pater, Cather considered the final word on painting and aesthetics during the period. As with their sense of painterly style, their choice of subjects also took them back to the past, to the later Middle Ages, which was in their minds, an enchanted world, an age of chivalry and heroism, an age of what they called “Immortals” (Wood 13). This subject matter is seen in many of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, among them Rossetti’s *The Wedding of Saint George and the Princess Sabra* and *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, Ford Madox Brown’s *Chaucer at the Court of King Edward III*, Hunt’s *Claudio and Isabella*, Edmund Blair Leighton’s *The Accolade* and *God Speed*, Sir Frank Dicksee’s *Chivalry*, and Burne-Jones’s *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (see page 17).

The second or later phase of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which developed in the 1870s and is often referred to as the Aesthetic movement, also began with the friendships and influence of three artists: Rossetti, William Morris, and Edward Burne-Jones, with Burne-Jones soon becoming the leader of the movement. The group’s great achievement was the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877. Cather must have become aware of this exhibition, for it was an event that no one seriously interested in late nineteenth-century art would not have heard of. In an 1878 article on the second summer exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery, Cather’s mentor Henry James praised Burne-Jones effusively—effusively at least for James—declaring him among the “cleverest English painters of the day,” “the first” among the painters exhibited in both the 1877 and 1878 shows, and describing his several works as “wonderfully elegant,” “far and away the most interesting and remarkable things in the exhibition” (162, 164).³



Edward Burne-Jones, 1874, from the National Portrait Gallery, London (Creative Commons license)

Several of Cather’s journalistic pieces specifically mention Burne-Jones. The first, which appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal* in January 1895, mentions a dramatic production in London, titled *The Passing of Arthur*, for which Burne-Jones painted the scenery (Slote xxviii). In an 1896 *Journal* article, Cather would speak of “those mystical effects that Burne-Jones and Rossetti worked into their painting” (*W&P* 377). In a January 1900 piece on Clara Butt, Cather described the English singer as being “wonderfully like Burne-Jones’s women, like those tall, angular, bloodless women with the sensuousness of the soul in their pale, worn cheeks, chained by a fever that is never fed. There is something of their unwholesomeness about this Clara Butt of the trumpet tones, for she is not at all like a rose, but like ‘the jasmine white as death.’” Cather goes on to comment on the “haunting, horror-begetting quality” of her voice, which Cather says, gives her a “creepy feeling” (*W&P* 648). One of Burne-Jones’s best known paintings, *The Beguiling of Merlin* (see next page), suggests something of this quality. In addition, Cather mentions Burne-Jones in her 1902 short story “The Professor’s Commencement,” where she tells us that the walls of Professor Graves’s library





The Beguiling of Merlin

“were hung with photographs of the works of *the best modern painters* [italics mine]—Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Corot, and a dozen others” (CSF 283).

Cather’s most extensive comments on Burne-Jones are found in her report on a visit to Burne-Jones’s studio during that 1902 trip to Europe, in which she describes seeing his paintings hung and stacked all over the room, and having a long conversation with his valet James (W&P 912-17). As Mildred Bennett points out in *The World of Willa Cather*, it is clear that this piece, which was to form a basis for Cather’s later short story “The Marriage of Phaedra,” is a fictionalized account of what actually must have happened. According to Burne-Jones’s granddaughter, Burne-Jones never had a valet by any name, nor was there anyone named James in charge of his studio after his death in 1898. This detail was corroborated by Sir Sydney Cockerell, who also noted that

the studio had been cleared out by the time of Cather’s purported visit (Bennett 249; W&P 911-12).⁴ However, if Cather’s description of that visit is suspect, what she says about Burne-Jones and his paintings must reliably convey her fascination with the artist and his work. One passage in particular makes this point quite clearly:

To anyone who has ever come under the spell of Burne-Jones’ work it is only necessary to say that all these things, from the slightest study of an arm to the finished pictures, are most really and wholly and convincingly his, and could be the conception or execution of no other man. Certainly there can be no question nowadays as to who is the master of all English painters. . . . There is something that speaks from every canvas or study on the studio wall, from the long-limbed languid women, the wide, far-seeing eyes, the astonishingly bold, yet always delicate and tender experiments in composition and color scheme, which speak from no other canvas stretched in English land. For this grace of curve and pregnant beauty of line, this harmony between figure and setting, this depth of atmosphere and truth of tone and subtle poetry of color, you can find no equal here (W&P 914).

So, then, let us examine some of the influences of Burne-Jones’s paintings in Cather’s early poetry. The most obvious, explicit reference in *April Twilights* is in the poem “White Birch in Wyoming,” which begins with the line, “Stark as a Burne-Jones vision of despair” (AT 29). While the setting of the poem is ostensibly the American West, it is more the mystical dreamscape than it is realistically Western. After this opening line, the poem quickly moves from the world of art to the world of music with references in the second and third stanzas to Wagner’s Brunhilde and her Valkyrie sisters. As Slote points out, Cather’s description of the Wyoming landscape may have been suggested by the typically barren background in Burne-Jones’ painting *The Mirror of Venus* (see cover). On the right of the painting we see a stand of



The Wedding of Psyche



Burne-Jones's studio, 1887

trees, which look very much like birches amid the surrounding barren landscape. Slote also notes that two Burne-Jones panels, titled *Fides* (Faith) and *Spes* (Hope) might have suggested ideas for Cather's poem "Fides, Spes" (xxix).

However, the poem that most clearly captures and recreates the enchanted, dreamlike quality of so many of Burne-Jones's paintings is Cather's "Dedicatory." One of the most beautiful poems in the 1903 volume, this work certainly embodies the "haunting melancholy" and "pensive sadness" that George Seibel, in his early review of *April Twilights*, saw as characteristic of the volume (quoted in Slote xxi). Slote suggests that Cather's cutting this poem from the 1923 edition of *April Twilights* might have been part of an attempt to eliminate those poems that most obviously contained autobiographical references, as a way of "working in small ways toward a cooler, more impersonal tone, or to make universal what had started as simply individual or particular" (xxxv). Whatever Cather's motives might have been, that she dropped one of the very best poems from the original edition remains curious, and we might ask what effect the elimination of "Dedicatory" has on the reader's response to the poems that follow. For here in "Dedicatory" Cather establishes a mood for the volume as a whole and more than anywhere else achieves the synthesis of poetry and painting established by the ancients, e.g., in Horace's famous dictum, *ut pictura poesis erit*, "a poem is as a picture," and further developed in the theories of a number of late nineteenth-century Aesthetes, such as James McNeill Whistler and John Ruskin. In these theoretical notions, inherent in the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones and others, Willa Cather found that synchronistic fusion of subject, sight, sound, and sense that informed the aesthetic of her early poetry.

Indeed, the language and mood of many of the poems in *April Twilights* produce "mystical effects" and evoke a charming,

somehow magical lost world in which time has slowed or stopped but captured nonetheless in sensation and memory. It is a world very much like that which Burne-Jones described in reference to his own art: "a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be, in a light better than a light that ever shone, in a land no one can define or remember—only desire" (quoted in Wood 119). In "Dedicatory" poetic memory imbues actual experiences with the magic of a dream. Here, as in other poems in the volume, "one moves in a mythic landscape" (Slote xxiv); Cather's world here is characterized by a sense of the ideal, of a world that was, juxtaposed to the world that is. As in so much Arcadian poetry, the overwhelming sense is one of loss or regret, of disappointment or uncertainty; nostalgia, the "return," or desire to return, to that lost world or state of mind, creates the wistful tone of the work. And no other poem in the volume better captures and at the same time recreates that moment of "exquisite passion" and beauty that Walter Pater, whom Cather saw as the patron saint of the cult of beauty, attempted to define in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* and that Burne-Jones sought to evoke in his paintings. Christopher Wood's description of the effect of Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus* applies equally to Cather's "Dedicatory": "It is a deliberately romantic, introspective art the aim of which, if it has one at all, is to awaken our sense of beauty, and arouse a mood of nostalgia, reverie and introspection. It is a mood common to much of late Victorian art, especially the work of the later Pre-Raphaelites" (119).

Beginning the poem with the phrase, "Somewhere, sometime, in an April twilight," Cather immediately establishes the dreamlike quality of a lost world. Amid a world of shadows, called from the real world of the present, those from the past, "R.C.C. and C.D.C.," Cather's brothers Roscoe and Douglass, gather and join with the poet, to allow the moon to "work again its old enchantment." As an April twilight turns to an April night, their "grosser selves" are "transformed." Again, they are in the wonderful world of their youth, "on an island in a western river," talking of "war" and "ocean venture," "Odysseys," "brigandage" and "sack of cities," plans to conquer the world—"wonder tales" they were. Those who gathered, then, briefly inhabited an ideal kingdom in which the exquisite experience of the moment provided something of beauty. Now a "vanished kingdom," that place and those experiences, though a "shadow," a memory, live on as Wordsworthian "spots of time." As Cather declares in "The Treasure of Far Island," the 1902 short story clearly associated in her mind with this poem, these characters, in those moments, "had become as the gods, who dwell in their golden houses, recking little of the woes and labors of mortals, neither heeding any fall of rain or snow" (*CSF* 282). One of the fundamental tenets of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was that one's art must be honest and simple, demonstrating conscientious fidelity



to the chosen subject. At the same time, one of Burne-Jones's contemporaries told a group of young artists, "Remember that the true object of art is to create a world, not to imitate what is currently before our eyes" (Bell 95). These artists also wanted, as Millais said, to paint pictures that would "turn the minds of men to good reflections" (quoted in Wood 10). In "Dedicatory" Cather, remembering those magic days from her childhood, recreated her own lost world, a world like that of the Pre-Raphaelites and Aesthetes, "hushed for wonder."

Cather would later look back upon the period in her life in which she was discovering the world of art, the theories of the Pre-Raphaelites and Aesthetes, the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones and others, with a certain sense of amusement. In her 1902 article on her "visit" to Burne-Jones's studio, Cather had mentioned that she also visited the studio of another of the Aesthetes, George Frederick Watts. She criticized his work, saying that "even in a nightmare, the humblest Italian painter of any of the early schools, could not have dreamed of such transgressions in color as some of them present" (*W&P* 917) and declaring photographic reproductions of his works preferable to the actual paintings themselves. In 1934 Cather wrote to Louise Guerber Burroughs, whose painter husband, Cather had learned, was writing on the Pre-Raphaelites: "they always seemed so beautiful and legendary to me when I knew their works in reproduction only. But when I went to England first and saw their works! Such awful color, I've never got over the shock of it. I mean [Edward] Burne-Jones and [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti—seems as if they mixed a little mud in their paint. I remember awful greens, and ladies—pure Virgins with moldy complexions. These painters should be engraved, always, and their canvases kept in a locked gallery for students only" (29 August [1934]).⁵

Whatever her feelings about Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites or Aesthetes might have been later in her career, however, in the period prior to the publication of *April Twilight*, Willa Cather clearly found that in his paintings Burne-Jones had created "with the breath of his own genius, an enchanted world wonderously beautiful and beautifully wondrous" (Monkhouse 152). In her poem "Dedicatory," Cather "lifts high the cup of Old Romance,"⁶ poignantly captures her past, and recreates her own poetic vision of an enchanted "vanished kingdom."

NOTES

1. Of particular note are the February and December 1894 issues of *Scribner's* magazine, which include articles by one of the outstanding art critics of the day, Cosmo Monkhouse. The February issue contains an illustrated article on Edward Burne-

Jones, and the December issue, an illustrated article on George Frederick Watts, the two painters Cather focuses on in her 1902 piece about her visit to Burne-Jones's studio. Cather must certainly have read these two articles: The two issues were in the Cather family library and are currently part of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

2. These paintings are listed in the First and Second Annual Exhibition Catalogues of the Carnegie Art Galleries. In a 1934 letter to Louise Guerber Burroughs, Cather said that she had seen Burne-Jones's works only as black and white illustrations prior to her visit to England in 1902. However, given Cather's interest in art and in the work of Burne-Jones, her easy proximity to the Carnegie Gallery, and her penchant for recreating the past, one wonders whether she might, in fact, have seen these paintings, and perhaps others by Burne-Jones and other Pre-Raphaelites, before her trip to England.

3. Whether Cather read James's articles could not be determined. The articles on the Grosvenor Gallery, noted here, were published originally in *The Nation* in the 1870s. Others appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *New York Tribune*. While the Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln does have copies of *The Nation*, there is no record indicating whether they were there when Cather was a student. James's articles on art were not collected and published in one edition until 1956. Cather, however, may well have seen the most comprehensive contemporary study of Burne-Jones, Malcolm Bell's *Edward Burne-Jones*, originally published in 1893, and then republished in 1898 under the title *Sir Edward Burne-Jones: A Record and Review*. Bell provides a brief biographical introduction and then discusses Burne-Jones's artistic career, including his showings in the Grosvenor Gallery, on a year-by-year basis. The text, which is supplemented with numerous black and white illustrations, concludes with a chapter on Burne-Jones's art and its critics. An excellent current look at the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements is *The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-Garde 1860-1900*, the catalogue for the first international exhibition of these works, sponsored by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

4. Burne-Jones did have a studio assistant by the name of Thomas Matthews Rooke. Rooke, born in 1842, himself a painter, first worked with Burne-Jones in 1869. Over the years he served as an intellectual stimulus to Burne-Jones, drawing on his reading as well as his knowledge of art to provide subjects for conversation during their studio work. In early 1895 Rooke decided that these conversations might be of particular interest to those interested in Burne-Jones and his work; Rooke, therefore, began keeping a daily record of their conversations, which he continued until Burne-Jones's death in June 1898. Upon Burne-



Jones's death Rooke turned his records over to Burne-Jones's widow, Georgiana, who used the material in creating *Memorials of Edward Coley Burne-Jones*, which was published in two volumes in 1904. It is highly unlikely that Willa Cather would have known of Rooke or that he could have been the prototype for the "James" of her 1902 newspaper piece.

5. Cather's comments here contradict her original statement about Burne-Jones's use of color. In her 1902 "report" on her visit to Burne-Jones's Kensington studio, Cather had said, "It seems well established that he was the only painter the island has produced whose color-sense can not [sic] be challenged" (*W&P* 914).

6. This phrase begins the last stanza of an 1899 Cather poem titled "To Roscoe with 'Seats of the Mighty,'" which, like "Dedicatory," harkens back to those childhood dreams of adventure that Cather shared with her brothers Roscoe and Douglass. The poem begins,

Dear, Brother, let's forget to-night
That we are grown up, I and you,
And all the dear illusions gone,
And none of the sweet dreams come true.

The poem, a typescript of which is in the Helen Cather Southwick Collection of the Willa Cather Foundation, was printed with the first three stanzas deleted in the 22 April 1899 edition of the *Lincoln Courier*. (See *April Twilights*, revised edition 69.) As the complete version of the poem makes clear, the poem and a copy of Parker's book were Christmas gifts from Willa Cather to Roscoe. My thanks to Robert Thacker for reminding me that Cather reviewed Gilbert Parker's novel *The Seats of the Mighty: A Romance of Old Quebec* in the fall of 1897 (*W&P* 354-56).

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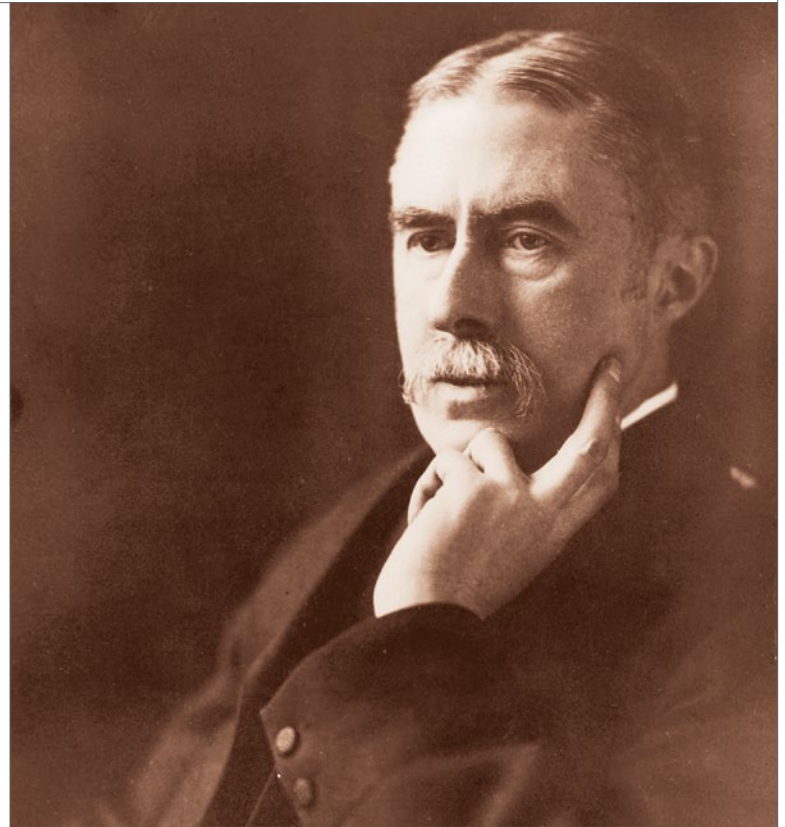


Willa Cather's Early Poems

Mary R. Ryder | South Dakota State University

Sometimes our earliest efforts at our art become in retrospect embarrassments, and one could argue that such was the case for many of the poems that Willa Cather included in her 1903 slim volume of poetry *April Twilights*. In later years, Cather claimed to have destroyed as many copies of that collection as she could find and, in 1923, substantially revised her selections for *April Twilights and Other Poems*. But, her first published poems, those of her youth and early years as a career woman, also tell us much about Cather as an aspiring artist, a devoted and loving sister, and a homesick young woman. From just this handful of pieces emerges a very genuine voice of a young woman whose lyric impulse best expressed her desires and longings, her ambition and even her regrets. Cather once wrote to the poet Sara Teasdale that the “only reason to write a poem was to let an emotion take form” (Stout 160), and she was an emotionally charged young woman writer whom many of us recognize as our younger selves and whose feelings many of us fully understand.

Cather started writing poetry in about 1892, a time in which she was immersed in studies in English literature and the Classics and during which she, like many late adolescents, admired and dreamed of emulating accomplished individuals who seemed heroic in her eyes. Having been reared on poetry from the Bible and ancient Classics to English and Scottish poetry, Cather was, one might say, intuitively a poet. At age fifteen, she listed Tennyson as her favorite poet (Bennett 112), and later she declared Emerson as “the foremost American poet” (Slote xxxiii). According to her sister Elsie, Cather “always did prefer emotional rather than philosophical poetry” (Slote xxxiii), and her pre-*April Twilights* poetry shows that she was more successful when allowing her emotions to direct her poetry rather than trying to imitate some model of high art. While Cather was not an innovator or great experimenter in form, she did dabble in dialectical poems (“Grandmither, Think Not I Forget” and “Broncho Bill’s Valedictory”) and did write some poems for children. She once described Eugene Fields’s poems for children as “not great” but “quaint and tender and in their own way beautiful” (*The World and the Parish* 272). Several of her early poems reflect this tenderness, especially when focused on her younger brother Jack. Prior to the publication of *April Twilights* in 1903, then, Cather was steeped in poetry, reading widely of American and European poets, writing columns about poets and poetry, publishing some of her own poems, translating her favorite poets, and creating poetic epigraphs for some of her short stories.



A. E. Housman, 1910. Photograph by E. O. Hoppé

Two poems that Cather published during her years at the University of Nebraska well illustrate her developing skills and ambitions as a poet. In 1892, as a freshman theme, Cather drafted a poem titled “Shakespeare,” a work not particularly remarkable in form—it is simple blank verse—but very interesting in what it tells us about the nineteen-year old college student whose ambitions were already keen. Placing Shakespeare on a pedestal as the “World Poet” (1), she labels her present generation of aspiring artists as “dwarfed children” (2) before his imposing presence. She has found her idol, the “sun born bard” (6). By comparison we, including Cather herself, are “weary souls,” weak in “the shadow of infinitude” (7-8). While one might read these lines as indications of the writer’s sense of inferiority to the mighty bard, she finds some comfort in knowing that the heights of artistic perfection still lie before us and that we have the chance to uncover the secret to such exquisite art, to plunge yet “into that path of quivering gold” (17). Here is a poem of youthful expectation and desire, the desire to pierce the veil of the mystery of Shakespeare’s greatness. Like many young people who latch onto a singer, writer, artist, or musician in hopes of discovering the secret to that greatness that they, too, might achieve it, Cather is dreaming, admiring, and yet knowing in the depths of her heart

that she is not nor can she be a Shakespeare. Sharon O'Brien contends that this poem shows Shakespeare as an "imposing literary father whose achievements doomed his descendants" to artistic impotence (257), but with the Shakespeare model before her, Cather does not retreat from the sun. Rather, she basks in it. She remains one of "those who love thee" ("Shakespeare" 23) but know and accept the reality of their own skills. When Cather closes her poem with a classical allusion filtered through Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," she indirectly pays tribute to the heroic endurance of the great adventurer. While she, like Penelope's suitors, may not yet have the cunning to fit the arrows to the massive frame of Ulysses's bow, the target still stands in the sky: "Above it all the sun stands still in heaven, / Pierced there long centuries with a shaft of song" (34-35). Her target is real, and her creative impulse is not diminished by its remoteness. She, like Tennyson's Ulysses, will continue "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" ("Ulysses" 70).

Within six months, Cather again drew upon the myth of Ulysses as she enshrined Columbus as another individual of heroic dimensions. Cather's regular and extensive use of classical allusions in these poems from her college years is not surprising. She was so steeped in classical learning that the voices, allusions, and references to the ancients colored much of her thinking and became the vehicle through which she conveyed her admiration for both Shakespeare and Columbus. Cather portrays them as men of heroic vision, unflinching devotion, and accomplishment. These poems reveal a young and aspiring artist who is eager and yearning, admiring and dreaming. In "Columbus" she once again evokes Tennyson's "Ulysses" but attributes to Columbus a different motive for venturing onto unknown seas. "Not as Odysseus sailed thou for the love / Of blue sea water" (3-4), she writes. "Unto thee / The waters were but wastes that lay between / Thee and thy prize" (7-9). Columbus is a "Prophet," peering into "things that were / Only the future . . ." (11-12). She calls Columbus "Most happy of all bards" who saw in a "low, blue, coast" his fancies realized (15, 18). It was Columbus's soul that saw, not his eyes, she writes. Cather closes her poem by equating the heroic Columbus with God who dreamed the universe into being. What creation would young Cather dream into being? The expectancy of youth undergirds both of these poems and brings home to us the enthusiasm of a young woman, enthralled by the world that her education has opened to her. The two poems thus anticipate the poem "Prairie Spring" that introduces *O Pioneers!*: "Youth with its unsupportable sweetness / Its fierce necessity, / Its sharp desire."



"O sun born bard": the Chandos portrait of William Shakespeare

As is so often the case, though, the "dreaming expectancy of youth" (Slote xxxix) falls victim to the rude awakening to the real world of work and the daily grind. When Cather graduated from college, she found herself at loose ends for some time. Eventually moving to Pittsburgh in June of 1896 to edit the *Home Monthly*, Cather was excited about the opportunities before her, though she was far from home. Realizing that the less than stellar magazine did not require her to publish work that she deemed art, she, like Ulysses, was determined to stick to the job, "grind though it was" (Woodress 115). The cultural climate of the city provided compensation, and one can imagine her plunging herself into city life with an almost hedonist delight. Her friend George Seibel described Cather at this time "as looking about eighteen: 'She was plump and dimpled, with dreamy eyes and an eager mind'" (qtd. in Woodress 120).

In two of her poems of this period, one gets to know and see this youthful Cather. She is embarking on a new adventure, but ties to home weigh heavily on her. While she was beginning to feel at home in Pittsburgh, there is "a big psychological difference between feeling at home and being home" (Klinkenberg 14). Nebraska and the little house on Cedar Street called to her in this first year away from home. Janis Stout notes that "the Nebraska home represents what we might call personal bedrock [for Cather] . . . It serves as a metaphor

for her sense of the personally authentic" (171). In this year she also first read A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and commented that she liked best his "homesick songs" (Slote xviii). Cather had spent a discontented postgraduate year in Lincoln and Red Cloud, without a "real job," but her move to Pittsburgh, while a relief from professional boredom and monotony, also brought a rupture from family. She would soon realize that she did miss home, and especially four-year-old Jack. In a three-month period (August to October of 1896) two poems appeared—"My Little Boy" and "Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender"—published respectively under the pseudonyms of John Esten and

Emily Vantell. While one could argue that the speaker in these poems need not be Cather, the specific and personal details strongly suggest that the voice is Cather's. The tone of these poems is hardly that of the self-assured and aspiring journalist, anxious to explore her new urban environment and to immerse herself in its art. Here is the voice of a big sister who misses a little brother, the little scamp who had swallowed two pennies when in her charge, who rode his hobbyhorse like a world conqueror, and who dangled his legs from the express wagon that Cather, like Thea Kronborg, drew behind her along the sidewalks of Red Cloud.



The tone is not simply nostalgic; it is laden with emotions of a full heart, of longing, and of love. These are some of the first steps of Cather's "finding the home pasture," as she said about her writing of *O Pioneers!*; they are the first steps of reconciling her ambivalent feelings toward the prairielands of her childhood. As Stout concludes, "To become an artist, for her, meant to come home," literally and figuratively (171). One's "psychological habit," as Verlyn Klinkenborg suggests, "is shaped by what you might call the magnetic property of home, the way it aligns everything around us" (14). Cather's artistic inspiration was clearly drawn by this magnet.

In the lilting, sing-song rhythm of "My Little Boy," a twenty-two year old big sister recalls a "wee boy in a far-away land" (1). The "My" of the title recalls Jim Burden's possessive "My" in the title of Cather's subsequent 1918 novel *My Antonia*, but in this instance a maternal rather than paternal possessiveness is evoked. Cather captures the physical closeness that a big sister might miss when separated from a little brother. His simple and intuitive response to his big sister's fretting—"And when all the world went wrong with me / And nobody seemed to care"—is to lay his "dear little hand" on her knee (5-6, 7). Cather lets her woe emerge not in a recounting of the world's sins against her but with a mournful alliterative string of "w's." Cather then admits that she meets little fellows wherever she goes, but she pleads to "just give my one boy to me" (12). The genuineness of her affection is clear. While one could argue that the poem is just a generic version of any sister's longing for a little brother, this is Cather's personal longing. She remarks on the little boy's wide-eyed amazement at the tale she told of the "were-wolf's spell" (15). Indeed, Cather was known to have entertained her siblings, especially Douglass and Roscoe, with tales of high romance, and within four months of publishing this poem she did release in the December 1896 edition of the *Home Monthly* a frightening Christmas story, "The Strategy of the Were-Wolf Dog." Again, the physicality of her connection with "her" little boy is stressed: "He used to creep close to my side" (16). The speaker, ostensibly Cather, misses the closeness of a trusting little brother. And, he is much like her, telling his own imaginative tales "That never came out of a book" (18). His sensitivity to criticism is one of her acute memories, and one can only surmise that she wonders who is now at home to console this "gentle and shy" child (22). The poem closes not in the little bungalow on Cedar Street in Red Cloud but in a barer room in Pittsburgh:

And here in my room, where there is no boy,
Stands a bed by the empty chair,
Oh, what would I give just now for the joy
Of finding that little boy there! (29-32)

It seems, then, that the young Cather found that the writing of poetry "provided her a more direct emotional outlet than the

writing of fiction," at least at this stage of her life (Stout 160). A subsequent poem, "Thine Eyes So Blue and Tender" returns again to her longing for home and for little Jack. Whereas the poem begins with a lover who misses the eyes of his absent sweetheart, Cather goes on to describe how she misses the trusting eyes of a little boy. The setting is at night, that twilight time between waking and sleeping when, as Hawthorne noted, the romance of the possible becomes the probable. She writes that when her "loneliness is heavy" (9), she recalls her little brother's eyes, the only ones that surely expressed sorrow at her absence. Does such a comment signal Cather's misgiving that she may not have been all that missed in the busy, crowded Cather household? She admits that "Every sick soul has its comfort" (17) to prevent it snapping "when the strain is long" (20), and Jack's eyes are that comforting life-line for her. Cather's experience and reaction to being far away from home are not atypical, considering her youth and the physical distance from her home and family. Yet, in this poem, Cather does more than just express her longings to reconnect with family. She projects Jack into the role of spiritual redeemer, vanquishing her doubts, interceding like a priest, and bringing God nearer to her:

Little boy, just made for loving,
With your laugh so glad and free,
And your eyes to blue and tender—
You have done all this for me! (25-28)

By 1900, Jack Cather had moved into Willa's dormer room, the room she had long associated, as would Thea Kronborg after her, with "high desire" and yet unfulfilled dreams. By this time, Cather had left behind her career in journalism but had not yet embarked on her teaching career at Central High School in Pittsburgh. In August 1900 she published another poem in tribute to Jack, "Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?" Printed in the *Library*, a journal for which she worked briefly, this poem is dedicated "To J. E. C." For the first time Cather had not returned to Nebraska to visit her family that summer (Woodress 144). While she would write to her old friend and former employer Will Owen Jones that "she had had a wonderful year, the happiest of her life so far" (147), one wonders if her happiness was not tempered by a sense of guilt. Her mother had been ill again that summer, and Cather was planning to return to Nebraska "to stay for the winter" (147), something she finally did not do. "Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?" echoes with not only a longing to reconnect with family but also a longing to return to a place that filled her heart to bursting. Home is "inseparable from self," and home as a universal idea "conjures up nostalgia and regret, the comfort of return and the sorrow of displacement" (Meek 35). Cather had been living away from Nebraska and on her own for some four years and clearly sensed that she was losing a connection with the day-to-day



Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as painted by John Everett Millais.

realities of her family. Her poem becomes a series of questions addressed to Jack as to who he has become. She wonders if he is dreaming of high romance, as she once did, as he lies in her room. She questions if he is similarly inspired by the “night winds” of summer and the whispers of “the aspen by the window” (3, 5). She inquires if he has become heir to her dreams: “Do those dreams still dwell, I wonder / In that little attic room . . .” (18-19). The three-stanza poem escalates from asking if he is sleeping, then dreaming, and finally loving. And, what is it that Cather asks Jack to love?: “Just the rose because it’s crimson, / Just the sky because it’s blue?” (29-30). This is Cather, the worshipper of high Art, asking if Jack, too, has found that “sudden inner explosion and enlightenment” that she spoke of as leading her to the final form of her novel *O Pioneers!* (Slote xlv). The question of this still emerging artist was, “Is the source of inspiration still there, in Nebraska, at home?”

The poem ends asking Jack if he could love one who may not have succeeded in fulfilling those dreams—“One whose knightly dreams are fled, / One whose coward lance has rusted / Since his heart was broke and bled . . .” (36-38). Again, Cather seeks from Jack redemption of her spirit. This haunting query could, perhaps, only be answered by going home. Home offered for Cather what Stout has called, “the more personal certainty” of who she was as an artist (171). Cather would return to this theme when Thea Kronborg also comes home to be reborn as an artist. In *April*

Twilights and Other Poems, her 1923 revised collection, Cather returned once again to this idea in her poem “Going Home,” the poem with which she chose to end her collection. The wheels of the Burlington Railroad turn smoothly and softly as if they are “glad to go” (3) when they cross the Missouri: “They run remembering, / They run rejoicing, / As if they, too, were going home” (23-25).

These few early poems, not included in the published *April Twilights* of 1903, offer a unique insight into the personal life of a young woman who had ventured out eagerly to test her art against the giant figures of writers who had gone before her. They also reveal a girl who longed to reconnect with the sources of her inspiration and to re-enter the comforting closeness of family. While only twenty percent of the poems published as *April Twilights* are “rooted in personal experience” (Woodress 167), those that preceded *April Twilights* are intensely personal, giving us a glimpse of Cather, the eager artist and yearning young woman. Bernice Slote in her introduction to *April Twilights* writes that “One pleasure in viewing the whole world of a writer . . . is to recognize the accumulated complexity and richness that may develop from simple first notes or chords” (xxxix). In these few early poems, we hear those first notes.

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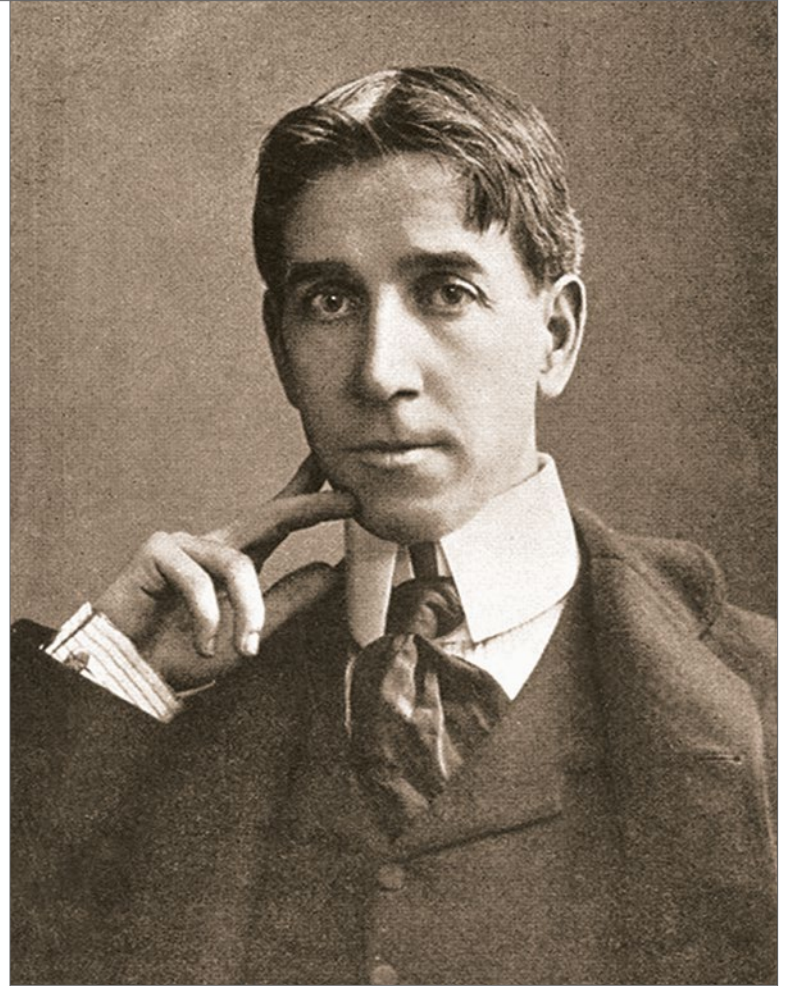


Cather's "Rosary" and Nevin's Legacy in *April Twilights* (1903)

Timothy Bintrim | Saint Francis University

When the news reached her in Washington on February 18, 1901, that Ethelbert Nevin was dead of a stroke, Willa Cather was shocked, but perhaps not surprised. Just three years earlier, when reviewing his homecoming concert at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall, she had enumerated the composer's accomplishments by age thirty-five and predicted, "before him there is song—song—song. Perhaps fifty glorious singing years" ("The Passing Show" rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 538). By 1901, she was more aware of his liabilities—secretive drinking, borrowing large sums from his family or publishers, mysterious illnesses—and, aggravating these problems, what we would call today bipolar disorder. She was among the first journalists to describe how his personality shaped his music. In "The Man Who Wrote Narcissus" (*Ladies Home Journal*, November 1900), she observed, "Temperamentally, Mr. Nevin is much the same blending of the blithe and the *triste* that gives his music its peculiar quality, now exultantly gay, now sunk in melancholy, as whimsical and capricious as April weather" (11). His frequent illnesses she attributed to nerves, hypersensitivity to criticism, and overwork. She did not mention alcoholism, but neither did Vance Thompson, who in 1913 avoided the topic altogether in his 275-page *Life of Ethelbert Nevin*. With "Uncle Valentine" of 1925, Cather made Valentine Ramsey an alcoholic a full decade before Nevin's second official biographer, John Tasker Howard, confirmed her diagnosis. While William Curtin is accurate in generalizing that Cather's journalistic "portrait of Nevin's life is a sunny one" (626), there is evidence, especially in her poems and her condolence letter to Anne Nevin, that Cather knew all was not sunny at Vineacre.

Cather's immediate reaction to Ethelbert's death—a telegram sent to his widow Anne—is often quoted: "By my own sorrow, I understand yours a little" (qtd. in Howard 341). A formal condolence letter of seven handwritten pages mailed the following Saturday (23 February 1901) is less known. The provenance of the letter, now part of the Nevin Collection of the University of Pittsburgh housed at the Stephen Foster Memorial, is lost, its envelope missing, but Anne Nevin probably gave or sold the letter to the university in the 1930s, when administrator Ruth Crawford Mitchell was accumulating memorabilia for a Nevin Memorial Room, never actualized, in Pitt's Cathedral of Learning. Cather gave several items to the collection during the same years, including a handmade valentine addressed to Ethelbert and Anne (Wolff 60).



Ethelbert Nevin in 1899 or 1900 at Vineacre (Howard 322)

If the letter in the Pitt collection were indeed delivered to Anne, Cather must have retained a draft, for the letter's metaphors and language enter several of the poems in *April Twilights* (1903) as well as her 21 March 1901 eulogy for Nevin in the *Nebraska State Journal*. I propose that the draft of this letter served Cather as a durable memento of Nevin, like the rosary beads which provided the trope of his famous song. Organizing her memories of her dead friend, the letter expressed her hopes that Nevin would gain a measure of immortality through his art.

Published in 1898, Nevin's "The Rosary" with verses by Robert Cameron Rogers, was rivaling the sales of his 1891 hit, "Narcissus," at the time of his death, having sold 500,000 copies. Opera divas in the first decade of the century such as Louise Homer, Alma Gluck, and Ernestine Schumann-Heink could expect encores whenever they sang it; Schumann-Heink regarded it "a perfect song," speaking to the hearts of both German and

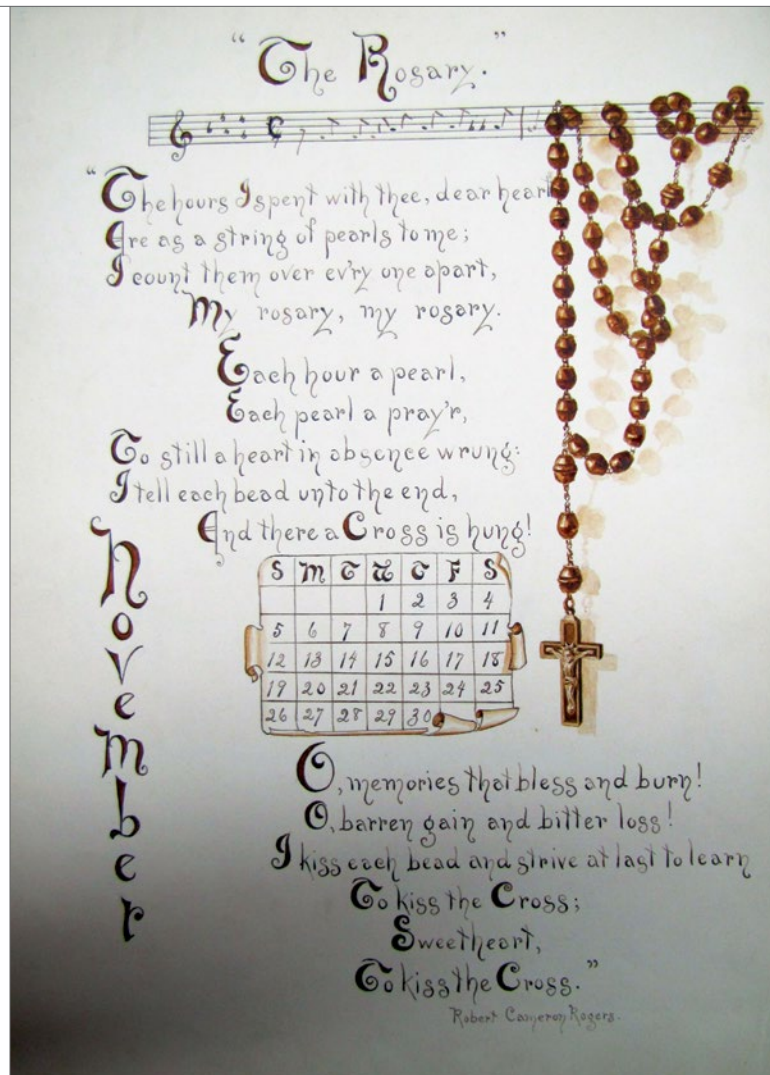
American audiences (Howard 299). Nevin's music for "The Rosary" is still familiar because generations of piano students learned it as a training exercise;¹ Rogers's verses, by contrast, are mostly forgotten. The adjacent image reproduces the lyrics from a calendar of Nevin's songs Anne had illustrated by an artist for Ethelbert's Christmas present of 1898 (Howard 313).

Nevin seldom wrote his own lyrics, but Cather judged "he could interpret a poet's song better than the poet himself" ("The Passing Show" rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 538). He shared Cather's enthusiasm for modern French poetry (Paul Verlaine's "The Silver Moon," dedicated to "W.C.," is one result), but his greatest success was with more conventional poems by Charles Kingsley, Eugene Field, Margaret Deland, Robert Louis Stevenson, James T. White, and Robert Cameron Rogers (Howard 5),² verses which often came to his attention as newspaper clippings sent by friends. Rogers, the author of "The Rosary," was an American born to wealth who struggled to reconcile his avocation as a poet with his adopted persona as a western roughneck. Legend has it that the woman who inspired "The Rosary" was not Rogers's own wife, but the wife of an acquaintance on a hunting trip (Howard 291). Despite its worldly origins, "The Rosary" was embraced by Catholics in 1900, as now.

Although he owned at least two rosaries, Ethelbert was not Catholic; in fact, his large family had long been liberal Presbyterians (one of his many cousins was rector of the Episcopal Church in Rome) (Howard 254). For her part, Cather did not consider "The Rosary" Nevin's greatest work ("The Passing Show," rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 535), nor did she have any reason to see herself as the heroine of the piece. All evidence indicates Ethelbert kept his marital vows, if he betrayed his boyhood temperance pledge. Still, in her letter to Anne, Cather quoted from "The Rosary" to explain why she did not attend Ethelbert's funeral at Sewickley, just down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh:

Isabelle wrote me of his last silent home coming. Had I known there was a possibility of seeing his face again, I should have gone on from Washington. I want to remember him always, always, just as he was. I am sure you must have arranged the services yourself, for they were so eminently fitting, but I don't think I could have stood it to hear his songs when he was in so deep a sleep. I am not one of those who learn easily to kiss the cross. (W.C. to A.N., February 23, 1901)

The rite of the Holy Rosary usually begins and ends by placing the lips on the pendant cross; in terms of Rogers's song, this kiss may also signal renunciation of a worldly relationship. Hesitating "to kiss the cross," Cather may have been protesting divine justice,



Lyrics to "The Rosary" from a calendar of songs commissioned by Anne Nevin for her husband's Christmas present, 1898. Photograph by Sylvia Bintrim. Courtesy Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

or just been alluding to the first lines of the song's third stanza, "Oh memories that bless and burn! / Oh barren gain and bitter loss!" A month later, she seems to have come to terms with her grief, telling her Lincoln readers that "The Rosary" was among the composer's own works played at the funeral, "The song so full of poignant meaning to those who now indeed must learn 'to kiss the cross'" ("Music," rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 641).

Ethelbert's problem drinking began, says Howard, during the last months of 1893, when Anne went under the surgeon's knife to remove a thyroid tumor. Ethelbert remained sober during Anne's convalescence, only to relapse and be hospitalized for several weeks at Saint Margaret's in Boston (Howard 220). Ethelbert emerged from Anne's crisis a changed man: friends noted that the hair at his temples "went white overnight" (qtd. in Howard 218; see the photograph on page 28). This psychic trauma Cather explained as the price of genius, saying, "Grey hair above a face so young, so lyric, so mobile, is a strange thing to see. It is as if the kiss of the muse had





Anne Nevin, about the time of her 1888 marriage to Ethelbert Nevin. Courtesy of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society.

left its visible mark, and tells if his wooing of her has been happy, it has not been altogether painless” (“An Evening,” rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 630). Because Cather elsewhere established that Anne was Ethelbert’s muse, she seems to have been hinting that their marriage, likewise, was not without pain. Nevin admitted as much, writing his wife in one preserved letter, “Miss Cather was right—my melodies are you, my harmony is you, and my discords are yours” (qtd. in Howard 322).

Ethelbert’s last seven years—encompassing all the time Cather knew him—“present[ed] a constant interplay of light and shadow,” according to Howard: “The light would still be bright when it shone, but the clouds would come more often” (222). His rapid cycling between unexplained euphoria and debilitating depression is symptomatic of what we now call bipolar disorder. A characteristic episode occurred during the Christmas season of 1895, which the Nevins spent in Florence, Italy, with journalist Richard Harding Davis, artist Charles Dana Gibson, and his wife Irene, the original Gibson girl (Howard 267). After acting the

life of the party, Ethelbert spent the days between Christmas and New Year’s in bed; on Christmas Eve he suffered hallucinations, and two nights later he spent what he described in his diary as “his night with departed spirits” (qtd. in Howard 268-269, the diary is preserved in the Nevin Collection). Serious depressions, sometimes lasting many days, came with increasing frequency.

Anne was not spared Ethelbert’s troubles. Because of his prodigal spending and reduced earning power, the couple had been forced to move back to Vineacre in June 1898—they had nowhere else to go (Howard 305). Ethelbert escaped to a rented five-room cottage across Beaver Road from the main house, which he gave the romantic but unrealistic designation “Queen Anne’s Lodge” (see the photograph below). The real Anne, meanwhile, resembling Cinderella more than a queen, had to carve out space for herself and their two children, Doris and Paul, in Vineacre. The family home was already crowded with Ethelbert’s father, five of his adult sons, and a second daughter-in-law (Howard 325). As Ethelbert struggled to remain sober, Anne assumed more and more of his professional and financial responsibilities. The death of Mother Nevin on August 26, 1898, increased Ethelbert’s frailty and Anne’s responsibilities: she was now expected to supervise the servants and manage the house (309). When Cather visited in the summer of 1899, Ethelbert and Anne put on a brave front, but the strain must have shown. The next summer, writes Howard, Ethelbert’s “lessened power to control his weakness; the strain of financial and business matters; and the family situation at Vineacre—all combined to cause [Anne] a nervous breakdown” (331). Confined to her bed throughout June 1900, Anne finally rallied in October, when the couple fled to New Haven to be near Ethelbert’s lifelong friend, Yale music professor William Sturgis (331). Three months later, Ethelbert was dead of stroke.

“Arcadian Winter,” the first ode in *April Twilights* that Bernice Slote identified with Nevin, seems to comment on matrimony: the couple who are its subjects remain married, but are trapped in the



“Queen Anne’s Lodge,” the cottage near Vineacre that served as Nevin’s studio from June 1898 to Oct. 1900. The eight children on the steps seem to be the six Slack sisters and the two Nevin siblings, Doris and Paul. Courtesy of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society.

past, “croon[ing] about the winter fire.” Victims of “broken vows” and human frailty, they allow their flocks to wander, possibly a reference to the Nevins’ preteen son Paul, who had been shipped off to military school. The poem’s final stanza reads,

Woe is me to tell it thee,
Winter winds in Arcady!
Broken pipes and vows forgot;
Scattered flocks returning not;
Frozen brook and drifted hill;
Ashen sun and song-birds still;
Songs of summer and desire
Crooned about the winter fire;
Shepherd lads with silver hair,
Shepherd maids no longer fair.

The penultimate line suggests Ethelbert’s appearance; the concluding line seems unkind toward Anne, who had patrician beauty although the camera seldom caught her smiling (see the portrait on page 30). On a personal level, Cather as poet may have been sympathizing with Ethelbert’s beleaguered wife, as she had in her letter of condolence.

In that letter, Cather acknowledges how difficult the last years had been. She credits Anne and Ethelbert’s mother with prolonging his life, and hints that other family members could have behaved better: “If ever anyone had and fulfilled a commission from God, you have done it, for you saved him and the wonder of him for us all as long as you could, otherwise he would have lashed himself out long ago” (W.C. to A.N., February 23, 1901). A paragraph earlier, she wrote, “The last time I saw him he said he was going away ‘where people could not say unkind things anymore.’ Oh I hope those people will suffer and suffer and *suffer!* And they will, I know it. Heaven calls the world to account for souls like his.” Who made the hurtful remarks is difficult to pin down, but these “unkind things” may have come from within the family. Such is the implication of Cather’s poem “Sleep, Minstrel, Sleep,” in which the winter wind is no longer a natural force, but sharp tongues. Like Percy Shelley’s elegy for John Keats, *Adonais*, which Cather quoted at some length in the letter,³ Cather’s elegy in *April Twilights* is concerned with assigning blame for an artist’s death:

Sleep, minstrel, sleep; we do not grow more kind;
Your cloak was thin, your wound was wet and deep;
More bitter breath there was than winter wind,
And hotter tears than now thy lovers weep.
(April Twilights [1903] 14)

The allusions to family arguments—“bitter breath” and “hotter tears”—are painful to read. Because his last days at New

Haven appear to have been peaceful, the poem seems to comment on the stormy previous October at Vineacre. Her eulogy for Nevin in the *Nebraska State Journal* repeats the metaphor: “he seemed to find death exceedingly simple and natural and sweet . . . the decent cloak that covered the scar of a wound⁴ . . . [Willingly] he set his face toward sleep and seemed to meet the earth with an embrace. . . . So the Grecian singers knew no fear of annihilation . . . but were changed into flowers . . . still in nature’s kingdom and still in the care of [the] warm red hands that had first fashioned them” (“Music,” rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 639).

If Ethelbert was sometimes Narcissus, painlessly transformed into his namesake flower, at other times Cather pictured him as the unfortunate Marsyas, a shepherd or satyr badly used by the hands of the god after he challenged Apollo to a musical contest. This was no *American Idol*, Slotte reminds us: “The loser was to be bound to a tree and flayed to death by the winner. Marsyas lost” (56). Cather makes the comparison explicit in her condolence letter:

It used to seem to me as if he were quite simply a shepherd strayed out of Arcady. . . . And yet there was such a tragic vein in him, and some of the stuff of martyrdom. He used sometimes to seem like a man stripped of his skin, with every nerve quivering to the torture of the air, like that other unhappy singer Marsyas [sic], whom jealous Apollo flayed. (W.C. to A.N., 23 February 1901)

Cather’s analogy is inexact—Marsyas was a piper, not a singer, his instrument the double flute. Marsyas’s fate was most often interpreted as a warning against hubris, but Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* is Cather’s likely source, focuses on the punishment, not the offense to the god. According to Ovid, the woodland creatures witnessed the torture and cried a river:

[A]s [Marsyas] screamed, Apollo stripped his skin; the whole of him was one huge wound, blood streaming everywhere, sinews laid bare, veins naked, quivering and pulsing. You could count his twitching guts, and the tissues as the light shone through his ribs. The countryfolk, the Sylvan Deities, the Fauni, and brother Satyri and the Nymphae, were all in tears. . . . The fertile earth grew moist . . . held their falling tears and drank them deep . . . thence a river hurries to the sea . . . , the river Marsyas . . . (Ovid 133).

Unlike the Roman poet, who stresses the blood and guts shed by Marsyas and the tears shed by the woodland creatures, Cather’s speaker is charged with explaining to the puzzled maidens why Marsyas is “whiter gone” than the flowering branches and narcissus they carry:





Nevin's "Little Choir" in the music room of the Slack home, "Braeface": Pictured left to right: Jean, Caroline, and Elizabeth Slack, Dorothy Nevin (at window), Ethelbert Nevin, Annie Reed Slack, and Dorothy Slack. Photograph by Sylvia Bintrim. Courtesy Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

Marsyas sleeps. Oh, never wait,
Maidens, by the city gate,
Till he come to plunder gold
Of the daffodils you hold,
Or your branches white with May;
He is whiter gone than they.

The damsels are, of course, the woodland nymphs, but also evoke "the little choir" composed of Doris Nevin and the six Slack sisters, neighbors who used to sing for Ethelbert during Sunday musicales at Vineacre or at Braeface, the home of John and Margaret Slack, which was the prototype of the Waterfords' "Fox Hill" in "Uncle Valentine" (see above: Nevin's "Little Choir"). Marsyas was sometimes represented as a follower of the wine god. In her second stanza, Cather makes a subdued reference to "the cup" of Dionysus, "which had eased him, when to bless / All who loved were powerless" (*April Twilights* [1903] 27).

After initial publication in 1903, Cather allowed "Lament for Marsyas" to be reprinted, but without the final stanza. Sloate reasons that Cather edited the poem to reduce its similarity to Housman's "To An Athlete Dying Young" (xxxiii). But the excision of the last stanza also reduces the presence of Nevin: in the 1903 version, wise Marsyas rests "underneath the daffodil" (28). Nevin had lived long enough to tire of his popular favorite "Narcissus,"⁵ but, like Cather's Marsyas, came to rest under his trademark flower. Evoking for her Lincoln audience his funeral which she had not herself seen, but only heard about from Isabelle McClung and others, Cather wrote: "The altar rail was transformed into a screen of narcissus blooms. . . . the body of the

man so well beloved was covered with his own flowers, so that his head and shoulders rose out of a bank of bloom" ("Music" rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 640). Through "Narcissus," "The Rosary," and a few other songs, Cather thought Nevin would achieve immortality. Paraphrasing Shelley's estimation of Keats, she predicted that Ethelbert's genius would be "one of those tapers that burn throughout the night of time wherein suns are extinguished" ("Music" rptd. in *The World and the Parish* 641). He may not have written symphonies, she admitted, but "time has sometimes been very tender with those exquisite and fragile things. . . . It took as true a genius to fashion the Tanagra figurines as to chisel the Elgin marbles" (641). Nevin came to acknowledge his own limitations: he would never write the epics of a Wagner or Dvořák. Found on his desk at the time of his death was a newspaper clipping, a couplet from the letters of James Russell Lowell, which served as an apology for his career:

Who deemeth small things are beneath his state,
Will be too small for what is truly great.
(Nevin Collection, University of Pittsburgh; Lowell 46)

NOTES

1. At the 2012 Cather Spring Conference in Red Cloud, I was fortunate to meet Nancy L. Savery of Lincoln, who, after hearing an early version of this paper, played "Narcissus" from memory seated at the Steinway grand piano in the Opera House Auditorium. She demonstrated that the left hand does cross over the right to play treble, a technique I had seen only in a YouTube performance by British pianist Phillip Sear: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNm-IhQ_b08&feature=relmfu. Savery said she and her cousins all "eagerly and naturally" learned "Narcissus," a favorite of Mrs. Florence Miller, who taught piano for several decades in their southeast Nebraska town.

2. It may be no coincidence that Cather's uncharacteristic foray into dialect verse, "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget," appeared in the *Pittsburgh Leader* the day after she attended a Nevin concert featuring a new song in African American dialect, "At Home (A Summer Night in Washington)" from the suite *Captive Memories* (Cather [as Sibert] "Nevin's New Song Cycle"; Howard 316-317). This concert at the Schenley Hotel is also noteworthy because selections of James T. White's *Captive Memories* were recited by the local stock company actor Tommy Meighan, whom Mark Madigan identified as the prototype of Charley Edwards in "Paul's Case" (Madigan 428).

3. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, stanza 40. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* explain that Shelley blamed

“the anonymous author of a vituperative review of Keats’s *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*, April 1818 (now known to be John Wilson Croker)” with bringing about Keats’s final illness (Abrams, et al. 741). Shelley was mistaken: Keats died of advanced tuberculosis.

4. The thin cloak, repeated in the poetic phrase “the decent cloak that covered the scar of a wound,” appears not to be a direct quotation. A well-read colleague, Dan Fredricks, suggests the line may refer to the Athenian ruler Pericles, who according to Thucydides, “said that there is justice in the fact that service to one’s country in battle should be as a cloak to cover a man’s other imperfections. In other words, good public action [or service to Art] outweighs bad personal behavior” (Fredricks, message to the author).

5. Although Nevin came to dislike “that wretched little ‘Narcissus’” (Howard 237) as did many other musicians of the day, pianist Edwin Hughes reported his shock when he heard no lesser authority than Raphael Joseffy praise it: “‘The man has talent,’ Joseffy said. ‘It is much better to compose a good melody like that than these long, tiresome symphonies which most American composers write’” (qtd. in Howard 312-13).

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“With warm affection”: Ethelbert Nevin in 1900, the year before his death. Photograph by Richards of East End, Pittsburgh, courtesy of Sewickley Valley Historical Society.



Reading Susan J. Rosowski At the Miner House

Red Cloud, Nebraska | May 2012

It's all about mothers, isn't it, I'm wondering
as I sit in bed, second floor, above
the dining room, as the sun colors the east,
the breeze lifts the curtain, and birds sing.
All about voyages, all of them perilous.

Listen. Our neighbor up the street
coughs until he chokes.
Beyond him and the chatty robins,
and sometimes late at night,
I hear her—Mrs. Miner
with her children. Sometimes
they laugh together; sometimes
she plays the old songs.

Sue, after class, voice softer
now or suddenly laughing—
I hear her too, and Annie's in the kitchen
making breakfast, cheeks flushed, humming
a song from last night's tent dance.
It's all about song, isn't it,
our own and the song of those we love.

Mary K. Stillwell

Susan Rosowski served as chair of Mary K. Stillwell's doctoral committee at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln.



The Harling House. Photograph by Chris Harris.

The 14th International Willa Cather Seminar

Willa Cather: Canyon, Rock, & Mesa Country

Hosted by Northern Arizona University and the
Willa Cather Foundation

Flagstaff, Arizona | June 16 – 22, 2013

Call for Papers

The Willa Cather Foundation and the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at Northern Arizona University invite proposals for the 14th International Willa Cather Seminar, to be held June 16 – 22, 2013, in Flagstaff, Arizona. Set in the locale of Cather's pivotal 1912 visit to the Southwest, the seminar will highlight the places that inspired Cather—like her protagonist Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*—to develop a new understanding and expression of her art. Suggested topics may include exploration of the effect of Cather's 1912 Southwestern trip on her life and art; discussions of the significance of canyons, rocks, and mesas in Cather's work; studies of music, art, architecture, ritual, and religion in Cather's work; gender and racial issues, especially as related to Cather's Southwestern works; and approaches to teaching Cather.

Please email abstracts of 250-300 words to all three seminar directors by February 15, 2013:

Ann Moseley	John J. Murphy	Robert Thacker
Texas A&M	Brigham Young	St. Lawrence
University—Commerce	University	University
anmm@cumbytel.com	murphyjjsm@netzero.net	rthacker@stlawu.edu

The seminar includes excursions to Walnut Canyon (Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark*), the Little Painted Desert (over which Cather rode with her Mexican guide Julio), Winslow (where Cather stayed in 1912 with her brother Douglass and H. L. Tooker, the prototype for Ray Kennedy in *The Song of the Lark*), a luncheon at the “Fred Harvey” La Posada Hotel, and a visit to the Museum of Northern Arizona's extensive Sinagua and Anasazi pottery collection.

Christian E. Downum, Professor of Anthropology at Northern Arizona University, Walnut Canyon specialist, and author of *Hisat's sinom: Ancient Peoples in a Land without Water* (2012), is the keynote speaker and will accompany the group to Walnut Canyon.

The plenary presenters include editors of the University of Nebraska Press Willa Cather Scholarly Edition and the editors of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, forthcoming from Knopf.

An evening recital of arias and lieder featured in *The Song of the Lark* will be performed by Sarah Bach, soprano, and Emily Murphy, pianist, and introduced with a plenary by David Porter, Cather scholar and musicologist.



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Ann Romines at annrom3@verizon.net.

Send letters and inquiries to

Thomas Reese Gallagher at tgallagher@nyc.rr.com

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Timothy Bintrim is Associate Professor of English and Chair of the Department of Literature and Languages at Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania. Recently he has been investigating Cather's press and women's club connections in Pittsburgh.

Richard C. Harris, John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities and Assistant Dean at Webb Institute, has published extensively on Cather and was editor for the Scholarly Edition of Cather's Pulitzer Prize novel *One of Ours*.

Diane Prenatt is Professor of English at Marian University where she teaches American and European literature. Her most recent essay on Cather appeared in *Cather Studies* 9. She is currently at work on a biography of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

Mary Ruth Ryder, Distinguished Professor Emerita of South Dakota State University, is the author of *Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus*. Her comparison of J. Hyatt Downing's *A Prayer for Tomorrow* and Cather's *A Lost Lady* appeared in the Summer 2012 *N&R*.

Elaine Smith is Assistant Professor in the Humanities/Cultural Studies Department at the University of South Florida. Her research focuses on Cather, modernism and domestic arts. Her article "Of Coconut Cake and Consommé: Willa Cather's School of Cookery" appeared in the Fall 2010 *N&R*.

Mary K. Stillwell was poet in residence at the Cather Foundation's Prairie Writers' Workshop in 2012. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many other publications, and her study, *The Life and Poetry of Ted Kooser*, will be available in September 2013 from the University of Nebraska Press.

Robert Thacker is Charles A. Dana Professor of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University. He is editor of the Scholarly Edition of Cather's *Poems* forthcoming from Nebraska and has just edited a Cather volume in the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets series from Knopf, to be published in April 2013.

In the years following Willa Cather's death in April 1947, some of her friends and admirers remarked on the meaning of her first book, *April Twilights*, a slim volume of poems that had been published in early 1903 by Richard G. Badger in Boston. Although Badger was clearly a vanity press, as were many better-known publishers then when it came to slim volumes of poems, the firm had also published E. A. Robinson's first book. Cather's, though largely ignored once her fiction had made her reputation, managed a review in the *New York Times*. Looking back at her friend's early career from about 1950, the playwright and poet Zöe Akins saw Cather's beginnings as poet as crucial to the distinctive, clear prose she later produced in her fiction. In 1950 too Cather's first biographer, E. K. Brown, was in correspondence with Cather's lifetime friend from university days, Dorothy Canfield Fisher. While weighing the significance of the early poetry, Fisher argued that Cather was throughout her life possessed of a poet's sensibility, one that is felt throughout her fiction. In 1962 scholar Bernice Slote published "Willa Cather and Her First Book" in her edition of that first book, *April Twilights* (1903) and that essay remains the key study of Cather the poet (Revised edition, 1968).

Read today, *April Twilights* at first seems alien from the Nebraska-based fiction Cather published in the 1910s to vault to the reputation that became hers, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918). Classical allusions, European scenes, and romantic longings predominate, expressed through clear poetic lines of the pre-Modernist era, Cather's sensibilities evident. She establishes a voice there that is distinctive though, seen today, is also mostly conventional.

Even so, the book opens with "Dedicatory," a poem written for Cather's brothers Roscoe and Douglass; it invokes all of them years past in an April twilight as "the three who lay and planned at moonrise, / On an island in a western river, / Of the conquest of the world together" (Slote 1968: 3). This image of home, drawn from the Republican river flowing just south of Red Cloud, became one of Cather's most enduring and repeated: she had used it previously in "The Treasure of Far Island" (1902) and was to offer it again in "The Enchanted Bluff" (1909), in *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), and in S. S. McClure's *My Autobiography* (1914)—the book she ghost-wrote for her mentor, a project that deeply affected her developing fictional methods. The retrospective longings for home beginnings "Dedicatory" presents are palpable in the whole cast of Jim Burden's rememberings in *My Ántonia*; in *The Professor's House* (1925), just before he almost dies from asphyxiation, Godfrey St. Peter again imaginatively becomes the "Kansas boy" he had once been, "a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water" (Scholarly 265). Even in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), when Cather has Bishop Latour in his final moments in the penultimate paragraph of what



is perhaps her most profound narrative rendering of being alive, she invokes his memory of his much younger self “trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay” (Scholarly 315). This is a memory, like Cather’s invocation of “the three who lay and planned at moonrise” in “Dedicatory,” that vitalizes the whole of the volume containing it—Bishop Latour is recalling the moment when he and his life-friend Father Vaillant, both young priests, were about to leave their home in France in order to embark on lives as missionaries in America. Much more than Latour, the young Vaillant was being torn in two by his warring desires to stay home or to go on his mission.

By then, the late 1920s, Cather knew just what she was doing with such passages. During the 1890s and into the 1900s, though, in her reviews, other journalistic pieces, and poems Cather reveals herself a writer finding her way, a writer “making herself born”—as she would later write of Thea Kronborg the singer in *The Song of the Lark*. As she did this, poetry and poets were key. For instance, writing in 1900 in the Lincoln *Courier* about A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)—a poet and book she had discovered early and championed mightily: she was the first American editor to republish one of his poems in the *Home Monthly* when she edited

it in Pittsburgh—Cather quotes from Poem 11 (“On your midnight pallet lying”) and asserts “That is what it means to write poetry; to be able to say the oldest thing in the world as though it had never been said before, to make the old wounds of us all bleed fresh, to give a new voice to the *Weltschmerz*, that, perhaps, is the most exalted lyric of the entire collection” (*The World and the Parish* 708).

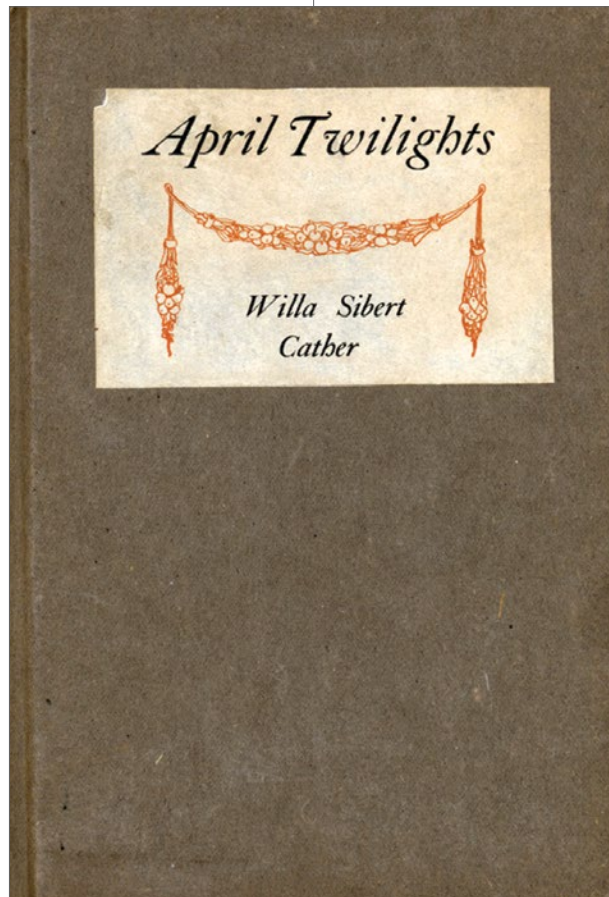
As she made her way during the late 1890s as critic and journalist in Lincoln and then in Pittsburgh, Cather showed herself drawn to poetry as much as she was to the short fiction she was also writing then. Her enthusiasm for of Housman led her with Dorothy Canfield and Isabelle McClung to famously

and awkwardly visit him unannounced in London in 1902 during her first trip to Europe. Embarrassed and upset, Cather came away weeping. Whatever actually occurred in Highgate, Cather was then an ambitious literary artist bent on the main chance. Just as she later shifted from Jamesian fictional models when she moved from the drawing rooms of *Alexander’s Bridge* to the Nebraska prairies in *O Pioneers!*, so too did she move from classical and continental poetic subjects as she came to write the poem, “Prairie Spring” (1912), that serves as one of

the epigraphs in the latter book, her second “first” novel as she later characterized it. Once she had made her name as a novelist, this shift was confirmed by *April Twilights and Other Poems* (Knopf, 1923), a very different collection of poems from that first 1903 version from Boston. Only “Poor Marty” (1931) appeared after that book, but Cather included it in the 1933 issue of the Knopf version and she continued to shape her poems in the 1937 Autograph Edition of her works.

All of this is by way of noting Foundation’s 2012 Spring Conference and Scholarly Symposium, “Willa Cather, Poet: Making Herself Born,” which was held in Red Cloud May 31-June 2, 2012. It focused on Cather the poet and on her activities then—in Lincoln and Pittsburgh when poetry was a focus for her in the years before *April Twilights*. The

papers offered in this issue have been selected from among those presented, and Mary K. Stillwell, who organized a panel of Nebraska Presence Poets for the conference, wrote the poem we offer here, “Reading Susan J. Rosowski at the Miner House” then. More than this, work on Cather the poet is ongoing: “new,” never before published, poems have emerged from archival materials that have been added to the Foundation’s archives and to those of UNL; the work on Cather’s *Poems* in the Nebraska Scholarly Edition continues and itself is turning up “new” poems. And next April will see the publication of a new *April Twilights and Other Poems* as a volume in the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series. Clearly, another Cather is being found and explored.



The 1903 edition of April Twilights, published by Richard G. Badger of Boston. Cather underwrote the costs of publication.



"One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. . . ."

2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of Cather's great *O Pioneers!*

"This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture. . . ."

Here's to a happy 2013 to all our friends and supporters.



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