



Cather's unpublished "Paestum"  
Mark Madigan

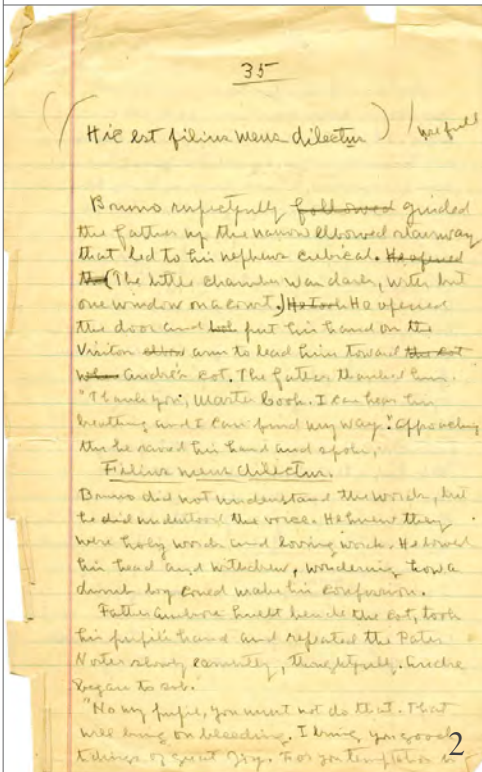
The "Hard Punishments" fragments

"Transcendent genius": Cather and Sarah Bernhardt  
Evelyn Funda

# Willa Cather

## NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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*On the cover: Jasper Francis Cropsey, Evening at Paestum, 1856. Oil on panel, 9½ x 15½ in.; The Francis Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. Gift of Matthew Vassar, 1864.1.21.*



## Letter from the President Susan Maher

There is something intriguing about a great novelist’s unfinished work. Jane Austen left a fragment of a novel, *Two Brothers* (later titled *Sanditon*) when she passed away at age 41. The twelve sketchy chapters now tease Austen readers. This work promised a much larger canvas of characters, and the setting, a new seaside resort, suggested the mobility and flux of larger English society, not the quiet world of a country village. This fragment feels Dickensian; it is rollicking, full of movement and comedy. Dickens himself left behind an unfinished work, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a dark vision of human desire and social instability. This incomplete novel has seen movie, theater, and radio versions; so piqued are Dickens aficionados by the violence, betrayal, and jealousy that they must see it completed.

Willa Cather, too, left an unfinished work at her death: “Hard Punishments.” No longer in good health and suffering severe losses, Cather turned her imagination to medieval Avignon, during the reign of Benedict XII. Two new fragments have recently emerged, to be considered alongside the one that

has long been known. The entire set is published in this issue. In 2007, the Cather International Seminar traveled to Avignon to walk its ancient streets, appreciate the fields of lavender and sunflowers, and trace Cather’s creative journey in southern France. The bright honey-colored stones of Avignon’s Palais des Papes presented an overpowering prospect that day; during the papal schism, this formidable structure protected the seven popes of the Avignon Papacy. With walls nearly eighteen feet thick, the Palais des Papes bespoke power, ambition, and God’s authority. While Avignon was warm and summery that day, all of us could feel the severity of those medieval popes. Like the famous winds of the mistral that turn balmy Avignon into a cold, besieged city, these power-wielding popes could mete out unbearable hardships on individuals and larger society. Against the horrors of World War II, Cather sought understanding of the human condition in 14<sup>th</sup>-century France.

This is a special issue of the *N & R*. It offers up a newly discovered poem and Cather’s final fictional landscape. Readers will be left with much to ponder. The fragments of “Hard Punishments” hint at the power of Cather’s vision. Where would she have taken us? How would she have turned historical record into art? Would her protagonists have been as memorable as Antonia Shimerda or Archbishop Latour? Might she have saved the best for last? We will never know. That is the tease of the final work, of genius unfulfilled.



## Letter from the Executive Director Leslie Levy

I remember the first time I saw a *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*. It was just so . . . well, *scholarly*. And then, upon reading the *Newsletter & Review*, to realize that the editors of this beautiful publication and some of its writers—the “Oz behind the curtain”—are Foundation board members! I was somewhat intimidated; yet here I was hoping to be hired by the Willa Cather Foundation to be their Executive Director. What was I thinking? But I had the good fortune earlier this year to meet some of the scholars on the Cather Board of Governors at Spring Conference in Red Cloud. I was immediately inspired by their passion and knowledge and put at ease by their humble personalities and great senses of humor.

As we visited that day, and as I have come to know my new colleagues better, I wholeheartedly admire their long-

standing commitment to Willa Cather and our Foundation. I see the amazing articles, scholarly editions, lectures, and presentations and I feel so fortunate that the newsletter is but one of the many beneficiaries of their talents. It is not an exaggeration to say that each of the scholars on our board is a living embodiment of our mission.

I look forward to attending upcoming conferences and the International Seminar in Albuquerque in 2013. Maybe I’ll even get to meet the next John Murphy, Ann Romines, or Robert Thacker, just to name a few.

As the Cather Foundation evolves and expands, I embrace the opportunity to forge bonds with others from around the world with the same passion and drive. Together we can work to enable future generations to experience the work and life of Willa Cather and to ensure that Cather’s literary legacy remains vibrant.

As I have started my professional journey with the Cather Foundation, I am honored to have the opportunity to learn from, and work with, such an amazing group of talented people.



# Toward Completing a Triptych: The “Hard Punishments” Fragments

John J. Murphy

The newly surfaced fragments of Willa Cather’s unfinished Avignon story, “Hard Punishments,” from the papers of Cather’s nephew Charles E. Cather, when added to the four paragraphs in the University of Virginia Library Special Collections, significantly flesh out much of the account Edith Lewis provided George N. Kates for his essay, “Willa Cather’s Unfinished Avignon Story” (1956). Not only do these fragments<sup>1</sup> confirm Lewis’s memory of specifics in a “manuscript” she and Kates believed “no longer exists” (Kates 482), but also that the subject Cather took up in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), of the history and culture of French Catholicism, remained a creative subject until the end of her life, so much so that she had decided to set a major fiction entirely in France.

According to Lewis’s account (in Kates 482-84), the central characters were two youths: one well-born, André, and the other a peasant, Pierre, both mutilated victims of Avignon’s brutal penal code. The story would trace their friendship and show how, with the support of an old blind priest, they would complement each other in surviving their misfortune. The setting would be in and around Avignon’s Papal Palace in the year 1340, during the pontificate of Benedict XII. The proposed opening scene (still missing and referred to in my commentary on number 38 below) would be the first meeting of the boys, and the central scene (numbers 35-37 below), the old priest’s attempt to comfort and absolve André. Lewis’s account implies that the narrative structure involved extensive flashbacks, a technique Cather perfected as her career developed.

To clarify the sequence of the fragments it should be noted that Lewis mentions two festive events involving Pope Benedict

and Alfonso XI of Castile (the “Spanish King”), one occurring during the proposed (missing) opening scene, after the boys have been mutilated, and the other “sometime before the meeting of the two boys,” and immediately before André’s mutilation. This earlier festive event provides background for the three paragraphs of the first fragment below. My commentary cites Thomas Okey’s *The Story of Avignon* (1926), Cather’s major source. Her markings in this volume are detailed in Kates’s essay (484-89).

The three paragraphs of the first fragment depict André’s flight from the Papal Palace after Pope Benedict’s “dinner for Spanish King.” In Lewis’s account, “André [whose “uncle holds an important post among the servitors in the Palace”] had certain special duties to perform; but when they were over, he slipped away and joined a group of wild [“revolutionary” and “subversive,” according to Lewis] companions in the town.” He runs through the *Cour d’Honneur* in the center of the palace and is surrounded by four largely windowless walls, the dearth of windows and absence of glass in a Gothic building striking Cather as “un-French.” She marked in her copy of Okey “that the windows of the rooms in the palace were unglazed” (218).

Officially *the* Crusades (in the Holy Land) were over by this time; however, the term continued to be applied to various campaigns against heresy and to Spanish battles with the Moors. The pagan quality of the palace apparently reflects not only its “non-Christian” architecture but most likely Cather’s highlighting in Okey of details on papal extravagance and pageantry associated with hedonism: she singles out a lavish state dinner epitomizing the height of a corrupt hierarchy (Okey 237-38). Such sensual pleasure seems particularly scandalous in



View of Avignon from Villeneuve across the Rhone, with Pont Saint-Benezet in the foreground and beyond it the Palais des Papes and Notre-Dame des Doms tower. Photographs by John J. Murphy.



a building serving (from 1309 to 1378) as the headquarters of the Catholic Church. The final paragraph, a contrasting glimpse at “the people who lived and worked” in the palace, obviously owes to Okey’s chapter 15, the most heavily marked by Cather, a response to the question “But what of the little folk of Avignon—the merchant, the shopkeeper, the craftsman, the day drudge?” (Okey 240).

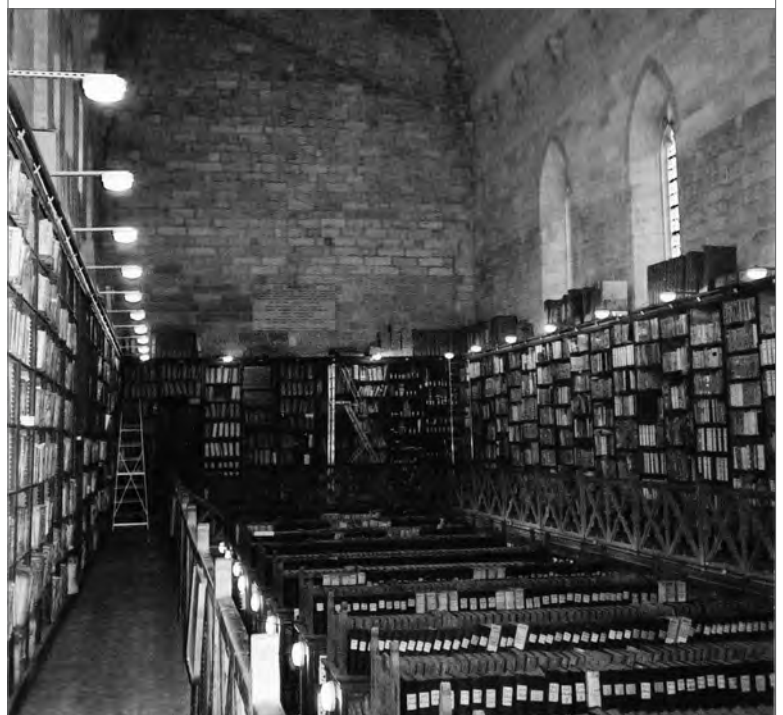
Numbers 35 to 37 of fragment two, what Lewis refers to as “the central scene,” chronologically follow the three paragraphs of the first fragment, after which André would have blasphemed in company with his revolutionary companions and been seized by the police. In it, in Lewis’s words, “an old blind priest, “. . . André’s friend and confessor . . . comes to him after his ordeal, where he lies tossing on his cot in his cubicle in the Palace.” His tongue has been torn out as punishment for his blasphemy. Okey notes in chapter 15 that “Human life was held cheap and punishments were of appalling ferocity” (240-41), and Cather marks two pages later the “cutting out the tongue of G. of Avignon for swearing by the womb of the Blessed Mary” (Okey 243), a revealing detail in this scene with the priest, since André has obviously blasphemed against the Virgin Mary.

We learn here that André’s uncle, Bruno, is master cook at the palace, where André is lodged. The priest’s blindness is also established at this point, and his first words to André, in Latin, are taken from God the Father’s references to Jesus: “This is my Beloved Son” (Matt. 3.17 and 17.5; Mark 1.11; Luke 3.22). Cather peppers the scene with additional biblical quotes: “good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2.10); “Let him that [thinketh he] standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10.12), and “I will sprinkle thee with hyssop etc,” from “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Ps. 51.7), the source of the “Asperges me” prayer during the sprinkling of the congregation before Mass, with which the old priest would be familiar. The first and third of these quotes refer to the absolving of André’s sin, while the one from 1 Corinthians introduces a warning to André and a somewhat blurred explanation of the necessity of preserving free will in resisting temptation. This supports Lewis’s explanation that André got carried away, was “[e]xcited” and “trie[d] to out-do” the other revolutionaries. The sin committed was “not of [André’s] true nature.”

References to the Virgin in this fragment recall passages in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: Father Vaillant remembers the tenth-century anthem *Alma redemptoris mater* (“Loving Mother of the Redeemer”) in “The Month of Mary,” and Bishop Latour reflects on Mary’s qualities as mother and source of grace in “December Night” and “Auspice Maria.” Through Mary’s “Persuasion,” André is absolved.

In number 38 of fragment two, Pierre/Jean (Cather’s names for characters remained tentative) recalls his first meeting with André. Lewis’s account of their meeting (in Cather’s missing

opening scene) helps explain this second scene set on a trash pile high above the Rhone, in which the peasant boy hopes for the reappearance of André and reflects on his own struggle. The missing opening scene, Lewis explains, is set “on the height above the Papal Palace, overlooking the Rhone, a sort of ash heap, where . . . Pierre . . . sit[s] and look[s] across [the river] toward his former home. . . . [H]e had traded off his father’s cart and donkey, and a load of pottery . . . for a wonderful monkey belonging to a sailor”—a fairly clear echo of Captain Pondaven’s ape story and pet parrot in *Shadows on the Rock*. “His father had denounced him for theft to the authorities, and as punishment . . . [h]is hands are now useless, and he is an outcast.” Cather has marked in Okey the cutting off of the hand of Jean de Astraca and the cutting off of the ear of Pierre de Rostand for theft (242-43), interesting details in that she vacillates between these given names in referring to the peasant boy.



*The Chapel of Pope Benedict XII, setting of the University of Virginia Library fragment of Cather’s Avignon story. Along with other parts of the Palace, it currently houses the Vacluse department archives.*

While the boy sits weeping on his ash-heap in the missing opening scene, continues Lewis, he is discovered by a “handsome, spirited, intelligent, well-born” boy, who “cannot speak.” This is André after his ordeal and absolution. Cather’s opening takes place (in Lewis’s words) on “the day . . . Benedict XII . . . , surrounded by a magnificent train, had gone down to meet Alfonso of Castile and his embassy.” Cather marked in Okey the “imperial splendour” and “glittering pageant” celebrating Alfonso’s “bloody victory over four Moorish kings” (89). This festive occasion should not be confused with the banquet for the Spanish King from which André escapes to meet with wild friends

*continued on page 8*



## “The Avignon Story”

### Manuscript Fragments of Willa Cather’s Last Unpublished Story—“Hard Punishments”

Transcriptions by Andrew Jewell and Kari Ronning

*These transcriptions are designed to provide the reader with a clear reading text. We have added missing characters in brackets and omitted deleted words still visible on the original manuscripts. In a few places Cather left two words in the manuscript where only one was grammatically appropriate; we assume she had not yet decided which of the alternative words would be used. In these cases, we have included both words separated by a slash, as “think/believe.”*

*For full diplomatic transcriptions—preserving the spellings, emendations, annotations, and substitutions in the original fragments—visit [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org).*

1 st Crusade 1095

2 nd Crusade 1145

Palace

Pope’s dinner for Spanish King at noon!

When André at last escaped he did not leave by the one many mysterious exits and back ways on the east. Being fresh from his bath and dressed in his best he ran out through the Court of Honor into a blaze of fiery light so fierce that he might well have been a martyr. The low sun beat with all its power against the great pile of yellow masonry which was the Palace: a building like nothing else in Provence and utterly un-French. Eastern, Moslem, Pagan—secret, blind. The crusades had been a-doing for a century and more, but why should that feeling so Eastern so pagan, belonging to harems and eunuchs and Palace revolutions, affect the building which was to be the head

[2]

of Christ’s Church?

It was huge, as if it were hewn out of a mountain, tawny (the color of gold in sunlight) built to last for centuries—forever. But it was blind. The great window arches that rose half the height of the building—even higher in the towers—had no glass in them, were bricked up with solid masonry. They had the grace of the pointed arch, but admitted no light. They were blind eyes. So the whole pile, which let in nothing and sent out nothing, seemed blind and deaf. Little barred windows there were, of course, stuck away behind the façade and in the towers were loop holes in that great mass of stone which was fortress, castle palace

[3]

[The following questions, scribbled out with pencil, were likely written on the paper at a different time:]

#### Questions

1. At what date was Grace Church in Winchester built?
2. When was the first Episcopal church in Winchester built?

[end scribbled out section]

To the people who lived and worked there, the cooks and wood carriers and chamberlins and laundrymen and the hundred serving boys, there was nothing mysterious here, but a huge, jolly old building, where one had to run for miles over stone floors and leap up great stairways and shake up down beds and beat up huge pillows for great statesmen and high churchmen and ambassadors speaking outrageous tongues from all over the world: some of the jobs merely in the days work.

( (carry hot water and empty slops and bring hot drinks wine) ) {outer parentheses blue}

*This marks the close of the first of the two fragments newly donated to the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries as part of the Charles E. Cather Collection. The second of these two fragments is below, followed by the University of Virginia fragment.*

35

(Hic est filius meus dilectus) | use full {marginal note}

Bruno respectfully guided the father up the narrow elbowed stairway that led to his nephews cubicle. (The little chamber was dark, with but one window on a court.) He opened the door and put his hand on the visitor’s arm to lead him toward André’s cot. The father thanked him. “Thank you, Master Cook. I can hear his breathing and I can find my way.” Approaching he raised his hand and spoke,

Filius meus dilectus.

Bruno did not understand the words, but he understood the voice. He knew they were holy words and loving words. He bowed his head and withdrew, wondering how a dumb boy could make his confession.

Father Ambrose knelt beside the cot, took his pupil’s hand and repeated the Pater Noster slowly earnestly, thoughtfully. Andre began to sob.”

“No my pupil, you must not do that. That will bring on bleeding. I bring you good tidings of great joy. For you temptation is

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over and past. You have sinned and you have been punished. It is over and done. I have heard the story, and it seems not to belong to you. In all the years I have been your friend and confessor I have seen nothing like that. It was not from you, not characteristic. It was an accident, as if you had fallen into a dirty pit. The lesson is: Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall. Hereafter [y]ou will take heed. The sin into which you fell can never be repeated. We all sin, and seldom is the power to repeat our most grievous sin taken from us. To voluntarily deprive ones self of the power to yield to our besetting temptation is a grievous sin and is forbidden us, as you know. But for my dear pupil that struggle is over. Since the darkest of your evil speaking was against the most merciful of all of all the blessed, Alma Mater redemptoris, I think/believe it was forgiven even as it left your tongue. If I who have followed you only with my poor senses know that this evil moment was accident and not of your true nature, how much more did She who knows all things



know it! You have seen a little child when some toy is taken from it, scream and strike at its mother? Does the mother turn hard cease to love hate that child? For its own good she may punish it, but she does not love it less. If we can keep Her love we keep that which can never fail us. From this day on you and I, my son, will never fail in devotion to her. When I have wakened in the night since your trouble I have implored her grace for you, and through her I have reached you and held communion with you. You are unable to make your confession to me as heretofore. Alma Mater, she has in some fashion made it for you. In the still hours of the night she made me understand what had befallen my son and healed in my heart the sting wound which tale-bearers had brought. To me she made all clear, and with Her son her love is all Persuasion. Sleep and grow strong, my pupil, to serve Her better. I will sing Her Hymn and your heart will sing with me. You are now dedicated to her service. I will sprinkle thee with hyssop etc

On the morning after his first meeting with Andrew Jean again climbed the kitchen boys' path up to that grandly situated trash pile which looked out over the river (Rhône) the spires of Ville-eneuf, and beyond the gray hills of his own country. He sat down on a rock yesterday, but today he had not come to look mournfully across the river. He had a warmer hope, that he might see again the dumb miracle man who seemed to make very free with everything at Pope Benedict's palace. If Jean had not the evidence of a new shirt and breeches he might have thought that charming youth a dream, though he seldom had pleasant dreams now. Now [h]e dreamed mostly about an angry father (a merciless father, a terrible judge, a sick monkey, even, sometimes about the other monkey—still dreamed of that one!) For there was another monkey, Five years ago on his first trip to Avignon with his cart of crockery

Charles E. Cather Collection (MS 350). Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.  
Transcription by Andrew Jewell and Kari Ronning (September 2011)

[In another hand:] Willa Cather's mss.

**(Avignon)**

Father X from his place near (below) the choir could see very little of the splendor in that marvellously white rectangular chapel. But the lights from many candles he could see—bright points in darkness and about each a haze like a halo. And the choir he could hear, with an ear sensitive and trained. And all about him he could feel something more beautiful than light or music (music or light itself) the kindling of emotion, faith, belief, imagination— which is itself a miracle. At the Christmas Mass something is born in thousands of unlikely people—the swineherd, the hairy cook, the lazy page boys.

While the tenor priest from Toulouse was singing the mass, Father X closed his eyes and shut off even such poor sight as he had, to rest  
[page break]

2  
the more wholly upon the music and the beautiful words. And in the cadence of the priest he seemed to feel/sense the feeling (awe) of the close-packed crowd around him,—like a heart beating under his hand.

Was there, he asked himself, anything in all the universe, anything so wonderful as wonder—wonderment? That thing which the beautiful or the noble calls up in all human creatures not utterly base. That wave of emotion which is both exaltation and humility, humbleness and triumph—triumph over we know not what. Were there in the systems of stars, other creatures who could feel the heavens with the heart, with the mind, and, in such littleness, rejoice in such immensity? The angels, perhaps. Surely the Creator of it all could not rejoice and wonder as did men—that would be

[page break]

self worship—whom did God worship? That was a frightful thought—for without the power to worship, to be humbled and exalted in admiration, any being would be a stone, a blindness and dumbness in eternity. And the Creator of all wonders—the ways of the bees and the ants and the ways of the stars—could not wonder at his own creations. That was not the way of great creators, even of the human kind. They made and passed on satisfied, partly, but not admiring Et Vidit Deus quod esset bonum.

The priest from Toulouse sang the last beautiful words. Natus est, “here among them within them. In his own heart fathe[r] Ambrose knew[.]” And beside him he felt

[page break]

the shiver/shudder of delight that ran through his pupil Andre, and a sob he heard from that unfortunate creature with the useless hands. Yes, He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the dumb to speak,—and to all the future a release from bondage (All the generations of the future he left the, the hours, of release from bondage, that moment of becoming truly a living soul.

Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, MSS 6494-j  
Transcription by Andrew Jewell (July 2005)



Palace

1st Crusade 1095-1099  
2nd = Crusade 1145-

Pope's dinner for Spanish King at noon!

When Andri at last escaped he did not leave by <sup>one</sup> the many mysterious exits and back ways on the east. ~~But~~ Being fresh from his bath and dressed in his best he ran out through the Court of Honor into a blaze of ~~sunlight~~ <sup>fiery light</sup> so fierce that he might well have been a martyr. The low sun beat with all its power against the great pile of yellow masonry which was the Palace; a building like nothing else in Provence and utterly non-French, Eastern, ~~Muslim~~ Modern, Pagan - secret, blind. The Crusades had ~~been~~ been a-coming for a century and more, but why should that feeling so Eastern so pagan, belonging to harems and barracks and Palace revolutions, affect the building which was to be the head

*These are the initial pages of the two newly discovered manuscript fragments, now in the Charles E. Cather Collection in the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.*



( His est filius meus dilectus ) / we full

Bonno respectfully ~~followed~~ guided the father up the narrow, elbowed stairway that led to his nephew's cubical. He opened ~~the~~ (The little chamber was dark, with but one window on a court.) He took He opened the door and ~~look~~ put his hand on the visitor's ~~elbow~~ arm to lead him toward ~~the~~ ~~est~~ ~~was~~ Andre's cot. The father thanked him. "Thank you, Master Book. I can hear his breathing and I can find my way." Approaching ~~the~~ he raised his hand and spoke:

Filius meus dilectus.

Bonno did not understand the words, but he did understand the voice. He knew they were holy words and loving words. He bowed his head and withdrew, wondering how a dumb boy could make him confess.

Father Ambrose knelt beside the cot, took his pupil's hand and repeated the Pater Noster slowly earnestly, thoughtfully. Andre began to sob.

"No my pupil, you must not do that. That will bring on bleeding. I bring you good tidings of great joy. For you temptations in



*continued from page 3*

(the first fragment here). This banquet, Lewis clarifies, occurs “[s]ome time before the meeting of the two boys.” In the second scene overlooking the Rhone (fragment 38), the peasant boy again looks across toward home. The spires he sees are those of Villeneuve-les-Avignon, the “City of the Cardinals.”

This brings us to the four paragraphs of (Avignon) in the University of Virginia Library Special Collections, which Cather’s bibliographer Joan Crane encouraged Susan Rosowski to have printed in the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* in a letter dated 10 November 1988.<sup>2</sup> These four paragraphs balance “the central scene” (numbers 35 to 37) for richness of allusions, and Crane notes in her letter the biblical excerpts from the Christmas and Easter liturgies they contain.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this scene, depicting the two boys and the old priest (from whose perspective it is presented) at Christmas Mass in the “Old Chapel” of Benedict XII, is from the concluding section of Cather’s story. It is one of conversion and fits Lewis’s “understanding” that Cather intended André’s life to advance to “a new plane. His disability becomes for him a challenge. . . . After his encounter with Pierre, the poor peasant boy becomes a part of this challenge. He sets out to succor . . . one even more unfortunate than himself.” Notable in these paragraphs is Cather’s mining of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, of Augustine, Aquinas, and Ambrose, the name she gives to her priest (initially referred to as “Father X”), whose rumination on the wonderment of Creation has its source in St. Ambrose’s *Hexameron, or Six Days of Creation* (ca 387). Cather’s theme embraces spiritual vision, the release from bondage symbolized in the Nativity, and rebirth in Christ as evident in André’s “shudder” and the peasant boy’s “moan.”

What we now know of “Hard Punishments” provides more than a mere outline of the third panel of a triptych of “Catholic narratives,” one balancing out *Shadows on the Rock* with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in the center. The Avignon story would have depicted (and, indeed, does to some extent in these fragments) the survival of Christian faith among the lowly and persecuted in a corrupt medieval church exiled in France. With emphasis on the simple faith of children, *Shadows* chronicles the implanting of Counter-Reformation French culture in Quebec. Finally, between these two, the *Archbishop* celebrates the efforts of French churchmen, inspired by the faith of peasants and the Virgin’s grace, to grow a universal and accommodating Catholicism from Hispanic and Native roots in the American Southwest. However readers chose to interpret this triptych, we must concede that it occupied Cather for more than twenty years and might have been her comforting escape from or antidote to the materialism she lamented vehemently at times in earlier fiction.

Beyond thematic consideration, these fragments also reveal aspects of Cather’s creative process. For one thing, the Papal

Palace and Avignon had teased her mind for a very long time; from her first visit to France in 1902 to the last decade of her life. These fragments are rough, and they contain notes to herself: some related to her text, as in “(Hic est filius dilectus)/ use full,” and others, like the questions about churches in Winchester, Virginia, seemingly irrelevant but clearly related to her own family’s churchgoing history. Except for André, the names of characters are still tentative. The priest’s name “Ambrose” comes to Cather while writing the (Avignon) fragment, which suggests that it predates fragment two, in which he is “Father Ambrose.” Cather’s notes on the dates of the Crusades and dinner for the Spanish king indicate her concern for historical accuracy and use of historical sources, particularly details from Okey. While steeping herself in history, by sleight of hand she manages “to give the feeling of the place and time” with “little of the historical material . . . actually introduced in the story,” as Edith Lewis wrote to Kates (Kates 489-90). All of this suggests intense dedication to the craft of fiction and to its flawless result, which explains why Cather would not have wanted us to share these rough drafts.

#### NOTES

1. In this commentary the first three paragraphs (following “Pope’s dinner for Spanish King at noon!”) are referred to as fragment one. The numbered sections, 35 to 38, are referred to as parts of fragment two, a single scene comprising 35 to 37. The Virginia manuscript, the third fragment, is identified as (Avignon).

2. This letter accompanied Crane’s transcription of (Avignon). I have copies of both the letter and the transcription sent to me by Rosowski.

3. A thorough analysis of these paragraphs is available in my article “Building the House of Faith: ‘Hard Punishments,’ the Plan and the Fragment,” *Literature and Belief* 22 (2002), 202-27, also available on the Willa Cather Foundation website: <http://www.willacather.org/education/essays-a-articles>.

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# “By the Sweat of Thy Brow”: Work, Gender, and Eden in Cather’s *My Ántonia* and Hurston’s “Sweat”

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In an article titled “‘My Six Books Would Be’: The Cather-Hurston Connection,” Nancy Chinn documents two instances of Zora Neale Hurston referencing the literary work of Willa Cather. In a 1934 letter to Lewis Stiles Gannett, reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Hurston includes Cather’s *My Ántonia* in a list of “My six books.” Presumably this list is a response to a request by Gannett for Hurston “to name six books she liked or thought were significant generally or important to her specifically” (Chinn 78). Chinn conjectures that Hurston’s reading of *My Ántonia* “probably took place in the decade between the 1918 publication date and 1928” and notes that Hurston also included Cather in a list of her favorite writers in 1942 (78). In light of this evidence suggesting Cather’s influence on Hurston,<sup>1</sup> it seems worthwhile to explore topical and thematic similarities between the works of the two authors. *My Ántonia* and Hurston’s 1926 short story “Sweat” appear prime candidates for such comparative study. Both works feature female protagonists who defy traditionally prescribed gender roles in regard to work, as well as male characters who resent these women for challenging male dominance in the economic roles of laborer and provider; in doing so, both narratives recall and, in a sense, invert the Genesis story of the Fall of humankind, a story which highlights male dominance over women and portrays male labor in breadwinning as divine punishment for human sin.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, *My Ántonia* and “Sweat” also both make heavy use of Edenic imagery in dramatically portraying conflict and tension over gender roles. Because of these significant thematic and topical parallels, a close and comparative analysis of the two works seems appropriate.

Throughout Cather’s novel, Ántonia Shimerda defies stereotypes of the proper occupation and economic role of a woman. While Ántonia labors in the fields primarily out of economic necessity, it is nonetheless obvious that she takes great pride in her work and ability. Jim Burden recalls that, upon one visit to the Shimerda’s farm, Ántonia “began at once to tell me how much ploughing she had done that day” and then requested that Jim find out how much Jake, the Burdens’ farmhand, had ploughed in the same day because she did not want to be outdone in acreage plowed (118). Ántonia’s pride in herself and belief that her ability is equal to that of her brother Ambrosch,

the “man” of the Shimerda household, becomes even more obvious when Jim asks her to go to the country schoolhouse with him and Ántonia rejects his offer, claiming, “I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him” (118). Ántonia’s bravado here seems in part an attempt to mask her disappointment at not being able to attend school; not long after she says that she “ain’t got time to learn,” she begins to cry and asks Jim to tell her “all those nice things you learn at the school,” remembering that her own father was highly educated (119). Despite her regrets at her lack of educational opportunities, Ántonia’s personal satisfaction in her ability to work “like mans” appears genuine. For Ántonia, outdoor labor brings a conviction of her responsibility for her family’s well-being and a sense of ownership of the family farm. She becomes crucial to her family’s survival when Ambrosch hires himself and younger brother Marek out as laborers, leaving Ántonia and Mrs. Shimerda to work in the family’s fields all day and do the chores at night (127), as well as later on when Ambrosch hires out Ántonia “like a man,” sending her from farm to farm to work in the fields at harvest time (143). Ántonia herself recognizes that her outdoor work defies conventions of gender, asserting, “Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house! . . . I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man” (133). Later in the novel, Ántonia’s stereotypically male role of providing economic support for her family continues even as she assumes the more socially acceptable occupation of domestic laborer in the households of the Burdens, Harlings, and Cutters. Even after her marriage to Anton Cuzak, Ántonia still assumes a field-laboring role essential to the economic survival of her new family. She unabashedly professes the importance of her outdoor labor during the first ten years of her marriage to Cuzak. The course that Ántonia’s life takes challenges gender stereotypes about labor, both in the nature of the work at which she excels and in the necessity of the financial contribution she makes to her family.

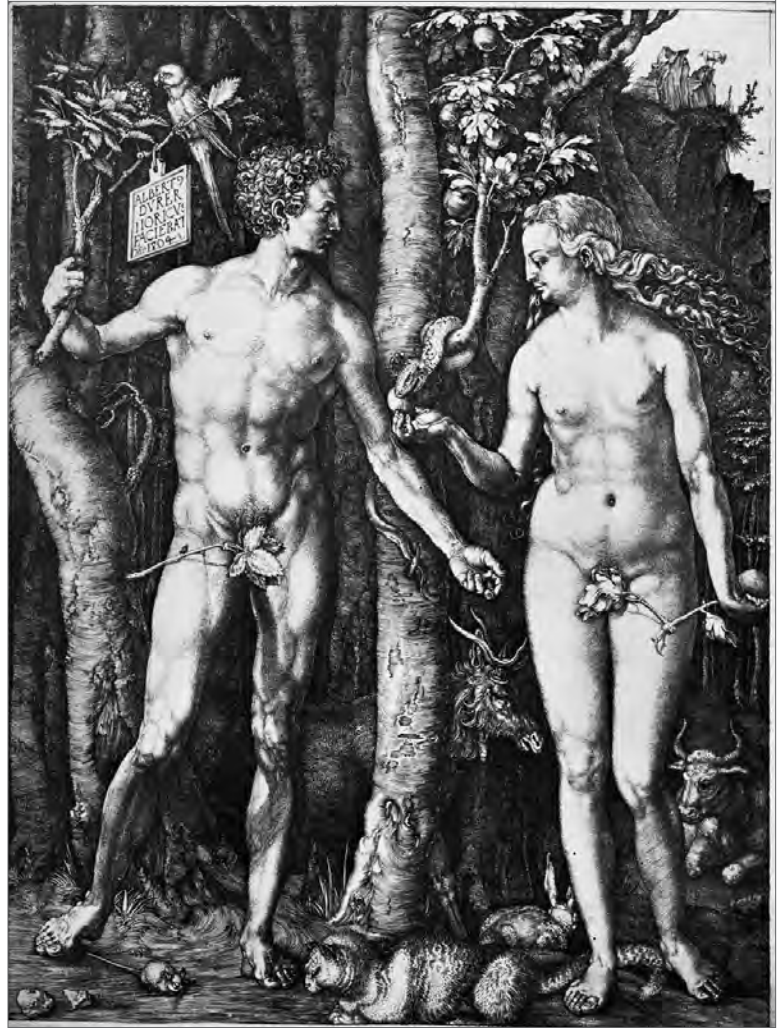
In contrast to Ántonia, Jim Burden does not do heavy farm work, nor does he earn money to assist his grandparents with the costs of maintaining their household. Even when Jim begins to work on his own as a lawyer, the narrator of the novel’s



Introduction implies that his success is, at least in some measure, still contingent on his family ties: “When Jim was still an obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way in New York, his career was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage” to the “only daughter of a distinguished man” (x).<sup>3</sup> Though Jim grows up admiring the family farmhands Otto and Jake and listening to their stories of outdoor work and adventure, his life in Nebraska is far more domestic than the lives of the men he admires. When Jim does perform farm chores, he usually does so in the company of his grandmother; his duties of gathering eggs, feeding chickens, working in the garden, and carrying water are all tasks stereotypically associated with females rather than males. While Jim’s literacy and intellectual competence eventually enable him to succeed academically in a way that Otto, Jake, and Ántonia cannot, these abilities also distance Jim from the men and the woman that he esteems so much.

Jim’s insecurities, when coupled with his awareness of Ántonia’s strength and ability, produce in him desires that reveal his unconscious resentment of her independence and subversion of societal gender norms. The most obvious indication of Jim’s resentment comes early in the novel when he recounts the snake-killing episode. Jim notably prefaces this tale by reflecting, “Much as I liked Ántonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (41). An excursion to the prairie-dog town offers Jim the opportunity to finally play the role of hero to Ántonia’s damsel in distress. Ántonia’s fearful scream prompts Jim to turn and behold the “circus monstrosity” of a rattlesnake that is “as thick as [Jim’s] leg, and looked as if millstones couldn’t crush the disgusting vitality out of him” (44). Jim runs at the snake and uses a spade to pound “its ugly head flat” (44); later on, a “faint, fetid smell came from” the rattlesnake, “and a thread of green liquid oozed from his crushed head” (45). In crushing the snake’s head, Jim evokes the imagery of Genesis, which includes a curse not only for Adam and Eve but also for the serpent: “the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field. . . . And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3.14-15, KJV). Jim himself associates the snake he kills with the serpent of the primal Fall narrative, commenting that the “five and a half [foot] long” snake inspired in him “a kind of respect for his age and size. He seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil. Certainly his kind have left horrible unconscious memories in all warm-blooded life” (45-46). The snake imagery used in this passage cannot be read

as a direct Edenic allegory; it does, however, significantly call to mind the beginning chapters of Genesis and the ideas about gender roles implied there.



*Albrecht Dürer, Adam and Eve, engraving, 1504.*

Indications of Jim’s subconscious feelings of resentment toward Ántonia occur throughout Book I. At one point during the first spring, Jim laments, “Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength” (121). His patronizing attitude becomes more evident as he recalls, “Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, ‘My Án-tonia!’” (121). Mary Paniccia Carden locates the psychological roots of Jim’s resentment in his insecurity about his own masculinity: “Acting as a productive pioneer farmer, Ántonia is a better ‘man’ than Jim, and he is considerably reduced in comparison” (289). One way Jim deals with his insecurity is by serving as a mouthpiece for many of

his grandmother's negative judgments of *Ántonia's* manners and practices. When *Ántonia* yawns at the supper table and stretches her arms out "as if they ached," Jim is highly offended and recollects his grandmother's fear that heavy work would cause *Ántonia* to "lose all her nice ways and get rough ones," judging that "[s]he had lost them already" (121). His views about work and gender similarly echo those of his grandmother. Near the beginning of Book II, "The Hired Girls," Jim recalls, "When fall came [*Ántonia*] was to husk corn for the neighbors until Christmas, as she had done the year before; but grandmother saved her from this by getting her a place to work with our neighbors, the Harlings" (143). Grandmother Burden and Jim obviously view *Ántonia's* work as a farmhand as a problem to be solved. Though placing *Ántonia* in the more socially acceptable role of domestic laborer relieves the Burdens of their embarrassment at her situation, the fact that *Ántonia* must work in order to support her family is still threatening to Jim; as he struggles to define his own role as a man, Jim evinces an obvious desire to fit *Ántonia* into set gendered categories in order to assuage his insecurities about his own masculinity.

Similar to the way in which *Ántonia's* heavy work and breadwinner role incite Jim's resentment and disapproval, the protagonist of Hurston's story "Sweat," Delia Jones, enrages her abusive husband Sykes with her strong work ethic and economic self-sufficiency. Hurston's 1926 short story thus anticipates the 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in its depiction of complicated and uneasy relationships between work, gender, and economics in the context of marriage. As Cheryl A. Wall summarizes, "Delia Jones is a washerwoman, the family breadwinner, and an abused wife. These roles exist in a causal relation, for Delia's work is both an economic necessity and a psychological threat to her husband Sykes. In the story Sykes seems never to work at all, and he asserts his manhood mainly by intimidating and betraying his wife" (7-8). Hurston establishes the centrality of Delia's work in the story's opening by explaining that Delia is awake at eleven o'clock on Sunday night because "she was a washwoman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start" (73). The references to Delia's church attendance, as well as to the days of the week that she works, also introduce the importance of religion and spirituality in the story. The perceptive reader will already detect hints of the significance of the story's title in terms of the biblical Fall narrative and the ideas about work and gender roles it explores; it seems that the female Delia is reaping the curse designated for the male Adam.<sup>4</sup>

Hurston further highlights Delia's role as the sole breadwinner for her household during the washerwoman's arguments with her husband. Delia's response to Sykes's belligerence asserts her economic dominance: "Mah tub of suds is filled yo belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it" (75). Other members of the community recognize Delia's strong work ethic and economic independence as well. As Delia rides by collecting and delivering clothes each Saturday, the men who congregate on the store porch discuss her dependability and Sykes's delinquency. One man reflects that "Hot or col', rain or shine, jes ez reg'lar ez de weeks roll roun' Delia carries 'em an' fetches 'em on Sat'day" (76-77), to which another replies, "She better if she wante eat. . . . Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to huh he aint'" (77). The narrative of "Sweat" does not clearly indicate that Sykes is aware of his reputation within the community as a deadbeat husband, but one can assume that, if he were, it would only intensify his resentment of his wife. Kathryn Lee Seidel analyzes the economic power structure of the marriage between Delia and Sykes, noting that "[i]n the early days of their marriage Sykes was employed"



Zora Neale Hurston in a 1938 photo by Carl Van Vechten. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection, LC-DIG-van-5a52142.



(112), but he squandered his wages in Orlando; furthermore, “At some point Sykes stopped working and began to rely entirely on Delia for income” (112). Seidel’s article frames Delia’s work in remarkably positive terms. Seidel makes no qualms about the fact that the work of washerwomen during the early twentieth century was less economically rewarding and far more physically taxing than that of maids or cooks; Seidel’s claim that “being a ‘washerwoman’ was as arduous a task as being a field hand” calls to mind the strenuousness of *Ántonia*’s labor (116). However, the major benefit that the occupation of washerwoman afforded was independence, which engendered pride and self-respect. The satisfaction Delia derives from her work and economic independence parallels *Ántonia*’s attitude about her field work and the freedom from deference to Ambrosch that it affords her.

Though Delia’s occupation as a washerwoman is more stereotypically feminine than *Ántonia*’s field labor, Delia’s economic role is even more dominant than that of *Ántonia*, and her husband’s resentment is correspondingly more intense than that of Jim. While Sykes’s spiteful violence toward his wife marks him as uniquely villainous, his resentment of Delia resembles that of Jim toward *Ántonia* since both men’s feelings stem from insecurities about their inability to fulfill stereotypical male roles. Jim fears *Ántonia*’s usurpation of the stereotypical male role of earning a living by the “sweat” of the brow, revealing his apprehensions about the fact that he himself does not “sweat”; similarly, Sykes resents the economic dominance of his wife, revealing his own insecurities about the fact that he himself does not earn through labor.

In “Sweat,” the very first interaction between Delia and Sykes indicates Sykes’s animosity toward his wife and specifically toward the symbols of her work and prosperity. As Delia sorts the laundry, Sykes throws a bull whip at her. Hurston describes the movement of the whip in serpentine terms: “Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her” (73). Correspondingly, Delia’s response indicates her great fear of snakes, yet another suggestion of the biblical Fall story and its prediction of enmity between the serpent and the woman. In pathetic attempts to assert the rule and dominance over his wife that is also referenced in the Fall narrative, Sykes gleefully uses the whip to prey upon her fear: “A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out and move” (73). Sykes’s bitterness at Delia often expresses itself as pleasure at her suffering, so his response to her obvious fear is to become “bent over with laughter at her fright” (73). After scolding Sykes for exploiting her fear of snakes, Delia reminds her husband of what he resents most by asking him, “Nother thing, where you been drivin’ wid *mab* rig? *Ab* feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin’ wid

no bull whip” (74, emphases added). Although Delia obviously fears the physical violence of her husband, this fear apparently does not prevent her from asserting the truth about her monetary provision for the household. Moreover, when Hurston describes the fights between Delia and Sykes, she reveals the source of Sykes’s resentment by continually juxtaposing his acts of hatred and abuse with Delia’s work. Although Sykes attempts to provoke his wife by declaring, “You sho is one aggravatin’ nigger woman,” Delia simply “resumed her work and did not answer him at once” (74). Likewise, when Sykes “picked up the whip and glared down at her,” Delia “went on with her work” (74). Sykes continues to seek Delia’s attention by kicking all of the sorted clothes back together again and standing in Delia’s way “truculently” (74). Again, Delia ignores Sykes: “[S]he walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things” (74). When Sykes finally threatens to kick the clothes outside, “Delia never looked up from her work” (74). These repeated interactions between Delia and Sykes underscore the violent power struggle that defines their marriage. Delia’s employment doubly cuts Sykes: it serves as a symbol of her independence and as a reminder of his own unemployment.

In addition to its exploration of the work and gender roles dealt with in the Fall narrative, “Sweat” also employs direct Edenic allusions. It is difficult to miss the symbolic significance of the snake imagery utilized throughout “Sweat” and of the actual snake that Sykes brings into the house to terrorize Delia, although any interpretation of this imagery must take into account the complexities of Hurston’s thematic development. Several critics have noted that Hurston portrays Sykes himself in snake-like terms throughout the story. Clearly, one implication of the Edenic imagery in “Sweat” is that Sykes is a snake-devil figure who threatens to destroy the peace created by Delia’s economic self-sufficiency. However, the story’s conclusion—in which Sykes, who has left the rattlesnake in Delia’s laundry basket, is himself bitten by it, and Delia, who ran from the house in fear upon discovering the snake in the basket, listens to her husband’s cries, unable to move to help him, as he dies a painful death—indicates that the snake is a multivalent symbol in “Sweat.” Mary Jane Lupton argues that Hurston’s story “is an Adam and Eve in reverse, a very unblissful bower which is made peaceful when the snake . . . bites the man” (51). Especially relevant to analysis of the story as “an Adam and Eve in reverse” is Delia’s fear of snakes. In contrast to Eve, who calmly converses with the serpent in Genesis, Delia is terrified of the rattlesnake Sykes brings into the house. Hurston describes the “six-foot rattler” (80), comparable in size to the rattlesnake in *My Ántonia*, as “the creature that was [Delia’s] torment” (81). Yet it is this source of torment that eventually brings Delia freedom from Sykes. Suzanne D. Green contends that the story’s conclusion, in which Sykes is killed by

the very animal he intended to kill Delia, presents the snake as “a positive, empowering symbol, as it brings about justice rather than undermining it” (111). In a chillingly ironic turn of events, the vengeful course of action Sykes takes because of his resentment of Delia’s economic independence ultimately sets her free from his violence forever.

The striking topical and thematic parallels between “Sweat” and *My Ántonia*, when combined with the earlier cited evidence of Cather’s influence on Hurston, suggest that Cather’s novel impacted the composition of Hurston’s story. Though they

occupy different milieus and time periods and encounter unique challenges, Ántonia Shimerda and Delia Jones share similar struggles in their subversion of traditional gender roles. While Sykes Jones demonstrates a far more hostile attitude toward his wife than does Jim Burden toward Ántonia, both men wrestle with the insecurities that result from traditional definitions of male work and economic roles. By recalling and inverting the gender roles described in the biblical story of the Fall and perpetuated in Western tradition, both Cather and Hurston explore fundamental questions about work, gender, and the meaning of Eden.

## NOTES

1. Chinn acknowledges that the possibility of a reciprocal influence of Hurston on Cather is much more difficult to document, noting that “[t]he standard Cather biography written by James Woodress includes no references to Harlem Renaissance writers” (76), but she does “speculate” that Cather may have known of Hurston’s work, pointing to the writers’ shared milieu in New York City during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (76), as well as a number of key mutual friends and acquaintances that the writers shared, most notably Carl Van Vechten and Fannie Hurst (77). Cather’s “emphatic refusal in other letters to comment on the quality of the works of other writers, especially living ones” might be one reason for her apparent lack of response to the Harlem Renaissance in general and Hurston’s work in particular (Chinn 78).

2. After Eve and Adam disobey the divine command by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, distinctive punishments are pronounced for the woman and the man:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband,

and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3.16-19)

3. This sentence is one of many eliminated by Cather in her revision of the Introduction for the 1926 edition of *My Ántonia*; these details about Jim thus appear in the 1918 edition of *My Ántonia* but are missing from many subsequent editions.

4. See Genesis 3.17-19 above. Also significant in terms of Hurston’s inversion of the Genesis Fall narrative is Genesis 3.16. Delia has no children, possibly because of her husband’s abuse; Delia’s childlessness is a major difference between “Sweat” and Cather’s novel, in which Ántonia’s role as a mother is emphasized.

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# Recalling Northampton

Elisabeth Bayley and Sarah Clere

*The 13th International Cather Seminar, co-sponsored by the Willa Cather Foundation and Smith College, was held June 20-25, 2011 on the Smith College campus in Northampton, Massachusetts. The Newsletter & Review invited two participants, Elisabeth Bayley and Sarah Clere, to engage each other in an e-mail dialogue about their experiences at the conference and share the results with us.*



Elisabeth Bayley and Sarah Clere. Photographs by Elisabeth Bayley.

**EB:** Hey Sarah, thanks again for doing this interview-type thing with me.

**SC:** No problem, I'm happy to. Thanks for starting us off.

**EB:** All right, first question: Where were you when you first heard about the incredible, the one and only, Willa Cather?

**SC:** I was in my parents' house at about 13 years old and found my mother's copy of *My Mortal Enemy*. It was the Vintage edition from the 1970s or early 1980s. I liked the picture on the cover, so I read it. Then I read *O Pioneers!* and after that *My Ántonia*. I can't remember the sequence in which I read her other novels. Nearly twenty years later I completed my dissertation on Cather. Oh, and I should also ask, how did you "meet" WC?

**EB:** I love that, WC. WC over here in Europe means something slightly different. But thanks for asking. I actually first heard about her about five years ago, when a friend was talking about her. I kind of blew it off. Then, when I moved to Leuven I took a class with my now co-promoter Jean-Michel Rabaté and he had us read *O Pioneers!* From then on, I was hooked. Now, if only I could fast-forward a year or two to my own completed dissertation on WC! Was this the first International Cather Conference you have attended?

**SC:** Yes, I had presented on Cather at other conferences, but this was my first time at any Cather-centric conference. I do get a kick out of calling her WC. I refer to her that way in my notes all the

time, and, yes, I'm aware that the meaning might be misconstrued. I think it is appropriate that you encountered Cather in Europe. I think she would be happy about that.

**EB:** I would like to make Cather happy, but then again, wouldn't we all? How do you think your presentation went? How do you feel about the way the participants responded?

**SC:** I thought my presentation went well; my co-panelists both gave interesting talks, and the panel was well-attended. I will say that I definitely thought the stakes in Northampton were slightly higher than at other conferences. I knew everyone in the audience would be as rabidly devoted to Cather as I! Responses to my talk were engaged and generous but also challenging—I received very constructive feedback—you?

**EB:** I was also very encouraged by the response to my paper. I likewise presented with a very interesting co-panelist and the feedback for both of our papers was so lively. We got into a huge discussion about how aging is depicted by Cather and about the desire to avoid aging in *Alexander's Bridge*; it was great. Also, it was good to hear feedback from people who were a little more seasoned in Cather studies. And yes, the stakes seemed a ton higher in Northampton (if only because the town was so picture perfect!). But everyone was so welcoming, no matter what stage one was in in their Cather explorations. Let's hear it for the Cather crowd: they aren't pretentious!

**SC:** That was the thing that struck me most: everyone was so welcoming and enthusiastic. No one tried to own Cather; there was no weird academic territorialism. I particularly loved the mix of academics and independent scholars. The questions after my panel basically evolved into a big, unstructured group discussion, which I loved. I had never had that experience at a conference before (although I have had the awkward experience of having only four people come to a panel).

**EB:** I am afraid I can one-up you on that one. I have presented a paper at a conference where another presenter and I were the only two there. That paper was on Cather so of course as the other presenter and I presented our papers to each other, I still had a good time. I am glad to hear your conference experience just solidified the truth, that no one owns Cather! I think she would have it no other way. However, we do own a sweet Cather water bottle from the conference, no? Oh the benefits of a well-organized/water-bottle-giving-away conference.

**SC:** The conference participants you mentioned obviously lacked taste, Elisabeth. There is no other explanation for a poorly attended talk on Cather. The water bottle was indeed welcome. And I thought the entire conference was beautifully orchestrated.



From the time I checked in with Anne to the last morning when I cornered Rick in the dining hall to get directions to where I was to meet the shuttle (which was due to arrive in ten minutes) everything ran without a hitch, or so it seemed to me. I'm sure there were many hitches, deftly dealt with.

**EB:** I agree. It all seemed to flow like butter. (Aside to Anne and Rick: Did it feel that way for you?). How was staying in a dorm room for you? And the food, what did you think about the food? I found it so amazing that there were five kinds of options for the milk/soy products! My state university back in Missouri only had two options of milk: whole or 2%. I felt like I was at the Ritz of college dorms.

**SC:** I thought the whole concept of staying in dorms was great. I had never done that at a conference before. It was so much less expensive than a hotel, and I loved the camaraderie. The only negative aspect was the sadistic birds who sang insistently outside my window every morning. I also really enjoyed the food. I don't eat meat and anticipated a few meals of a bagel and salad, but there were ample (and delicious) vegetarian options. I also thoroughly enjoyed being on the Smith campus. It was just as bucolic as I always expected a New England small liberal arts college to be. I managed a walk in the woods around Paradise Pond one day, and it was absolutely beautiful. I love nature when it is not squawking outside my window at 5:45 a.m.



*Seminar co-hosts Rick Millington and Anne Kaufman*

like a small roller coaster ride but you could literally feel everyone sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation! When Andy would reveal something, there would be gasps and oohs and aahs. The highlight was when he revealed that Cather's letters could now be published and everyone just about started crying out of happiness! When the cheers and clapping began, I suddenly felt like I was back in a birthing room during nursing school: a child had been born (Cather's letters had been freed!), let's all celebrate this massive release!

**SC:** I know, Elisabeth! The air of suspense during Andy's presentation was palpable. It's remarkable how much and how deeply Cather scholars care about Cather and her reputation and dissemination. I also found (and have followed over the years) Andy's argument that Cather probably did not want to restrict her letters so completely (and would have been horrified at some of the results and implications of the ban on quoting) very compelling. The talk that resonated most with my own research was Janis Stout's presentation on Cather and the Civil War. I have become interested in various ways Americans in the twentieth century remembered and reconfigured the Civil War. I particularly liked her use of the phrase "interpretive vantage point" (I've got my conference notes in front of me!) to describe Cather's use of that war as a means of gauging and expressing her reactions to WWI and WWII.

**EB:** Yes, there is a great respect for Cather and desire for her works to be disseminated accurately. I have also been following Andy's argument and find it to be helpful in understanding Cather's desire regarding her letters. I agree, Janis Stout's talk was very interesting. I guess I am a visual learner because another thing I found interesting was when Martha Nell Smith showed us that new photo of Emily Dickinson. It made me really want to go and look at all of the photos of Cather in the archives. The way she talked about how Emily was sitting, what she was wearing, etc, made me think about the way we analyze photos of Cather.



*Mark Madigan and John Swift*

**EB:** I want to make some "Song of the Lark" nerdy Cather joke about the birds, but I will refrain. Seeing that we are both vegetarians, I am glad that we can agree that we were pleasantly surprised by the many *good* options there were. Way to go Smith/Anne/Rick! And yes, the pond on the campus was a totally nice addition to our New England experience. I also thought the dorms were great. There is nothing like brushing your teeth in the morning next to Janis Stout! What did you think about the speakers during the main sessions? I found the talk by Andy Jewell to be one of the most entertaining. Not only were the graphics



**SC:** I also enjoyed Martha Nell's talk; the point where she talked about the defaced letters made me tear up a little. In terms of photography, I think we often see tiny, grainy reproductions of photos and tend to miss details. We also sometimes lack the historical knowledge to interpret older photographs. I was lucky enough to see an exhibit on Cather's clothing in Lincoln this summer, and it really brought some of the photographs to life. I learned from the exhibit that the so-called Confederate cap Cather wears in an early picture is probably not a Confederate cap at all but one from a school cadet corps. I also have to say that I thought Nina Baym's keynote talk was so exciting. She should have set up a folding table and started autographing copies of *Women Writers of the American West* because I would have bought a copy that night.

**EB:** I am jealous that you got to see that exhibit on her clothing. I really wanted to see that. Did they let you take photos of the outfits? You are right, there is so much that needs to go into the analyzing of a photo. Then again, there is never a final interpretation that can capture a photo in its totality. The beauty of the photograph! I agree, why didn't Nina Baym have her book with her? I would have bought one myself. Her talk was very interesting. I also liked Sue Miller's talk because it was from an "I appreciate Cather's work" point of view—a reader's point of view. It was relaxed. Also, I had been wanting to meet her for a number of years, so that was a huge bonus. Now, there is one thing that took place during the conference that was something I just feel I need to talk about: getting beers from a cooler out of Bob Thacker's bathtub. How did that make you feel?



Mark Robison and Geneva Gano

Janis Stout

**EB:** For me it was after the first couple of beers that it got easier to delve into Bob's tub, take the beer cap off and throw it away. Those evenings were some of my favorite parts of the conference as well. I'm studying Cather in Belgium. Needless to say, I am isolated similarly to how you were in your graduate program. So getting to be surrounded by Catherites was like being inside an incredibly fun pinball game! Everywhere I turned there would be someone to talk with about an author that I love! I also felt like a camel drinking water before a long journey back to my isolated world of studies. I relished all I could. I especially liked that people knitted or played Scrabble during the gatherings. It made it really feel down home-ish.

All right, last question: if you were to design a t-shirt regarding the 2011 International Cather Seminar, what would it say?

**SC:** It would be absolutely plain—no references to Cather or the Seminar—with this line on the front: "We can quote from her letters now!"

**EB:** Yes! And on the back? Maybe it could just say "excellent." All right, I do have one last question for real this time. What do you think Cather would have said if she could have seen all of our sad, disappointed faces looking out of the bus windows, through the pouring rain, at the lane we didn't get to go down, at the end of which stood her writing tent?

**SC:** I think she would have laughed and perhaps been reminded of her own disappointing trip to see A. E. Housman when she was a young woman. Remembering the conference has been a lot of fun. Thank you so much for letting me have this conversation with you, Elisabeth. If you ever feel desperate to talk about Cather, you know whom to e-mail!

**EB:** And thanks for being willing to talk about Cather with me. I appreciate it. Have a good rest of your day and I hope to see you soon at another Cather conference.

**SC:** Great, Elisabeth, thanks. Talk to you soon!



Max Despain, Patrick Dooley, and Nora Dooley

**SC:** After the first beer it seemed to get easier. I thought those gatherings in Bob's suite were one of the most enjoyable parts of the conference. And singing the praises of the dorms yet again, beer out of a dorm bathtub turned out to be a lot more economical than beer at a hotel bar! Getting to socialize with other Cather people was so nice. No one else in my graduate program was doing any research on her, so my opportunities for Cather-related conversation have been slim.



# “Paestum”: An Unpublished Poem from Cather’s Grand Tour of Italy

Mark Madigan | Nazareth College

*“The effect of the jagged outline of mountains through groups of enormous columns on one side, & on the other the level horizon of the sea is inexpressably grand.”*

— Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock,  
February 25 [1819]

Willa Cather’s European Grand Tour was one of halves: the first a three-month trip to England and France in 1902, the second a four-month journey through Italy in 1908.<sup>1</sup> While the former has been recognized by her biographers as a crucial moment in her life and literary career, the Italian trip has received little scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> This is regrettable, for in Italy Cather not only deepened her knowledge of modern Europe, but also made direct contact with the cultural legacies of ancient Greece and Rome, which were important influences on her work.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the world of classical antiquity, specifically the ruins of the ancient city of Paestum, inspired Cather to write a poem which would become a source for a key scene in *My Antonia*.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript of the poem entitled “Paestum,” previously unacknowledged in Cather scholarship, is written in Cather’s hand and pasted into a scrapbook of memorabilia from her European travels, which is now housed in the Archives and Special Collections Department at the University of Nebraska’s Love Library. The aim of this essay is to explicate the biographical, historical, and cultural contexts of the poem, as well as its meaning and use in Cather’s most famous novel.

For an American writer of Cather’s interests and aspirations, a European Grand Tour was critically important. Her strongest literary influence at the time of her trip, Henry James, emphasized the significance of Europe to the American artist in his 1903 biography of the sculptor William Wetmore Story:

The old relation, social, personal, aesthetic, of the American world to the European . . . is as charming a subject as the student of manners, morals, personal adventures, the history of taste, the development of a society, need wish to take up, with the one drawback, in truth, of being treatable but in too many lights. The poet, the dramatist, the critic, would alike, on consideration, find it to bristle with appeals and admonitions. (5-6)

The term “Grand Tour” was coined in the mid-seventeenth century, when young men of the British gentry began to visit Europe for the specific purpose of completing their liberal educations. The itinerary included the Continent’s most important museums, monuments, ruins, and natural wonders and could take several years (Stebbins 29). By the nineteenth century, steamship and railway travel, as well as guided trips such as Cook’s tours, made the Grand Tour accessible to Americans of lesser means and more restrictive schedules. As Alice Leccese Powers asserts, Italy was the one country not to be missed: “In the nineteenth century no British or American education was complete without the ‘Grand Tour’ of the Continent. France and the Netherlands were often on the itinerary, sometimes Austria and Germany, but the prime destination was always Italy. The neoclassical movement that swept the Victorians mandated direct knowledge of that country’s cultural past” (xvi).



*The Doge’s Palace in Venice: “a place as beautiful as Sandy Point.” Cather’s postcard to her brother Roscoe.*

When Cather made her Grand Tour of Italy less than a decade into the twentieth century, she was thirty-five years old, had published a book of poetry and another of short stories, and was an editor at *McClure’s Magazine*. The trip fulfilled a long-held desire. As early as the age of fourteen, she identified Rome as “the single place or locality I would prefer to visit, above all others” (Bennett 113). Only weeks before departing, she wrote to her brother Roscoe that it seemed odd to go to the city after it had occupied a place in her imagination for so long (3/2/[08]). The trip also fulfilled a commitment from her employer S. S. McClure, who promised her a European vacation upon completion of a major



series of articles on the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. The project occupied Cather for most of 1907 and early 1908, but by April she was ready to leave and not expected to return until August (Woodress 198).

On April 9<sup>th</sup> Cather departed from New York on the S.S. *Carpathia* with Isabelle McClung, who also accompanied her on her 1902 European trip.<sup>5</sup> In an April 18<sup>th</sup> letter to Roscoe, Cather wrote that Cape St. Vincent, Portugal, had been sighted that afternoon. According to McClung's notes in the scrapbook, Easter services were observed the next day at Gibraltar, where afternoon tea was taken as well. The *Carpathia* docked at Naples on the twenty-third. Cather and McClung spent the first forty days of their Grand Tour in the vicinity of Naples and the Amalfi coast and the next twenty-six days in Rome. Cather spent the following sixteen days in Venice, but McClung had to leave after a week to attend to her ailing father in Pittsburgh.<sup>6</sup> From Venice, Cather went to Lake Como for five days. She spent the last three days of her trip in Genoa, from which she departed on July 23<sup>rd</sup>.



Naples: "all the world seems like fairy land." Cather's postcard to her sister Elsie.

Cather's postcards to her brother Roscoe and sister Elsie give insight into her activities, thoughts, and emotions in Italy. From Naples, she wrote to Elsie of the beauty of the bay, which she could see from the balcony of her hotel room, and gardens nearby (4/25/[08]). She could not imagine leaving Amalfi, she told Roscoe two weeks later, for it was delightful just to breathe there. She had never been "so content just to live" (5/8/[08]). On a postcard depicting a view of St. Peter's Basilica from the public gardens of the Villa Doria Pamphili, where she enjoyed sitting by the fountains and watching the sunlight play upon the columns, she wrote to Elsie that modern Europe was born in Rome (6/11/08). A few days later, she informed her that she had been in the Palace of the Caesars, where the rooms were taller than Red Cloud's standpipe (6/16/08). In Venice, she was in a



A "wild day" on Lake Como in 1908 is recalled 27 years later for a pivotal scene in *Lucy Gayheart*. Cather's postcard to her brother Roscoe.

joking mood; on a postcard of the Doge's Palace, she told Roscoe she had finally found a place as beautiful as Sandy Point "ever was in the days of the pride and power"<sup>7</sup> (7/10/08).

Near the end of her trip, Cather wrote Roscoe from Lake Como of a "wild day" on the water. In describing the turbulent weather, she told him, "The lake steamers are pitching like ocean liners and the wind howls in the pine trees" (7/17/[08]). Twenty-seven years later, she drew upon that memory for a pivotal scene in *Lucy Gayheart*. In the novel, the opera singer Clement Sebastian drowns at Lake Como when his boat overturns in a storm. Cather describes a scene remarkably similar to her "wild day" on the lake: "Yesterday Clement Sebastian and James Mockford [his accompanist] were drowned when their boat capsized in a sudden storm on Lake Como. . . . When the hurricane from the mountains broke down upon them, the boat was turned over immediately" (116).

In her final postcard from Italy, two days before departing for New York, Cather lamented to her sister that she would not see cypress trees for a long time and it would be difficult to leave for the crossing of the Atlantic (7/21/08).

Save for a three-day ship stopover in Naples in 1920,<sup>8</sup> Cather returned to Italy only once, when she stayed at Cortina in the Dolomite Alps and revisited Venice in August and September of 1935. Her affection for the country and its culture are, however, irrefutable. Her published work and correspondence are replete with admiring references to Italian music, literature, and visual arts.<sup>9</sup> She was reminded of the country's natural beauty by paintings of Capri and Positano by Earl Brewster, which hung in the apartment she shared with Edith Lewis at 570 Park Avenue (Sergeant 262, Marks).<sup>10</sup>

Another memento of Italy was the scrapbook containing the manuscript of "Paestum." Much about the book remains a mystery. Its forty-six gray-colored pages were unbound when it was donated to the University of Nebraska in 2001 and their

original order has not been determined. It is unclear whether it was assembled by Cather or McClung independent of each other or if it was a collaborative effort. Whether the book was assembled all at once or in stages following each of the European trips is also unknown, as is the reason why there are numerous photographs in the first section on England and France, but none in the second on Italy. Furthermore, it is not known when the book came into Cather's possession.<sup>11</sup> While Cather is not known to have made scrapbooks as an adult, she did create at least one in her youth.<sup>12</sup>

Although Paestum is not mentioned in Cather's correspondence, McClung's notes in the scrapbook indicate that they visited the site at the end of April or beginning of May.<sup>13</sup> The 1908 edition of Baedeker's *Southern Italy and Sicily*, which Cather probably used as her guidebook,<sup>14</sup> offers the following estimation of the ruins: "Those who appreciate the simple majesty of Greek architecture should endeavor, before quitting Naples, to pay a visit to the Temples at Paestum, which are, with the exception of those at Athens, the finest existing monuments of the kind" (184). A student of the classics since adolescence, Cather was deeply impressed by both Paestum and Pompeii, which she also visited.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to her former high school principal, she wrote with delight that the classical world seemed palpable, close enough to touch, and she recalled enough Latin to read Tacitus and Suetonius (Cather to Goudy).

Cather's visit to Paestum not only melded her connection with the classical world, it fired her literary imagination. The poem she composed after visiting the ruins is affixed to scrapbook page thirty-three beneath a postcard of the Temple of Athena at Paestum.<sup>16</sup> The manuscript is written in a neat hand, lines carefully arranged on the page, and does not appear to be a first draft:

"Paestum"

Among the old sea temples why should restless birds be winging  
where the yellow marshes run?

Through the columned spaces darting, raven, swallow, croaking,  
Black and barbed against the sun. singing

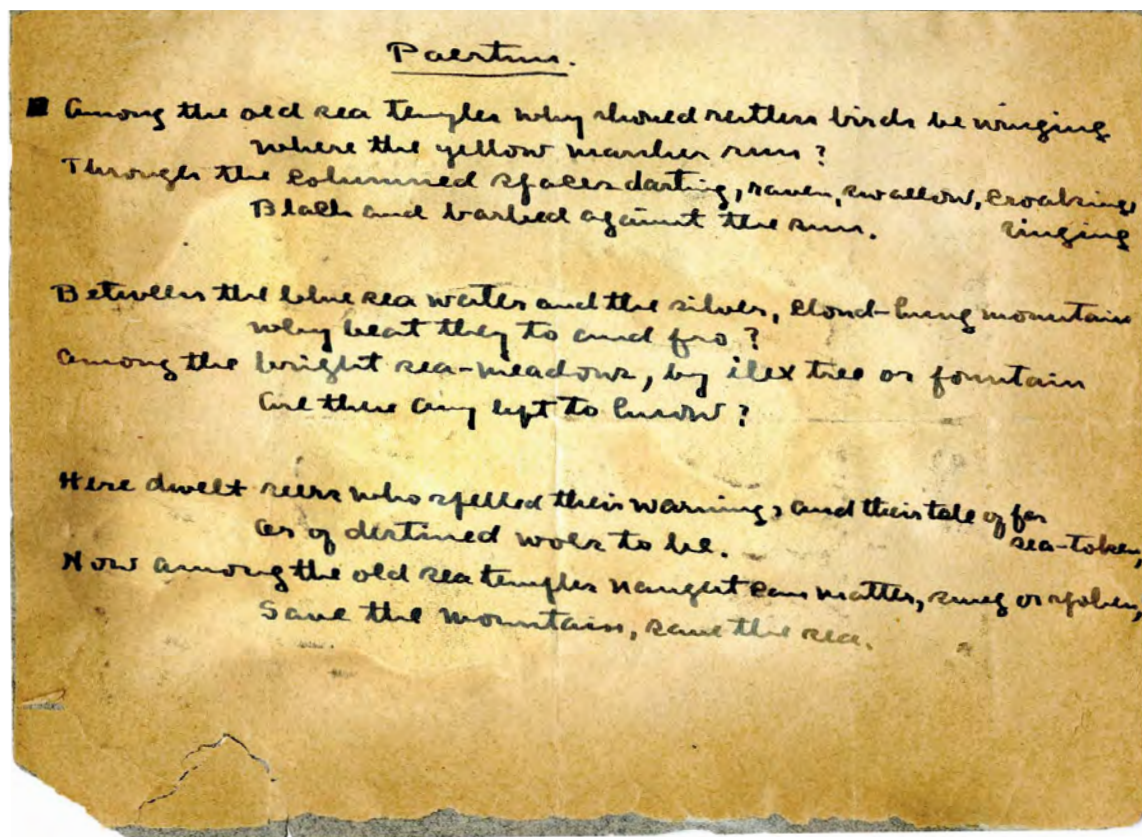
Between the blue sea water and the silver, cloud-hung mountain  
why beat they to and fro?

Among the bright sea-meadows, by ilex tree<sup>17</sup> or fountain  
are there any left to know?

Here dwelt seers who spelled their warning, and their tale of far  
or of destined woes to be. sea-token,

Now among the old sea temples naught can matter, sung or  
Save the mountain, save the sea. spoken,

"The manuscript is written in a neat hand, lines carefully arranged on the page, and does not appear to be a first draft"—Cather's poem, key elements of which would find their way into *My Ántonia*, is one of the most intriguing elements in a travel scrapbook that remains shrouded in mystery.



A brief history of Paestum may help elucidate the poem. The ancient city was founded at about 600 BC by Greeks from Sybaris. The city, then named Poseidonia (city of Neptune), flourished, due to its coastal location at the end of a land trading route from the southwest. Following the defeat of Pyrrhus, Poseidonia was claimed by the Romans, who renamed the colony Paestum in 273 BC. The city continued to prosper at the beginning of the Roman Empire, but was damaged in 79 AD by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius. As volcanic ash and silt accumulated at the mouth of the nearby Sele River, the area became a malarial swamp. By the first century AD the city's population was declining and by the late ninth century it was deserted (Pedley). Thus, the poem's "seers who spelled their warning . . . of destined woes to be" may refer to either or both the invasion of Poseidonia by the Romans or the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the ensuing malarial plague.



*This souvenir postcard of the Temple of Athena (often identified with Ceres) accompanies Cather's manuscript of "Paestum" in the travel scrapbook.*

Amidst the devastation, three of Paestum's temples remained standing: The Temple of Hera I and the Temple of Athena, dating from the sixth century BC, and the Temple of Hera II dating from the fifth century BC. The ruins were rediscovered in 1755 and publication of detailed drawings and descriptions of the three temples brought renewed attention to Paestum in the late eighteenth century. According to art historian K. Matthews Hohlstein, "Such publication played an important role in the spread of the Doric revival in Europe and America and made Paestum a popular destination for grand tourists in the later decades of the century, notwithstanding malaria, bandits, flooding, and other perils associated with journey from Naples" (Stebbins 268). He continues, "As the eighteenth century drew to a close, Paestum acquired a sublime image consonant with the rise of Romanticism. Instead of studying the rational design of the Doric temples, visitors now marveled at their immensity,

desolation, untold age, and mysterious origins" (268-269). Such is true of the descriptions of Paestum by Goethe, Percy Shelley, James Fenimore Cooper, and Sir Walter Scott, who visited the ruins in 1787, 1819, 1829, and 1832 respectively.<sup>18</sup> The ruins also held a special appeal for American landscape painters of the Hudson River School, including Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, Jasper Cropsey, and Robert Weir, who went to Paestum in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> The hallmarks of Romanticism to which Hohlstein refers are evident in their paintings of the ruins.

The circumstances of Cather's visit to Paestum were markedly different from those of the American artists who preceded her. There is no evidence of her encountering bandits along the fifty-mile route from Naples and land drainage techniques had rid the area around the ruins of malaria by 1908. However, the somber mood of her poem and its images of birds, marshes, temples, mountains, sea, and seers, emphasizing the desolation, age, and tragic history of the site, are in concert with the renderings of Paestum by the romantic writers and American painters who visited there. Classical and Renaissance literary influences are obvious in the poem's themes of memory and loss, and overtones of A. E. Housman's poetry may be discerned as well. From Ravello, Cather wrote to Sarah Orne Jewett that Housman's poem "The Olive" rang in her ears all day as she walked along the mountain-sides and through the fields nearby (Cather to Jewett). She proceeded to quote the poem from memory in her letter.<sup>20</sup>

The tragic history to which Cather's poem alludes is illustrative of Virgil's words in the *Georgics* and the epigraph to *My Antonia*, "Optima dies . . . prima fugit" ("the best days are the first to flee").<sup>21</sup> In the novel, Jim Burden's classics professor, Gaston Cleric, contracts an illness at Paestum—recalling the residents of the ancient city beset by malarial plague—that eventually causes him to move from New England to Nebraska, where he meets Burden for the first time. That pivotal moment sets the course for Burden's studies and career in law. For the setting of the scene at Paestum, Cather used her 1908 poem, recycling its images of temples, birds, marshes, and a "silver, cloud-hung mountain" (pluralized in the novel). The following is Burden's account of what Cleric, who "narrowly missed being a great poet" (252), told him of his visit to Paestum:

I shall never forget his face as it looked one night when he told me about the solitary day he spent among the sea temples at Paestum: the soft wind blowing through the roofless columns, the birds flying low over the flowering marsh grasses, the changing lights on the silver, cloud-hung mountains. He had willfully stayed the short summer night there, wrapped in his coat and rug, watching the constellations on their path down

the sky until “the bride of old Tithonus” rose out of the sea, and the mountains stood sharp in the dawn. It was there he caught the fever which held him back on the eve of his departure for Greece and of which he lay ill so long in Naples. He was still, indeed, doing penance for it. (253)

Cather may have retrieved her poetic images of Paestum from memory when composing *My Ántonia* in 1917. Given the close similarities between the poetic and fictive descriptions of the ruins, however, it is more likely that she had a copy of the poem at hand when writing the novel. She may have had either her own duplicate copy or access to the manuscript in the scrapbook. The second possibility is plausible even if the book was in McClung’s possession, for the two were together frequently during the period when the novel was composed. Having recently married Jan Hambourg, Isabelle and her new husband were, according to Woodress, “making a great effort to reconcile [Cather] to their marriage” (285). The trio attended concerts and social events in New York in early 1917 and spent three weeks together in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in late summer (Woodress 286). Borrowing from earlier works of her own was not unprecedented for Cather. As Kathleen D. Byrne and Richard C. Snyder have demonstrated, passages in the short story “A Death in the Desert,” published in 1903 closely parallel ones in Cather’s journalism about Ethelbert Nevin published five years earlier (27).

Cleric’s stay at Paestum does more than establish the cause of his illness. It also deepens the elegiac tone of *My Ántonia*. Through her description of the ruins, with imagery borrowed from her poem, Cather heeds advice William Cullen Bryant offered to Thomas Cole, when he was about to embark on his own Grand Tour. In the sonnet “To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe” (1829), Cullen writes: “Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,/ But different—everywhere the trace of men,/ Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen/ To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air./ Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight/ But keep that earlier, wilder image bright” (Bryant 219). In *My Ántonia*, Cather not only inscribes the “wilder image” of the Nebraska landscape, but also memorializes the “paths, homes,



A current view of the Temple of Athena. Photograph by Amanda K. Madigan.

graves, and ruins” of the ancient civilization at Paestum, which is the only mention of the place in her published work.<sup>22</sup>

While Cather liked the imagery of “Paestum” well enough to reuse it in *My Ántonia*, she did not see the poem appear in print, even in *McClure’s*, which published several of her works during her editorial tenure at the magazine.<sup>23</sup> So why, then, did she choose not to publish “Paestum”? Perhaps the poem did not meet her literary standards—and yet it does not stand out as an inferior example of her verse. Perhaps she preferred that it remain a private keepsake, a gift to Isabelle McClung in remembrance of their Grand Tour of Italy. Even so, Cather’s poem is not personal in content and she was keen to publish her work. Ultimately, the question about publication, like those about the creation and provenance of the scrapbook, remains open.<sup>24</sup>

On her Grand Tour of Italy, Cather encountered not only a complex, vibrant, living culture, but also a narrative of human history, the depth of which was unparalleled in her own country. Accordingly, in “Paestum” she meditates on the history of an ancient city and concludes that all things of human creation are impermanent, that in the end, only the earth abides. Or as she writes, “naught can matter, sung or spoken/Save the mountain, save the sea.” Ironically, the sole manuscript of Cather’s poem, never published nor otherwise reproduced, has survived for over a century between the leaves of a common scrapbook. The time has come for “Paestum” to be rediscovered like the ruins of the city and civilization it commemorates.

## NOTES

1. Cather’s visits to Europe subsequent to 1908 focused on ends other than visiting the most important cultural and natural sites of particular countries. In 1909, for example, she spent two months in England on a “scouting trip,” searching for writers and manuscripts for *McClure’s*, and in 1920 she spent several months in France

gathering material for *One of Ours* (Woodress 206-207, 310-311).

2. See, for example, Hermione Lee’s *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (59-61), Sharon O’Brien’s *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (246-255), and James Woodress’s *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (156-163).



3. See, for example, Mary Ruth Ryder's *Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus* and Erik Ingvar Thurin's *The Humanization of Willa Cather: Classicism in an American Classic*.

4. Although Cather published several poems on classical subjects, she drew directly from her 1908 trip to Italy for only one other, "A Silver Cup." The focal point of that poem, which was published in the revised and expanded edition of *April Twilights* in 1923, is an engraved silver goblet purchased in a Venetian second-hand shop. The names of the new owner and his or her beloved are inscribed on the cup with "Four words which mean that life is sweet together." Many years later, the owner plans to discard it in a "junk shop" in New York after removing their names. In 1925, Cather listed "A Silver Cup" among her best poems (Bohlke 179).

5. Four years after Cather was a passenger on the *Carpathia*, it became famous as the ship that came to the rescue of over 700 survivors from the *Titanic* on April 15, 1912. The ship is mentioned in Cather's short story "The Diamond Mine" (*Youth* 134).

6. McClung departed from Genoa on July 9<sup>th</sup>. According to Byrne and Snyder, "increasing neurasthenia caused the elder McClung to resign his position as judge of Common Pleas Court" in 1908 (51).

7. Sandy Point was a play town constructed by Cather and her brother Roscoe in the backyard of their childhood home in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

8. In a 24 October 1920 letter to her mother, Cather stated she would depart from Marseille the next day. She wrote that she would not be pleased about her injured foot when the ship stopped at Naples for three days. In *Seeking Life Whole: Willa Cather and the Brewsters*, Lucy Marks and David Porter establish that Cather and Edith Lewis visited Earl and Achsah Brewster in Naples during the stopover. Cather inscribed a copy of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* for the Brewsters, dating it "Naples, October 29, 1920." (96).

9. Among the many Italian artists, musicians, and writers praised in Cather's correspondence and published writings are Bellini, Da Vinci, Dante, Mascagni, Michelangelo, Puccini, Raphael, Tintoretto, and Titian. At the Metropolitan Opera, she attended performances by Caruso, Tetrizzini, and Toscanini.

10. For a discussion of the Brewster paintings Cather and Edith Lewis owned, see Marks and Porter, *Seeking Life Whole*, 90-93. An image of "Positano" is reproduced on the book jacket and Plate 1.

11. The scrapbook was bequeathed to Edith Lewis after Cather died in 1947. Following Lewis's death in 1972, it came to Cather's niece Helen Cather Southwick, who donated it to the University of Nebraska in May 2001.

12. For a discussion of Cather's childhood scrapbook, see Jennifer Bradley's "A Glimpse Inside Childhood: Willa Cather's Childhood Scrapbook," *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 46.2 (Fall 2002): 32-34.

13. The timeframe is established by a note presumably in McClung's hand on leaf 21 of the scrapbook beneath two postcards of Pompeii: "April 29 to la cava, then to Corpo de cava, and to Paestum"; and a 3 May [1908] letter to Alice Goudy from Naples, in which Cather wrote that she just returned from a week in the Apennines, a mountain range near Paestum.

14. This statement is based on the fact that the hotels at which Cather is known to have lodged were recommended in Baedeker's *Southern Italy and Sicily*; moreover, she used Baedeker's *Southern France* during her 1902 trip. The guidebook is mentioned in her article on Lavandou collected in *WC in Europe* (155).

15. In *My Antonia*, Jim Burden hangs a photograph of the "Tragic Theater" at Pompeii, given to him by Gaston Cleric, in his apartment in Lincoln (251).

16. The Temple of Athena was misidentified as the Temple of Ceres when the ruins were rediscovered. This same erroneous identification appears on the postcard.

17. The *ilex* is commonly known as a holly. It is a large, dense slow-growing evergreen shrub or tree widely distributed throughout Europe. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather describes ilex trees in the Sabine hills overlooking Rome: ". . . The vehemence of the sun suggested motion. The light was full of action and had a peculiar quality of climax—of splendid finish. . . . It bored into the ilex trees, illuminating their mahogany trunks and blurring their dark foliage. . . ." (4).

18. See Goethe's *Italian Journey* (178-180), Shelley's *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (vol. 2, 78-80), Cooper's *Gleanings in Europe: Italy* (161-165), and Scott's *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* (700-706) for their accounts of visiting Paestum.

19. According to Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., other American artists who created images of Paestum include Sanford Gifford, William S. Haseltine, John F. Kensett, Jervis McEntee, John R. Penniman, John Rollin Tilton, and M. J. Wheelock (269).

20. "The Olive" was first published in *The Outlook* 9.227 (7 June 1902): 592. It appears in the following form in his *Collected Poems*:

The olive in its orchard  
Should now be rooted sure,  
To cast abroad its branches  
And flourish and endure.

Aloft amid the trenches  
Its dressers dug and died  
The olive in its orchard  
Should prosper and abide.

Close should the fruit be clustered  
And light the leaf should wave,  
So deep the root is planted  
In the corrupting grave.



In her 10 May 1908 letter to Jewett, Cather quoted an earlier version of the poem, a manuscript of which was given to her by Housman when she visited him at Highgate in 1902.

21. Virgil wrote of Paestum in the *Georgics* (Book IV, Line 119), praising its roses (“biferique Rosaria Paesti”), which bloomed twice, once in the spring and then again in late fall.

22. I am grateful To Richard C. Harris for making the connection between Bryant’s poem, Cole’s paintings, and Cather’s work. I thank him for helping to locate several images of Paestum by American artists as well.

23. The following Cather poems were published in *McClure’s* during her tenure at the magazine from 1906-1912: “Autumn Melody,” “The Star Dial,” “The Palatine/(In the ‘Dark Ages’),” “The Swedish Mother,” and “Spanish Johnny.” “Prairie Spring” appeared in December 1912 while Cather was on leave from the magazine. Cather stories published in *McClure’s*

while she was on staff include “The Namesake,” “The Profile,” “Eleanor’s House,” “On the Gull’s Road,” and “The Bohemian Girl.” *Alexander’s Bridge* was serialized in the magazine during that period as well.

24. A less likely, but still plausible explanation is that her poem would have seemed slight when compared to a 150-line poem of the same title in *Paestum and Other Poems* by Alexander Blair Thaw in 1909. Other poems on Paestum which Cather may have read either prior to or shortly after her trip include William Aspenwall Bradley’s “Roses of Paestum,” published in *Putnam’s Magazine* in April 1910, Josephine Preston Peabody’s “Noon at Paestum,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1907, Samuel Rogers’ “Paestum,” which appeared in his *Italy, A Poem* in 1852, Henry Pickering’s “The Ruins of Paestum,” published in his *The Ruins of Paestum and Other Compositions in Verse* in 1822, and Richard Claiborne’s *Paestum: A Poem* published in 1821.

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# “The Crowning Flight of Egotism”: Willa Cather, Sarah Bernhardt, and the Cult of Celebrity

Evelyn Funda | Utah State University

## Part I: “The Divine Sarah”

In late February of 1892, the American tour of French actress Sarah Bernhardt stopped in Omaha, Nebraska, where, according to the *Omaha Daily Bee*, two thousand people crowded into the theatre to see the world’s most famous stage actress. Along with the “swells” of Nebraska’s society were five hundred people who had stood in line all day and paid \$10.00 for the last seats in the top-most gallery. While most of the audience could not understand a line of Bernhardt’s French dialogue, the *Bee* reported they were all nevertheless held “under . . . the sway” of this “human tigress” and “transcendent genius.” Written especially for the actress, *La Tosca* brought Bernhardt such success that reviewers claimed the electricity generated in her portrayal “would light up the streets of London” (Emboden 79), and by the 1890s, the writers of the day sometimes called her “the Divine Sarah.”

Among the Omaha crowd watching Bernhardt portray Tosca in Victorien Sardou’s play was a nineteen-year-old Willa Cather, there as the drama critic for Lincoln’s *Nebraska State Journal*. The effect of Bernhardt’s performance on Cather’s thinking was immediate, significant, and long-lasting. From her earliest fiction and journalistic comments of the 1890s to her 1920 short story “Coming, Aphrodite!,” Cather would thereafter use Bernhardt’s life and career to consider salient questions about artistic power and integrity.

In Cather’s first published short story “Peter,” which appeared in a short-lived Boston literary weekly *The Mahogany Tree* just three months later, she describes Bernhardt’s performance through the character of Bohemian Peter, a violinist from the orchestra pit, who admits Bernhardt’s art roused a “great hunger” in him because her face “changed so, it was never twice the same” (542). Identifying the moment of *La Tosca* when Tosca stabs and murders the ruthless villain Scarpia, Cather writes, “As Peter sat among the smoking gas jets down below the footlights with his fiddle on his knee, and looked up at her, he thought he would like to die too, if he could touch her arm once, and have her stab him so” (542). Through Peter, Cather had expressed the deeply visceral response Bernhardt could evoke in her audience.



Bernhardt as *Lady Macbeth*.

Cather’s early theatre criticism was dominated by Bernhardt; “none,” she wrote, “had power and magnetism like her” (Slote 118). Cather referred to the actress nearly fifty times in the first three years of her reviews, and when Bernhardt was again performing in the US in 1901, Cather faithfully attended the performances in Washington, D.C., on four consecutive nights (Seibel 203). She read everything she could about the icon, who became the measure by which she judged stage art. Was Eleanora Duse as passionate, she asked; was Lillian Lewis as convincing, Julia Marlowe as thrilling, or Maude Adams as grand and dignified?<sup>1</sup>

During what Cather herself identified as the “purple flurry,” “foamy-at-the-mouth” period of her early journalism, Bernhardt



inspired some of her most effusive language (Bohlke 12). Consistently associating Bernhardt's art with the Promethean power of fire and flights into the heavens, Cather noted her "fierce flame-like beauty," and claimed that she "may rise to snatch for us the blue from heaven and the fire from the sun" (Slote 126, 117). Descriptions of Bernhardt focused on the personal effects of her art, "like lightning which flashes and terrifies and is gone" (Curtin 243). Art like Bernhardt's "leaps up and strikes you between the eyes, makes you hold your breath and tremble" (Curtin 244). Her work was a "revolution . . . of joy, delight, and artistic enthusiasm" (Curtin 39), Cather said, and Bernhardt's was "a face of flame that is now all love, now all jealousy, now all hate" (Curtin 426).



Cabinet card of Bernhardt in her bat hat.

Bernhardt was able to evoke such fervent emotions in her audience, according to Cather, because she created a "convincing reality" that was not based on conventional methods (Curtin 620). In the 1890s, this notion of "convincing reality" was a hotly

debated subject. Previously, performances had been ruled by what was called the "declamatory style," the use of recognizable elements that dictated the stage representation of a monarch or villain down to the smallest details. Calling these "the most grotesque distortions imaginable," Bernhardt's biographer May Agate urged her readers to imagine the scene: "Arms fully extended, but hands above the head (imprecation!), ditto forwards (supplication!) ditto dropped to your sides (Heavens knows what!). . . . A travesty of acting . . . the most uncalled-for acrobatics in an effort to obtain an utterly false variety" (30). In an essay published in *McClure's Magazine* during Cather's tenure as editor, actress Ellen Terry also described how a well-regarded British actresses of the time slightly changed the way her Lady Macbeth carried the candle in the sleepwalking scene; although some applauded the innovation as groundbreaking, she also drew heated criticism (95-100). But naturalist performers like Bernhardt believed that "Nothing is more distasteful than to act according to a formula that is constantly repeated . . . [and] it is never by employing mannerisms that [an artist] can plunge an audience into emotion" (*Art of Theatre* 100).

Taking her cue from Bernhardt, Cather never hesitated to criticize the "stage business" of the declamatory style with all its "bewildering, illusive gestures, those beautiful but inexplicable poses" (Curtin 173). Instead she consistently held up Bernhardt's work as an epitome of "living in the character," of making "a beautiful creation . . . so dignified and delicate that one need not be ashamed to weep at it" (Curtin 820).<sup>2</sup>

### *Part II: Sarah, The "Magnificent Lunatic"*

Playwright Victorien Sardou once said of Bernhardt, "If there's anything more remarkable than watching Sarah act, it's watching her live" (qtd in Skinner xvii), and, since she was a celebrity, biographical details of her life were well known. For instance, it was widely known that the actress lived by the motto "*quand même*," meaning "despite all"—a motto that defined the way she persevered throughout difficulties with grace. The illegitimate daughter of a courtesan, Bernhardt had her own illegitimate child, whose father, a Belgian aristocrat, refused to acknowledge their son's paternity. For years, Bernhardt struggled to support herself as an actress, but when the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, she put acting aside to establish a military hospital at the Odéon Theatre in Paris—work that would earn her a medal of honor for patriotism. She cultivated friendships, and often ill-fated love affairs, with numerous artists and photographers, and she herself became proficient as a painter and sculptor. A debilitating knee injury suffered on the stage in 1905 caused her excruciating pain until 1915, when she insisted her doctor amputate her leg, even if it might mean the end of her acting career. Acting, she said, suddenly seemed insignificant when, "[a]t this moment lads of

twenty are losing their legs, and their arms meant for embraces” (qtd in Gold and Fizdale 315-316). Although Bernhardt would never walk again, she was performing just months after the surgery for the French troops near the front lines, and the following year, she was touring again in America and speaking tirelessly at Red Cross rallies to benefit war widows and orphans.

These details of Bernhardt’s unconventional life did not go unnoticed by Cather, who faithfully reported the specifics of Bernhardt’s ever-present financial woes (she insisted on being paid only in gold, Cather wrote), her personal tastes (she disdained women’s bloomers), and the details of her love affairs (Curtin 40, 821). For instance, in 1895 Cather alluded to the illegitimacy of Bernhardt’s son and discussed the claims of a woman who contended she was Bernhardt’s illegitimate daughter—an allegation Cather dismissed out of hand, saying that if it were true, Bernhardt would “not have any scruples about acknowledging her” (“The Passing Show”). She details at some length the scandal of Bernhardt’s disastrous marriage to a morphine addict more than ten years her junior. Marriage, Cather wrote, was “the only commonplace thing” Bernhardt ever did, and when Bernhardt’s husband died, Cather declared that “Living with La Grande Sarah must be like breathing pure oxygen; it is exhilarating but it kills” (“As You Like It” 5 May 1895). As much as Cather seems to have relished these lurid tales, she was troubled by how Bernhardt’s acclaim and notoriety had also made her *notorious*. Bernhardt deliberately sought fame, and it didn’t seem to matter how she found it.

Noting what she called Bernhardt’s “fondness for the bizarre” (Curtin 41), Cather often referred to her unusual house pets, a menagerie that, according to biographers, included at various times a jewel-encrusted tortoise, a monkey named Darwin, a chameleon that would ride around on her shoulder attached by a jeweled leash, a koala bear and wallaby, a python that devoured pillows, a lion that smelled up the house so badly she got rid of him but only after many loud complaints from her house guests, and a milk and champagne-fed alligator dubbed Ali Gaga, who had a penchant for climbing into Bernhardt’s bed at night, much to the surprise of her various lovers. Here was a woman who wore bat hats and kept a skeleton she named Lazarus, posed before a mirror in her bedroom. It’s no wonder that, in addition to being called “Le Grand Sarah,” she was sometimes also publicly referred to as “The Magnificent Lunatic” (Skinner xviii).

Perhaps the most famous of the bizarre Bernhardt legends—one often noted by Cather—was a pink satin-lined coffin that she kept in her bedroom. Versions of the coffin story abound. According to one report, Bernhardt’s mother had ordered it when a young, frail Sarah appeared to be breathing her last, but Sarah survived, and later, as if to suggest she could defy death itself, she had the coffin engraved with her personal motto, “despite all”



*Bernhardt posing in her coffin. The bust in the background is a self-portrait sculpture.*

(Skinner 20-21). Others claimed she studied her lines in it, while still others reported that she received her lovers there. According to Cather’s version, Bernhardt slept there every night “because . . . she acted even while she slept,” and the “only way in which she could sleep was by enacting slumber” (“As You Like It” 5 May 1895). Bernhardt herself wrote in her autobiography, *My Double Life*, that when her youngest sister, Regina, was dying from tuberculosis and was occupying Bernhardt’s own bed, she “found it quite natural” to sleep in the coffin, but when her manicurist arrived and found the actress napping in the coffin, she ran from the room shrieking, and soon all of Paris knew Bernhardt slept in a coffin (258). Afterwards, as a lark, Bernhardt had one of Paris’s leading photographers take pictures of her feigning death in it, and these he sold at a handsome profit as postcards.

In fact, Bernhardt became one of the most photographed women in the world during her time, and many of the images of Bernhardt available today come from what were known in the Victorian era as “cabinet cards”—that is, inexpensive, widely collected photographs that were distributed to the public to



reinforce Bernhardt's celebrity image. Bernhardt is said to have "pioneered the use of new technologies . . . to disseminate her image" and to have been a "brilliant self-promoter at a time when the basis of celebrity was shifting from the political figure to the theatrical performer" (Getty Museum). Although Bernhardt would complain "I am the most lied-about woman in the world!," she was often known to deliberately start rumors about herself, and she seldom made any effort to dispute lies or to reform her behavior which gave rise to them (qtd in Skinner xv). She seemed to live by the notion that the only bad publicity was no publicity at all. When critics dubbed her "Sarah Barnum," she defiantly began a series of "tent" shows in the American West, drawing as many as six thousand spectators to her performances. Next, she used the illusion of scarcity by going on a series of American "farewell" tours, eight in all from 1887-1918 (Glenn 10, 27). After one of these performances in New York, she was mobbed by the public as she left the theatre; one woman, desperate to get an autograph, realized she had no ink for her pen, so she bit into her own wrist and dipped the pen in blood (Skinner 168).



*Last scene from In the Clouds. This illustration by Georges Clairin shows Bernhardt repairing the chair. Note the monkeys and the skeleton Lazarus in the background.*

In her book about the theatrical roots of modern feminism, Susan A. Glenn has called Bernhardt a "cultural provocateur . . . who aggressively exploited . . . mass culture" and "pioneered the radical new practice of female self-advertisement" (11-12). A byproduct of what Glenn has called "The Bernhardt Industry" was the rise in power of "New Journalism," in which drama critics

"could fashion their own literary performances" by describing the spectacle of Bernhardt's life and art. "By paralleling and parodying Bernhardt's pyrotechnics and trading on her legend," Glenn writes, journalists "created dazzling spectacular, playful, excessive, and self-reflexive articles designed to secure their own fame and celebrity" (36-37).

During her work as a drama critic, Cather recognized that some of Bernhardt's efforts were merely ploys for public attention, in which Cather, as a young journalist, was complicit. Michael Schueth examines how Cather was "deeply engaged in exploring the culture of celebrity" in an age "in which anything or anybody could become a commodity," and he notes that her interest in Bernhardt shows Cather working out issues of "how the celebrity places himself—or herself—between private and public spheres" (33, 35). She complained about Bernhardt's lack of "good form" as early as 1896, writing "She surely does not need such methods of advertisement now, she has had all the honor and all the notoriety that is in the power of one poor planet to bestow. . . . There are no more worlds to conquer unless she goes to Mars or among the cannibal islands" ("The Passing Show"). Although Bernhardt's personal life was inarguably fascinating, it was her art that Cather wanted. "I would ask no greater boon of heaven," she wrote in 1894, "than to sit and watch Sarah Bernhardt [perform] night after night, but heaven preserve me from any very intimate relations with her" (Curtin 49).

### *Part III: "The Crowning Flight of Egotism"*

When Cather wrote about artists who were "on the verge of becoming a marketable product" in her 1920 story "Coming Aphrodite!," she had already used her criticism about Bernhardt to consider the question of whether a hunger for celebrity compromised the value of art (10). Written after Bernhardt's last farewell tour of America concluded in 1918, the story compartmentalizes the dual nature of Bernhardt's character in the main characters of Hedger and Bower. On the one hand, the painter Don Hedger represents what Cather admired about Bernhardt's uncompromising life and her artistic innovations. Like Bernhardt, who had exhibited her paintings and sculpture in the Paris Salon, Hedger aims to "paint what people think and feel" (49), to paint "for painters,—who haven't been born" (61). At the end of the story, an influential art dealer declares that Hedger is "the first man among the moderns," and in language reminiscent of Cather's earlier descriptions of Bernhardt, the art dealer claims that Hedger, "is decidedly an influence in art. . . . A man who is original, erratic, and who is changing all the time (72-73). Meanwhile, Eden Bower represents Cather's views of Bernhardt as an exhibitionist, the performer who seemed to believe that artistic success hinges on fame as much as real accomplishment. Eden tells Hedger that "there's only one kind of success that's real,"

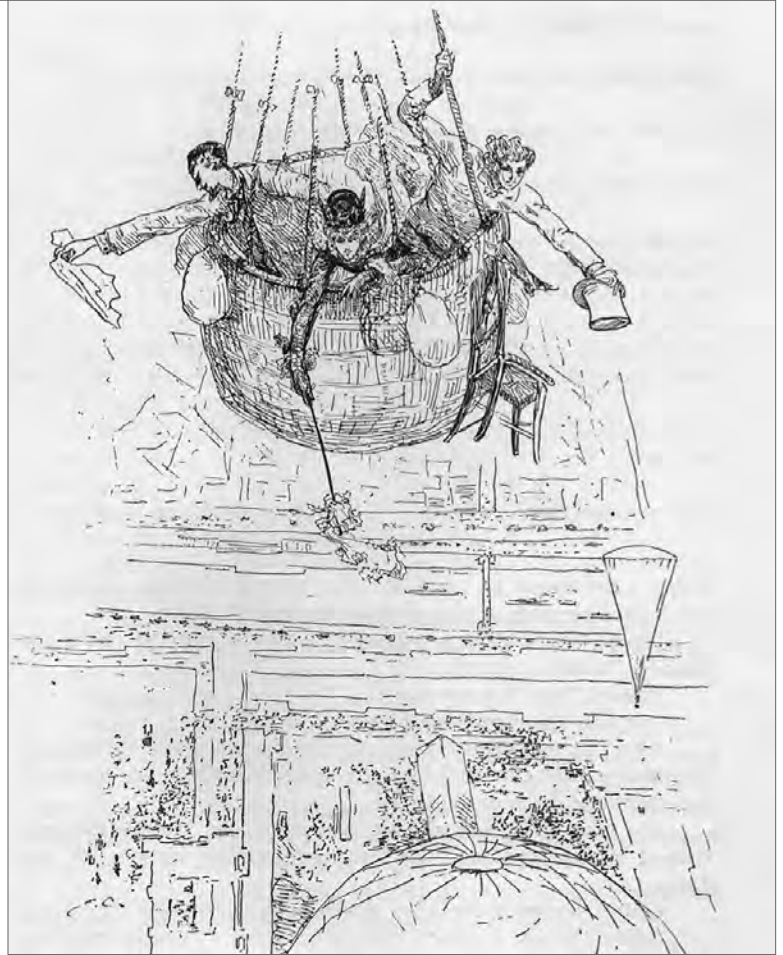
and that is to “float . . . on a tide of prosperity, [and] see [her] name in the papers” (62). Unlike Hedger’s, Eden’s notion of success is founded on the effort to “try to get a public” by any means (61).

Perhaps drawing upon the notion of “Sarah Barnum,” Cather’s scene at Coney Island, in which Eden trades places with Hedger’s model friend Molly and ascends in a balloon, demonstrates the lengths to which Eden “wanted to be admired and adored” (47). Although Eden’s “stunt” on the trapeze is billed as one in which the woman “risk[s] her life for [the public’s] entertainment,” it is, says Molly, “safe enough . . . as easy as rolling off a log, if you keep your cool” (39, 41, 45). When Hedger chides Eden afterwards for taking such a “foolish” risk, Eden dismisses his anger, orders a celebratory glass of champagne, and responds to Hedger in Bernhardt-esque manner: “It looked exciting,” coyly adding, “Didn’t I hold myself as well as she did?” (47-48).

This key scene has striking parallels to one of the Bernhardt legends, in which Sarah Bernhardt secretly arranged for a private—and untethered—balloon tour over Paris during the 1878 Exposition.<sup>3</sup> Ballooning was very new at the time, and the possibility of flight fascinated the public, including Bernhardt, who had taken rides in tethered balloons before. Despite her efforts at secrecy on this occasion, her lift-off was witnessed by much of the cheering citizenry of Paris, including her manager from the French National Theatre. Although her manager was horrified and enraged that his star performer was taking such a risk, Bernhardt felt perfectly safe in the balloon. She and portrait painter Georges Clairin shared champagne and foie-gras sandwiches on the ride over Paris before they touched down safely in the countryside.

The balloon ride was a defining moment in Bernhardt’s life. She would describe it at length in her autobiography and in a children’s book, *In the Clouds: A Chair’s Impression, as Told to Sarah Bernhardt* (written from the perspective of a chair that had been used as ballast). In July 1895, Cather reviewed the book, but she was not among the charmed. She wrote that it was “the monument of [Bernhardt’s] colossal vanity and abnormal self-conceit . . . an unconscious betrayal of the weaker side of a great nature, [that revealed] the vain woman that is under the consummate artist.” Quite simply, she concluded, it evidenced Bernhardt’s “crowning flight of egotism” (“As You Like It”).

Eden’s ascent above Coney Island is a similar “flight of egotism.” As a performer, she understands that the stunt in the tethered balloon is an illusion. As the audience gazes up at Eden, they gasp, but the danger is patently artificial. For Eden, the real thrill comes from the admiration of a captivated crowd. As her first lesson in marketing herself, this leads to Eden’s eventually becoming “a spectacular success” and a “legend,” first in Bernhardt’s hometown of Paris and then all over the world (59).



*Bernhardt waves to the crowds from an untethered balloon over Paris, as illustrated by her companion on the ride, the painter Georges Clairin.*

But, for Cather, Eden’s success is not unmitigated. The story ends with a worn-out Eden concluding that “a ‘big’ career takes its toll, even with the best of luck” (74).

“Coming, Aphrodite!” marks an important moment in the evolution of Cather’s ideas about self-promotion and fame. It is worth noting that in the decade after the publication of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, in which “Coming, Aphrodite!” appeared, Cather began to change her attitude and behavior in regard to public attention. Scholar Brent Bohlke writes that during her early career, Cather “courted and enjoyed public notice,” even “sought fame,” and the interviews she granted during this early period provide “ample evidence that Cather was a consummate creator of fiction . . . about herself” (xxi-xxii). Bohlke’s collection indicates that in 1921 she gave more interviews than at any other time in her career, but increasingly during the 1920s, that changed, and her “desire for seclusion in order to pursue her work becomes more and more pronounced” (89). A 1926 interview suggests this was because during her early career she had witnessed “the passion for the inside story of the celebrated” and had experienced firsthand “the machinery by which the great are revealed to the world and by what strategies many of them contrive to keep before the public eye” (Bohlke 92). I, for one, wonder if she was thinking at that moment of Bernhardt feigning death in her satin-lined coffin.



1. For Cather's comparisons of Bernhardt with these actresses, see Slote 115-21, 294-95 and Curtin 36-37, 426, 433-36, and 814-21.

2. This description, from a 1901 review of Bernhardt playing Marguerite in *La Dames aux Camélias*, both echoes Bernhardt's own artistic statement and the scene in *My Antonia* where Jim Burden "wept unrestrainedly" (277) at a performance of *Camille*, the English version of the same play. Cather also

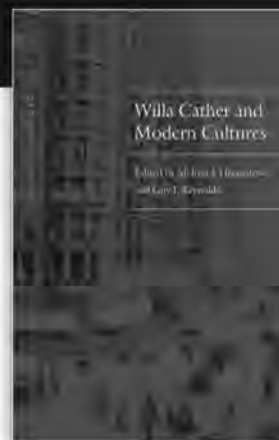
paid tribute to Bernhardt in *My Mortal Enemy*, where Nellie and Oswald go to see Bernhardt playing the title role in *Hamlet*, a role that both sparked controversy and won Bernhardt praise.

3. Recently, scholar Isabella Caruso also recognized this possible connection between Bernhardt's flight and "Coming, Aphrodite!" in her conference paper titled "Bernhardt vs. Duse: Passion and Reason in Cather's Fiction" (13th International Willa Cather Seminar, Smith College, June 22, 2011).

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# Rin Tin Tin Comes to Red Cloud

“Donovan was here for dinner last night and we went to see my crush, Rin Tin Tin.”

— Willa Cather in a February 1927 letter to her niece Mary Virginia Auld  
(Donovan may be Albert Donovan, one of Cather's high school students in Pittsburgh.)

Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University



Such luminaries as Eva Marie Saint, E. G. Marshall, Julie Harris, and Dick Cavett have graced Cather Spring Conferences through the years. This year, the legendary Rin Tin Tin joined the list of entertainment superstars who have come to Red Cloud to help conference-goers learn more about the life and literature of Willa Cather.

Our guest Rinty (as he is known to his many fans) is an eleventh-generation direct descendent of the original canine movie star, who was born in France in 1918 in the final weeks of World War I. He was found and brought to America at war's end by an American serviceman named Lee Duncan, who trained him for what would become a stellar and lucrative movie career. By the mid-1920s Rin Tin Tin was an international celebrity and the main source of revenue for his studio, Warner Brothers. After the first Rinty's death in 1932, successor Rintys continued to star in movies, radio and television for decades. The Rin Tin Tin story is fresh again this year thanks to the entertaining new “biography,” *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend*, by Susan Orlean.

In addition to public appearances, the current generation of Rin Tin Tins work as service dogs and as National Ambassadors for the American Humane Association, a role that has meant recent appearances with Whoopi Goldberg and Betty White. In Red Cloud, Rinty performed on the Opera House stage with his trainer Kathy Carlton, but it was the gracious way he submitted to photographs and petting that most endeared him to his frankly

“Oh Mabel, we rode from Lamy to Gallup on the same train with Rin Tin Tin, and had the pleasure of meeting him during the half-hour at Albuquerque. I never was so excited about any celebrity before!”

— Willa Cather in a May 1926 letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan  
Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

adoring audience. As part of the Cather Foundation's outreach efforts, Rin Tin Tin also entertained students at Lincoln Elementary School in Red Cloud and residents of the Heritage of Red Cloud care facility. The excerpts from Cather's letters included on this page reveal her personal warmth and sense of fun — and her great taste in movie stars (ignoring for the moment her conflicted attitudes about the movie business). They also show why Rin Tin Tin was a natural choice for this year's conference theme, “Willa Cather and Her Popular Culture.”

## Rin Tin Tin's “Peanutt Butter Cookies”

*Rinty's human shared this recipe for one of his favorite treats.*

¼ cup peanut butter  
1 cup water  
1 tablespoon vegetable oil  
2¼ cups whole wheat flour  
1 cup oatmeal

Preheat oven to 375°. Combine peanut butter, oil and water. Gradually add flour, then oatmeal. On a lightly floured surface, roll dough out to ¼-inch thickness, then cut out using a small round cookie cutter (about the size of a half-dollar coin). Transfer cookies to greased cookie sheets or baking stones. Bake at 375° for 35 minutes, or until set and lightly browned. Place on rack to cool, then store in airtight glass container. Makes about 2½ dozen treats.

— Kathy Carlton

*Photograph by Barb Kudrna. More information about the Rin Tin Tin breeding program can be found at [www.rintintin.com](http://www.rintintin.com). Rin Tin Tin is a registered trademark owned by Daphne Hereford, who co-sponsored his appearance.*



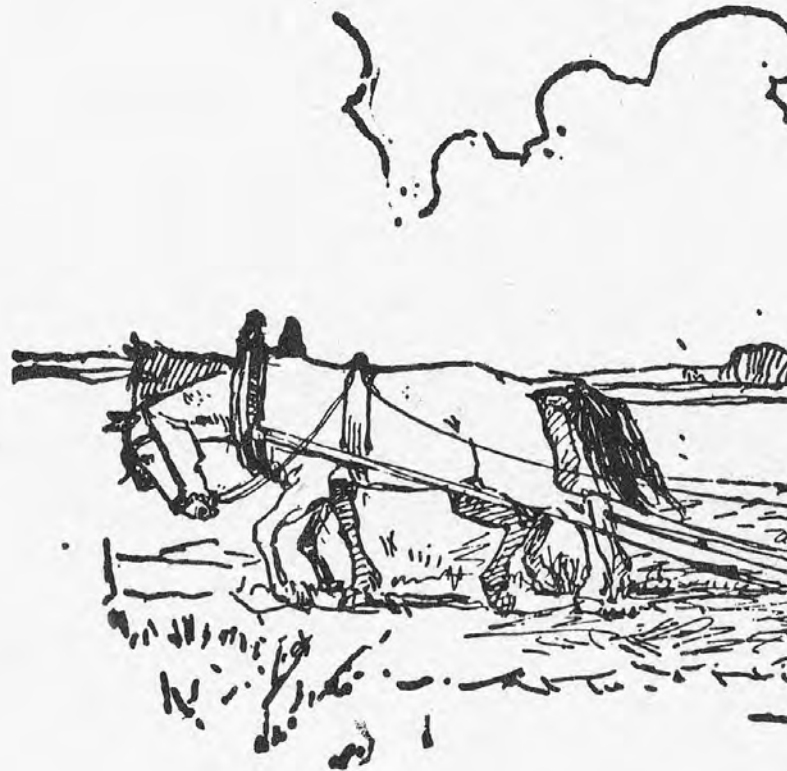
# Remembering Loretta Wasserman

Ann Romines

Loretta Wasserman, an active member of the community of Cather scholars and readers for many years, died in August, 2011. Loretta was born in 1924 and grew up on a farm in northwestern Minnesota, a place she wryly described as “Garrison Keillor country.” After receiving her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Minnesota, she taught at several Chicago junior colleges in the 1950s and 1960s, and was Professor of English at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, from 1966 until her retirement in 1991. Late in her career, Loretta developed a special interest in Willa Cather and, as her son Adam reports, “deeply enjoyed her engagement with fellow scholars and Cather enthusiasts.” Many of us fondly remember her thoughtful, witty company and her incisive papers at Cather Seminars and conferences. Her 1991 Twayne book, *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction*, was an important contribution to Cather scholarship, as were several groundbreaking essays, most of which appeared in *Cather Studies* and the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*. Cather scholar Ann Moseley says, “I have found especially helpful her work on Cather and Henri Bergson, and I can’t think of anyone who provided any significant discussion of this connection before her.” And I especially remember her original essays on Cather’s “Semitism” and on the links between *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and *Gone with the Wind*.

After their retirement, Loretta and her husband Irving (a philosophy professor who accompanied her to several Cather events) moved to Annapolis, Maryland, where she was active in several literary groups and charitable organizations and continued to collect (for the *Newsletter & Review*) surprising and often amusing references to Cather in popular culture, ranging from advertising to words of a poet laureate. In 2006, Loretta and Irving moved to Collington, a retirement home near Washington, D.C. There Loretta enjoyed a poetry club and wrote many sketches of rural Minnesota life for an autobiography class. (She shared a few of these sketches with me, and they were wonderful reading, both moving and hilarious, with a characteristic Norwegian-tinged taciturnity.) Her life ended at Collington, and Irving also died there, a few days later. Their two children, Adam and Jessica, have asked that gifts in memory of Loretta be made to the Willa Cather Foundation.

Cather scholar John Murphy, a longtime friend, characterized Loretta’s contributions: “The Cather community will miss her graciousness and kindness,” as well as “her fine insights into Cather’s fiction and her combination of intelligence and common sense. Loretta taught and wrote about this fiction out of love, one felt, not for self promotion. She was a lady.” Ann Moseley adds, “Loretta was a kind and gentle person—somewhat shy but passionate about Cather and fiercely intelligent.” And I will add that it was Loretta who gave me my first introduction to the Cather community. I met her on the plane, on the way to my first Cather Seminar, and somewhat shy and puzzled. Loretta took me under her wing, drew me out, introduced me to everyone, and became a friend for life. When she and Irv moved to their last retirement home, she gave me her library of Cather books and her treasured signed photograph of Cather. They have become very special treasures to me, and I hope to pass them on someday, in memory of the generous, welcoming spirit and the enduring scholarship that Loretta Wasserman has bequeathed to the Cather community.



# Joan Crane, Bibliographer

Kari Ronning



Joan St. Clair Crane, best known to the Cather world as author of *the* bibliography of Willa Cather, died May 29, 2011, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Just as children assume that their elementary school teachers live only in the classroom, on some level we might expect a bibliographer to exist only in a library, although as conscious adults we know that isn't true. Miss Crane's life was more varied, and a brief review of it may make Cather readers more conscious of how fortunate we were to have a scholar of such a background turn her attention to Cather.

Joan Crane was born in 1927 and spent much of her childhood at Pearl Harbor, where her father was stationed as a naval officer, and then in Haiti, Panama, and northern California. She attended Stanford University and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. While still an undergraduate, she began working in San Francisco's rare book shops, eventually becoming a cataloguer of antiquarian books at the Parke-Bernet Galleries (now Sotheby's) in New York. From

there she became a bibliographical cataloguer for the private library of Paul Mellon prior to its transfer to Yale University, where it became the centerpiece of the Yale Center for British Art. After that she became bibliographer of rare books at Stanford, and then, in 1969, at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. In 1975 she became Curator of American Literature Collections, a post she held until her retirement in 1992.

In the mid 1970s, Cather scholars and editors Bernice Slotte and Virginia Faulkner were looking for someone to construct a bibliography of Cather for the University of Nebraska Press. The great bibliographer Fredson Bowers recommended Miss Crane. With help from the Willa Cather Foundation and the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the resources of eminent Cather collectors such as Frederick B. Adams and Clifton Waller Barrett, the work was done, as Crane said, in a mere four years. In addition to her work on Cather, Crane also made bibliographies of the work of Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Carl Sandberg, and Guy Davenport.

Crane's bibliography has been absolutely indispensable to the work of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. It identifies which texts to begin with: the first editions, the revised editions, the magazine versions, the British and other foreign editions, and pointed toward revisions in other printings. Although collation of variants is not, strictly speaking, the job of an analytic bibliographer, Crane took this extra step in cases of such significantly revised texts as the first two editions of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Crane herself was always helpful when called upon by the editors; she will be missed, but her work will continue as the foundation of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition.



Illustration by W. T. Benda for *My Ántonia*, 1918.



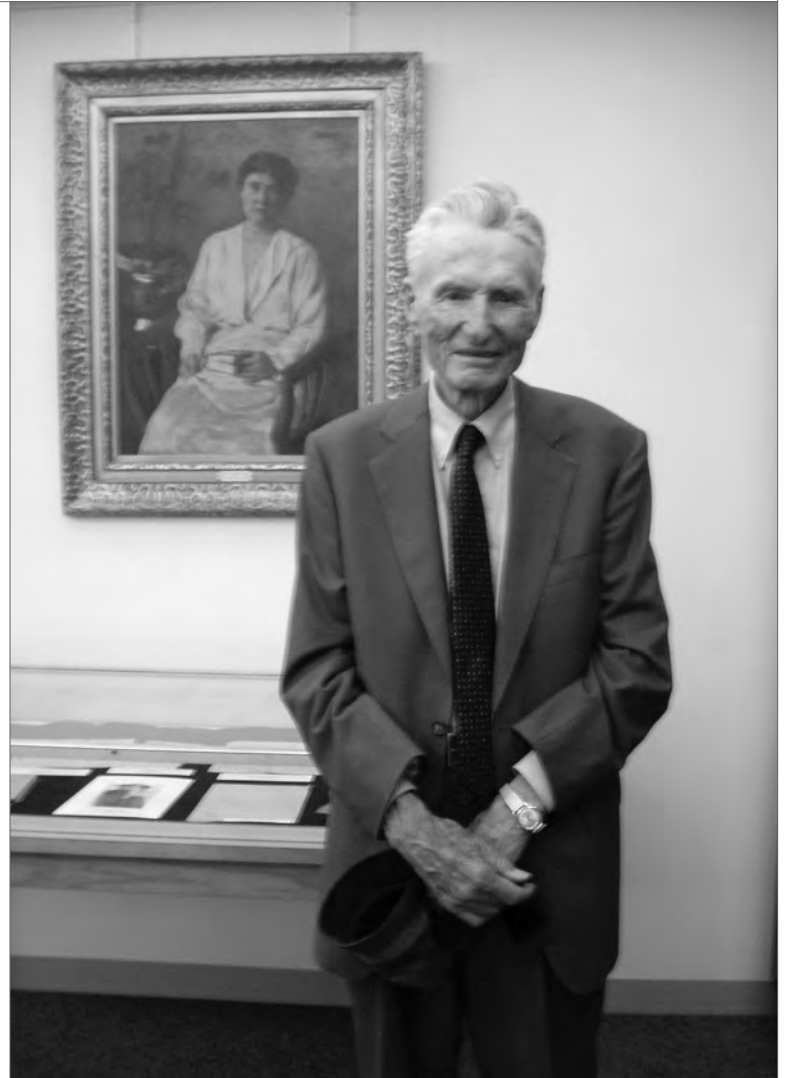
# Remembering Charles E. Cather

Ann Romines

Like many other Cather scholars, for many years I “knew” Charles E. Cather only as a distant, forbidding presence who made final decisions about permissions to publish Cather’s works. I first met Willa Cather’s nephew Charles at the White House on a fall morning in 2002, when Laura Bush had invited a group of Cather family members and scholars to a breakfast celebrating the work of Cather, Edna Ferber, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. When I saw him from a distance, bending courteously to take the hand of Mrs. Bush, I was shocked. At the time I was researching Willa Cather’s family history and spending hours poring over dim family photographs. This tall, slender man with the shock of white hair and the quiet, courtly manner might have stepped out of one of those photographs. He was the very image of his namesake and grandfather, Charles Cather, the father of Willa.

When we chatted on the sidewalk after the breakfast, I learned that his Aunts Willa and Elsie had urged him to read his grandfather’s nineteenth-century history of the Cather family’s home county in Virginia—Frederick County—but he never had. Nevertheless, he told me, Willa Cather’s Virginia novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, set in the family homeplace, was one of his favorites, and that day he intended to hire a cab to drive him to Frederick County, so he could see the Cather house where Willa Cather spent her first nine years, Willow Shade. I was alarmed: Willow Shade was almost a hundred miles away, and not easy to locate. A ride there in a D.C. cab would be risky and hugely expensive. Impulsively, I offered, “Mr. Cather, let me drive you there instead.” To my surprise, he accepted. We collected my friend Sue Rosowski (the legendary Cather scholar), piled into my small, untidy car, and were on our way to a memorable afternoon in Willa Cather’s Virginia.

Our travel time was limited, since Sue had a late afternoon plane to catch, so we planned to pick up carry-out sandwiches and lunch in the car. But the reticent Mr. Cather demurred at every possible stop. Finally he admitted that the dapper suit he was wearing was brand new—especially purchased for the White House outing—and he was afraid of getting spots on it from a drippy sandwich. So we made a quick stop at a Winchester restaurant and ate our sandwiches at a table, with plenty of napkins. Then we followed the old Northwestern Turnpike out toward Gore, and the 20-mile-long Great North Mountain



Charles Cather in Lincoln, Nebraska, 2005. Photograph by Stefanie Herron.

loomed up before us. Our first stop, just before crossing Back Creek, was Willow Shade, the substantial three-story brick house built in 1851 by William Cather—Willa’s grandfather and Charles Cather’s great-grandfather—the childhood home that Willa Cather described so vividly in the epilogue of *Sapphira*. No one was home, but Mr. Cather climbed the steep entry steps and asked me to photograph him there. Then we drove to other sites in Gore (Back Creek Valley, it was called, at the time when Willa’s family lived there) that figure in *Sapphira* and in Cather family history: Grandmother Rachel Boak’s house, where Willa was born; Hebron Baptist Church, which Willa attended with her family as a child; the Mill House, built in 1742 by Willa’s great-great grandfather Jeremiah Smith and then purchased in 1836 by Jacob and Ruhamah Seibert, Willa’s maternal great-

grandparents, who ran a mill there and became the models for Sapphira and her husband. All these spots were familiar to Mr. Cather, from his readings of *Sapphira* and from family stories he had heard as a boy. Seeing them, he began to unbend and to show his pleasure in this unexpected “homecoming.”

As we turned back toward Washington, to drop Sue at the airport and to find Mr. Cather’s hotel (not easy, since he had forgotten its name), he began to tell us some of his memories of his “Aunt Willie.” He remembered a childhood Christmas visit to his Cather grandparents’ home in Red Cloud (the Cather Second Home, now a Cather Foundation property), when Aunt Willa displayed a crèche from France. Little Charles was distressed that the animals in the manger scene did not include a cow, and he purchased one at the dime store for his aunt. According to him, this incident was a source for the episode in *Shadows on the Rock* in which little Jacques contributes his treasured toy beaver to a crèche from France. That novel had special significance for Charles, and one of the treasured objects he inherited from his aunt was the French crèche. He also recalled showing off for her as he performed new feats on his sled on the snowy Red Cloud streets. And he remembered another occasion, sitting with his father and Aunt Willa in the Cather house, when he was allowed to wind up the Victrola and choose records. When one of the records began to play, Aunt Willa burst into tears and ran up the back stairs. The song was “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” and it had been the favorite song of her Virginian father. As we drove through the rolling Virginia countryside that the elder Charles Cather had loved, that story seemed especially poignant.

During the next few years, before his final illness made it impossible for him to travel and to handle his business affairs, Mr. Cather became a more accessible presence for the Cather community (although still a stern arbiter of permissions). He came to Red Cloud in 2004 for the memorial service of his sister, Helen Cather Southwick—his first visit since the deaths of his parents, decades before. And he returned for spring conferences and an International Seminar, always staying in the Cather Second Home, the grandparents’ residence that he remembered fondly from childhood visits. Betty Kort, then Executive Director of the Foundation, remembers him vividly as a rather solitary and lonely man whose business interests seemed to provide the excitement of his life—especially his oil wells in California and Kansas. He often consulted Betty about permission decisions, and she found him deeply protective of his aunt’s personal and professional reputation.

Upon Charles Cather’s death in 2011, his collection of his aunt’s papers and related materials went to the University of

Nebraska Foundation; the collection was enticingly described by Andrew Jewell in the previous issue of the *Newsletter & Review*. In this issue, we are delighted to publish one of the many treasures of that collection: the two previously unknown fragments of the “Avignon story” that Cather was working on at the end of her life. The collection also includes cards and letters from Willa to Charles, carefully preserved. For example, this 1945 letter of advice:

My dear Charles:

I was so glad to hear from you, and to know that you are comfortably situated [presumably in a school?] and think well of the climate. Remember, that you can not trifle with mathematics. The old proverb was, “In mathematics as in war, leave nothing unconquered behind.” If you do not understand a point, hire a coach and peg away with him until you get it. You are not naturally mathematical, any more than I am. . . .

Mathematics are serious business with you now, Charles. When you do not understand a point perfectly, you must find a good coach who will pound it into you. . . . a faithful coach can make it clear to you if you give him enough time and money, and you must not be stingy of either.

You can’t make many members of our family understand this, because very few of them ever wanted desperately to do a difficult thing and struggle desperately to achieve it. Not everybody is built that way. If you are, this is your chance to prove it.

Blanchard has been the big name in the Notre Dame and Pennsylvania games, I notice.

With much love to you and every confidence in you,  
Your Aunt Willie

This affectionate letter, with its stern advice and challenge—and a reference to a shared interest in the football news—demonstrates Willa Cather’s love and concern for her young nephew. Charles Cather’s meticulously preserved gift shows that that love and concern were returned by him, throughout his long life.

*Willa Cather’s 1945 letter to Charles Cather is in the Charles E. Cather Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries. The complete guide to the collection can be found at <http://libxml1a.unl.edu/cocoon/archives/catherc.ms350.unl.html>.*



# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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## **The Willa Cather Foundation** **Established 1955 by Mildred Bennett**

Leslie Levy, Executive Director

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“I never was so excited about any celebrity before!”

— Willa Cather, 1926



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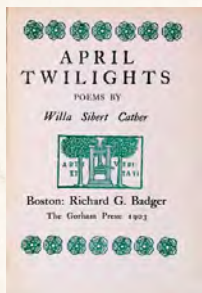
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*Call for Papers and Invitation to Participate*

## **Willa Cather, Poet: Making Herself Born**

Willa Cather Spring Conference and Scholarly Symposium  
Red Cloud, Nebraska  
May 31 - June 2, 2012



The 2012 conference and symposium will focus on Cather the poet, on poetry, and on today's Great Plains poets. Cather's readers have long noted her presentation of herself as a prairie poet with "Prairie Spring" at the beginning of her "real" first novel, *O Pioneers!*, yet her actual first book, *April Twilights* (1903), has received

much less critical attention. Similarly, the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of the *Poems*, now in preparation, will be among the last volumes published in that series.

The 2012 Spring Conference will be a lively celebration of Great Plains poets and poetry with readings and performances, discussions, and a "Passing Show" panel devoted to Cather as a writer who began as a poet and then established herself

as a writer of prose both luminous and poetic. The one-day symposium preceding the conference will focus on Cather as an engaged fin de siècle poet-aesthete intent on making her mark in literature. Possible paper topics include:

- Cather and 19th Century Poetry and Poetics
- Periodical Publication, the Making of *April Twilights*
- Cather, Poetry, and Pittsburgh
- Cather and Housman or Other Comparisons
- Cather's Poetry and *McClure's Magazine*
- *April Twilights* as a Richard G. Badger Volume
- Revising *April Twilights* into *April Twilights and Other Poems* (1923)
- Cather and the Poetic Throughout the Fiction



Proposals, inquiries, and expressions of interest should be sent by February 15th 2012 to:

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A happy holiday season to all  
our readers and supporters and friends

and then the selfless ~~dog-beast~~ <sup>creature</sup>, still exhausted  
after rescuing the kind old gentleman and his  
disoriented ~~man~~ beasts, proceeded to act on his  
kindest and purest instincts: he recovered the  
sundry packages from where they had fallen in  
the snow, returning them one-by-one ~~carefully~~  
to the sleigh. Then, deftly ~~placing~~ securing  
himself in harness, he and the trusting  
reindeer--and the old man, eyes brimming  
with grateful tears--flew off into the  
December  
~~wintery~~ night.



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