

# Willa Cather

## Newsletter & Review



Special Edition 2007

Volume LI, No. 1 (Spring)

## Breaking the Shackles: A Special Issue of Six Cather Essays

### Preface

In a recent (8 January 2007) *New Yorker* essay ("Die Weltliteratur"), Czech-born novelist and essayist Milan Kundera complains that literary study, unlike musical, is almost universally confined to *the small context*, the history of its particular nation, rather than to *the large context* (his italics), "the supranational history of its art" (29). He distinguishes the provincialism of larger and smaller nations: in the larger, it stems from arrogant indifference because the national literature is sufficiently rich; in the smaller, a sense of inferiority because *the large context* seems "alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible. . . . To set his gaze beyond the boundary of the homeland, to join his colleagues in the supranational territory of art, [the writer] is considered pretentious, disdainful of his own people" (30). Kundera concludes this part of his argument for *Weltliteratur* with a statement on small-nation provincialism that has, I think, some pertinence for Cather studies: "A nation's possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism* that reduces the entire meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland" (31).

*The small context* has been reflected in too many approaches to Cather's work, ranging from focus on local Nebraska prototypes for Cather characters and whether Cather had verboten feelings for some female companion, to suspicion of prejudices against Hispanics or Jews, or arguments that Cather outdid Fitzgerald or Faulkner at the fiction game. Yet, the art and the wisdom Cather offers to *Weltliteratur* should be our principal concern, and our *small context* preoccupations need to connect to *large context* ones in order to be contributive.

As an artist, Cather always had *the large context* in mind, even when she wrote about Nebraska, as Mary R. Ryder demonstrates in her paper from the 2006 Cather Spring



Willa Cather in the Luxembourg Gardens, 1920, Philip L. and Helen Southwick Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Archives and Special Collections.

Conference Symposium held in Red Cloud last June. Ryder explores the implications for reading *O Pioneers!* of the epigraph Cather selected from Adam Mickiewicz's Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz*. Similarly, in a symposium presentation on Classical allusions in *The Professor's House*, Theresa Levy and Sean Lake claim that even in her treatment of the Anasazi culture in the Southwest, Cather sought *the larger context* of ancient European and Near Eastern cultures. Catherine Morley's symposium contribution is a stimulating call to expand Cather studies from small national or provincial concerns in order to consider a writer "profoundly influenced by the great European tradition" as a modernist sharing company with Joyce, Pound, and Eliot.

The three papers on *Shadows on the Rock*, the novel featured in the 2006 Passing Show panel, also call for and/or explore *the larger context*. My own keynote claims that Cather responded to developments before and between the two world wars by creating a refuge out of the historical past from which to ponder cultural processes and life's meaning. The emergence of a new people from an old is

Robert Thacker's subject, as he demonstrates that Cather did her homework to acquire historical credentials but that some of her critics have not. Ann Moseley contextualizes *Shadows* and Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, placing Cather's novel within "the great European tradition" of Rabelais.

On the Eve of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Cather Seminar, the first to be held in Europe, it is our hope these efforts will be contributive, that they will help break the shackles continuing to reduce the recognition of Cather's contribution to *Weltliteratur*.

John J. Murphy  
Santa Fe, April 2007

## In Memory of Marge Van Meter



The Cather Foundation is pleased to dedicate this special edition of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* to Marcella "Marge" Van Meter, a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors for forty-one years. During her tenure, she seldom missed a board meeting and maintained a keen interest in the programming and development of the organization. She generously contributed both time and

resources, helping in many ways to make the Cather Foundation what it is today.

Like most Cather Foundation Board Members, Marge collected a variety of materials related to the Foundation. Recently the Cather Center received a package of notes, letters, and news clippings Marge had gathered, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s. The letters, especially, reveal the strong personal interest Marge was taking in the progress of the Foundation and indicate the important role Cather Foundation founder Mildred Bennett was assigning to Marge. It is obvious that Marge was looking over drafts of letters Mildred was sending and suggesting changes and providing other kinds of advice to Mildred. Marge was also writing letters and personal invitations to important individuals to make certain they would attend conferences and programs. She was conferring with Bernice Slote about an upcoming concert at a Spring Conference, writing thank you notes to individuals who helped institute the Willa Cather Commemorative Stamp, and the list goes on. A sampling of lines from some of the letters reveals Marge's engagement with the activities of the Foundation:

July 1971—Marge receives a letter from Frank Woods: Mr. Woods notes his distress that Mildred Bennett has undergone major surgery and wishes her well in her recovery. He ends by saying, "There is no urgency for a progress report on the Episcopal Church . . ."

February 1973—Mildred writes: "The government has tentatively changed the stamp date to Aug. 6. They are having trouble with the engraving or something. Anyhow, if your vacation is all set for May, you can do the addressing in May and we will let someone else pick up the extras that come in after that." Later there are indications that Marge is writing thank you notes, probably to the same addresses.

August 1974—Mildred reports: "The cataloging is going on fine. The girls are in the Cather house now looking through every drawer and writing down everything that's there. Of course the cards will have to be typed later."

September 1974—Mildred writes to Marge: "Glad you are saving your Opera House [Fremont]. Wish the one here would be restored, but I doubt it will ever be. . . . It would cost a lot of money."

It is obvious that Mildred and Marge were good friends on many levels:

## Breaking the Shackles: A Special Issue of Six Cather Essays

### I Beyond the Prairie:

"Escaping the Prairie and Approaching Quebec"  
—John J. Murphy . . . 3

"Voice of the Prairies? Willa Cather and the  
Modernist Scene"  
—Catherine Morley . . . 7

### II Historical Contexts:

"'A Kind of French Culture': 'Canada,' and the Quebecois"  
—Robert Thacker . . . 11

"Preserving and Commodifying the Past: Allusions  
to the Classical World in *The Professor's House*"  
—Theresa Levy and Sean Lake . . . 15

### III Literary Antecedents:

"Sanctuary and Transformation: Hugo's *The Hunchback of  
Notre-Dame* and Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*"  
—Ann Moseley . . . 21

"Cather's Nod to Mickiewicz: *Pan Tadeusz, O Pioneers!*,  
and the New World Epic"  
—Mary R. Ryder . . . 25

### *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*

#### *The Willa Cather Society*

Special Edition 2007

Volume LI, No. 1

ISSN 0197-663X

Telephone (402)746-2653/Toll Free (866)-731-7304

Facsimile (402)746-2652

[www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) or [wcpm@gpcom.net](mailto:wcpm@gpcom.net)

Copyright ©2007 by the

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial &

Educational Foundation

413 North Webster Street

Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

July 1974—Mildred laments: "I have heard that peaches will be \$15.00 a bushel. —so it's good you have some things in the freezer. So far I haven't done a thing. Usually I have corn up by this time."

August, 1974—Mildred ends a letter: "I can smell my beets a cooking so better go look at them."

During her eighty-six years, Marge led an active and productive life. Marge Duran was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1920, enlisted in the U.S. Navy, and was a veteran of World War II. Following military service, she married William D. Van Meter in San Francisco and moved to Nebraska, where she worked for the Federal Government for over forty years. She was named Midland Woman of the Year at Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, in 2003. She was also a member of the Fremont Art Association.

The Cather Foundation extends thanks to Marge's family for agreeing to use memorial funds to sponsor this special issue of the *Newsletter and Review*, devoted to the 2006 Symposium held at the Cather Foundation historic site in Red Cloud. Marge would have appreciated such a project.

# Escaping the Prairie and Approaching Quebec

John J. Murphy

Emeritus, Brigham Young University

## Spring Conference 2006

This morning I will touch upon several general issues about the Cather enterprise most of us work at and also consider specific issues about *Shadows on the Rock*, the seventy-five-year old novel featured at this Spring Conference. I will include my own discovery of *Shadows*, its reception by certain readers, and the neglect of Cather as a writer of broad cultural themes. I will suggest some solutions to this neglect, ways in which we can connect the provincial Cather to this other Cather. Many here will disagree with my assessments and conclusions, but such are the risks an older scholar can take.

I first read Cather in 1950—the book was *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which gave me a shimmering picture of the mesa and desert country of the Southwest where I now live, and it offered a rare opportunity for a student in a Catholic high school on Long Island to read about Catholic history and about other than the Anglo types that dominated most of the canonical works I studied. A year later, during a trip with some devout relatives to the Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré shrine in Quebec, I, like Cather twenty-three years earlier, “accidentally” discovered Quebec City and began my love affair with it. I discovered *Shadows* about a month later, while looking for summer reading in my town library. Approaching the Cs, I noticed a shelf of Cather and thought I’d try something else by her, since I’d liked the *Archbishop* so much. I saw the word *Rock* in a title and thought “could it be?” – and it *was* about Quebec. There, on the first page stood the grey rock over the St. Lawrence, the fortifications and the church spires. Here was another component of *my* history and of the culture of that other nation, Catholic not Protestant, that lost the continent but managed to survive somehow in a province with a bitter climate and on the edge of those Anglo aliens who stayed loyal to Britain and those who broke away to develop what certain of our leaders mistakenly refer to as “America.”

The last time *Shadows* was featured at Spring Conference was in 1979, because Mildred Bennett thought she had secured a French scholar (a friend of hers) to give the banquet address. But he cancelled shortly before the event, so they got me. It was my first Cather Spring Conference. During lunch after “The Passing Show,” an elderly and rather disgruntled farm lady approached me to question why Cather wasted her time on these distant French people and put so much of the French language in the text. Certainly, this was not the average conference-goer; however, many that year (and, unfortunately, many since—some of them academic and not casual readers) were (and are) turned



The Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City. Cather and Edith Lewis stayed at the Frontenac during their “discovery” of Quebec and on subsequent visits. Photo by J. Murphy.

off by Noël Chabanel (the Jesuit martyr) and by Jeanne Le Ber (the hermit contemplative), never having come upon their likes in a novel or in any other kind of book—or in life. What most Spring Conference goers have preferred is the Cather we’ve reduced to provincial status, who helps us romance farming the prairie, sentimentalize the one-room school (preferably red), and gloat over the malicious backbiting of the small town on the edge of oblivion where there isn’t much else to do. Coming to

Red Cloud, getting together with distant friends, and reminiscing on childhood frequently obscure the realities of Cather’s fiction that might help us approach her in more fruitful if less comfortable ways.

We avoid, during these spring celebrations in Red Cloud, Cather’s argument with America. In September 2002, at First Lady Laura Bush’s celebration of Cather (and two lesser writers with whom she was grouped, Edna Ferber and Laura Ingalls Wilder), the passages selected for reading were all celebratory ones, the kind we declaim annually here that help us feel good about America. Conspicuously absent were Jim Laird’s condemnation of Sand City in “The Sculptor’s Funeral” as a “dung heap” (*Collected* 203) and “place of bitter waters” (210), Jim Burden’s condemnation of Black Hawk in *My Ántonia* as a collection of “flimsy shelters” full of jealousy and envy and unhappiness, a place cringing under the “tyranny” of gossip where life is “made up of evasions and negations” and “every natural appetite . . . bridled by caution” (212), and Niel Herbert’s lament in *A Lost Lady* about the passing of the Old West from great-hearted dreamers to “shrewd young men, trained to petty economies,” who “had never dared anything, never risked anything” (102). Niel was “in a fever of impatience to be gone . . . forever, and was making the final break with everything that had been dear to him in his boyhood” (160). Sitting in the East Room and listening to Laura Bush confuse Cather’s celebration of the southwestern mesa country with Nebraska by referring to its prairies as “the floor of the sky” (*Archbishop* 245), I was reminded of doughboy Claude Wheeler’s reflection in France in *One of Ours* that in Nebraska he had “no chance for the kind of life he wanted [, that] at home . . . people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He had begun to believe that Americans were a people of shallow emotions” (534-35).

All those sentiments are Cather’s. In her 1923 article for *The Nation*, she laments the “Americanization” that has “done

## Escaping the Prairie and Approaching Quebec (Continued)

away with" (237) much of European culture and stamped out the use of other languages through English-only programs; she also condemns the indifference and even superior attitudes of Anglo settlers toward their Bohemian and Scandinavian neighbors. After presenting a picture of productive fields, new farmhouses with bathrooms, clean and well-kept towns, "crowds of happy looking children, well nourished," on their way to school, Cather turns to "the other side of the medal, stamped with the ugly crest of materialism." An over-abundance of prosperity, movies, gaudy fiction have generated "the frenzy to be showy; farmer boys who wish to be spenders before they are earners, girls who try to look like the heroines of the cinema screen; a coming generation which tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by buying things instead of making anything." Then she zeroes in on the University of Nebraska, fearing that her alma mater "may become a gigantic trade school. The men who control its destiny . . . wish their sons and daughters to study machines, mercantile processes, 'the principles of business'; everything that has to do with the game of getting on in the world and nothing else" (238).

Rather than celebrate the prairie West, in her Nebraska novels Cather deconstructed it, which is not to admit that she didn't love the prairie land, its sunsets, the changes wrought by its seasons, nor that she didn't cherish members of her family and her dear friends, or memorialize the adventure of childhood in this place. It was its culture as a microcosm of the United States and, to a degree, the modern world in general that alienated her. So Willa Cather left—for the East in 1896, for England and France in 1902, and in 1906 for New York, which would be her permanent home until her death forty-one years later. It was not that these places were free of the defects of modern life, but they offered more opportunities to avoid or offset them. The further east one traveled the richer the culture: New York was richer than Pittsburgh, England richer than America, and, for Cather, France richer than England.

With wider-ranging experiences came bigger ideas, aesthetic sophistication, and the development of a style. Cather's reading program, from her college days in Lincoln through her editorship at *McClure's*, ranged from the Greek and Roman epics to the best of contemporary fiction. Critics have explored her extensive knowledge of French and Russian writers as well as British and American, and her familiarity with national classics as disparate as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*. Such literary eclecticism was continually enhanced by travel, the fine arts, and the experience of great architecture. Paris in 1902 offered Cather not only literary associations and a famous Gothic cathedral; it was the hub for Monet and the Impressionists and where Cather viewed the recently installed Saint Genevieve murals by Puvis de Chavannes, whose work she had first seen in

Pittsburgh. The fragmentary nature of Puvis' panels (what art historians refer to as their silences), the emphasis in them on the processes of artistic making, dissection of the female body, androgyny, pastoral posing, classical and Christian mythologies are, more or less, detectable influences in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *Shadows on the Rock*, as well as in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which Cather admitted was indebted to Puvis. The Provence Cather visited in 1902 was not only the country of Alphonse Daudet (her favorite French writer at the time), the Roman ruins at Arles, and the Papal Palace in Avignon (which would become the setting of her unfinished novel), it was the country Cezanne was rendering into proto-cubistic forms.

Exposure to such diversity and the advice of her friend

Sarah Orne Jewett enabled Cather to write lovingly about Nebraska off and on for a decade, seeing it through the prism of literature and the arts; although in the progression of novels from *O Pioneers!* to *A Lost Lady*, bitter social criticism increasingly weighed against and eventually overwhelmed the lyric adventures of childhood on the prairie. By the mid-twenties, in *The Professor's House*, Cather was no longer writing provincially. She was examining the malaise of a secular, postwar society defined by business and science through a protagonist (much like herself) grappling with survival when "everything around him [ ] seemed insupportable," when life's voyage seemed blocked from the "bright rings" of the stars (148-49). This novel marks a definite break in Cather's fiction from her immediate personal past to the historical past, from the prairies to the mesa-strewn deserts, the antebellum South, and the rocks of Quebec, Grand Manan, and Avignon. Even when she returned intermittently to Nebraska in her writing, the issues seemed less



The main altar of Notre Dame des Victoires, which Cecile Auclair imagines as a duplicate of the Kingdom of Heaven. Photo by J. Murphy.

local. And if they had to do with family living and aspiration, freedom and bondage, guilt and sorrow, belief and morals, aging and dying—they were more often than not set in larger historical and moral contexts. They were interwoven with the universal potentials of Christianity, the cultural clashes in newly-annexed New Mexican territory, the transplanting of French culture during the struggle between France and England for this continent, the survival of grace (or of the human spirit) during historical nadir points—pre-Civil War Virginia, the last decades of Louis XIV, fourteenth-century Avignon. Was Cather escaping contemporary life or commenting on it in these works? That's an issue that we seem hesitant or reluctant to discuss—or are perhaps not interested in.

Willa Cather discovered Quebec in June 1928, during a period of loss and disappointment. The year before, she had been forced out of her Greenwich Village apartment; earlier in 1928 her father had died, and later that year Mrs. Cather suffered a stroke from which she would never recover. Written

during the Great Depression and a time of personal confusion, *Shadows* reflects the human need for a shield against a void of disconnection, meaninglessness. Since it continues to explore the Catholic cosmos Cather increasingly associated with the culture of France, the novel is constructed around that theological order, is a defense of what sociologist Peter Berger refers to as the sacred canopy, “man’s ultimate shield against the terror of anomy [alienation, lawlessness]. To be in a ‘right’ relationship with the sacred cosmos,” Berger continues, “is to be protected against the nightmare threats of chaos” (26).

The first pages of *Shadows* establish Quebec as a sanctuary of order surrounded by the turmoil of the forest, “the dead, sealed world of . . . interlocking trees . . . strangling each other . . . [—] suffocation, annihilation; there European was quickly swallowed up . . .” (11). In the city on the rock, secular and sacred order cooperate for survival. Madame Auclair carefully instructs her daughter in the domestic rituals that sustain the canopy. After Cecile’s excursion to the Isle of Orleans farm where domestic order has been compromised by proximity to nature, housekeeping becomes sacred to her. She compares her tasks to those of the nuns who had come to Canada to establish the sacred order there, and she recognizes that with her coppers, brooms, and cloths, she “made life” (227). The canopy concept becomes explicit on All Souls’ Day, when the cheerfulness of the nuns contrasts with those with less conviction. The sisters had overcome sorrow by theologizing the cosmos, inhabiting a “world of the mind,” an “earth, created by God for a great purpose, the sun which He made to light it by day, the moon . . . to light it by night,— and the stars, made to beautify the vault of heaven like frescoes, and to be a clock and compass for man.” In effect, a “safe, lovingly arranged and ordered universe” (115).

In Cather’s construction of it, Quebec is an experiment in maintaining and modifying the Old World in the New, in the society to be shaped by Cecile and her Canadian-born husband, Pierre Charron, which would become a Franco-American alternative to Puritan New England’s “city upon a hill” (Winthrop 225). The fourth book of the novel opens with a description of Quebec as the New Jerusalem, “gleaming above the river like an altar with many candles, or like a holy city in an old legend, shriven, sinless, washed in gold” (195). The cultural defiance embodied in the fortified city appealed to Cather, who increasingly felt her values and traditions under siege. Like T.S. Eliot in the first part of *Ash Wednesday*, “Because I do not hope to turn again,” she was compelled “to construct something / Upon which to rejoice” (lines 24-25).

Because the process of conserving and revitalizing a culture is ancient and ongoing, Cather concludes her celebration of the sacred universe of the nuns with line six from the opening book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “And march his gods into Latium.” Virgil is announcing here that the establishment of a new people is indebted to older civilizations, that his Roman founder Aeneas transports his household gods from Troy to Italy. In her particular version of the founding of New France, Cather adds:

When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will have . . . riches of the mind and spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight, perhaps, but precious . . . (116)

***With wider-ranging  
experiences came bigger ideas,  
aesthetic sophistication, and the  
development of a style.***

I will now consider, very briefly, two such slight incidents and indicate in the second how the local matter of Red Cloud might be used to serve big themes rather than call attention to Red Cloud as the center of Cather’s world. In the first, Cecile and Jacques seek shelter from rain in Notre-Dame-de-Victoire Church. They marvel at the high altar representing a walled feudal castle: “[t]he outer wall . . . low and thick, with many battlements,” contains the tabernacle, “an arched gateway . . . [where] the Host was kept” (77). The inner wall is higher and less battlemented, while the third rises into three towers and has many windows. On one of the towers stands St. Anne, “regally clad,” with “a little dark-skinned Virgin” on her arm. On the tallest tower, “the Blessed Mother and Child stood high up among the shadows” (78). Not only does this altar duplicate fortified Quebec, it clarifies that the theological universe it represents, the sacred canopy, is an import, taken to Canada from France like the home gods of Troy were taken to Italy: “Cecile had taken it for granted that the Kingdom of Heaven looked exactly like this from the outside and was surrounded by just such walls; that this altar was a reproduction of it, made in France by people who knew . . .” (77).

The second slight incident, the setting up of the Nativity crèche, illustrates not only the transporting of gods but their revitalization in the New World. The apothecary constructs a shelf beneath a windowsill so that the crèche can “be arranged in two terraces, as was customary at home” (126) in France. He is actually duplicating Quebec itself, which is arranged into Upper Town and Lower Town, and (Cather tells us in the first pages) resembles “one of those little artificial mountains . . . made in the churches at home to present a theatrical scene of the Nativity” (9). As Cecile unpacks the crèche figures from France, she retells the Old World story of the Incarnation to Jacques and to the homeless and disfigured Blinker. Then she sets the Holy Family, the ox, ass, and angels in a little *cabine* “like those the first missionaries built down by Notre Dame des Anges, when they landed here long ago” (128), a reference to the mass celebrated by the Franciscans under a shelter of fir branches at this site in 1615. The little booth of fir boughs becomes a Canadian addition to the Christmas story. And

Jacques’ contribution of his toy beaver is another. At first, Cecile hesitates to include such an “untraditional” animal—“I don’t believe there was ever a beaver in a crèche before,” she exclaims. But her neighbor Madame Pommier is insightful enough to accommodate Old World Christmas traditions to Canada: “Certainly, my dear,” she tells Cecile, “put it there with the lambs, before the manger. Our Lord died for Canada as well as for the world over there, and the beaver is our very special animal” (131).

This episode, set so far away in time and place, has Red Cloud origins. It is based on Cather’s nephew Charles Cather offering his toy cow to the “little Jesus” when setting up a crèche with Aunt Willa in the family home at 541 North Seward in 1927, just months before her father’s death and her discovery of Quebec (Bennett 38-39). As the nucleus of a scene in the novel, the incident is significant; it informs us about the creative process, about Cather’s method of taking an intimate experience, altering it, and giving it far-reaching implications. In Cather studies, local lore is *only* important, really, in transformation. We

## Escaping the Prairie and Approaching Quebec (Continued)

should never operate in the opposite direction, that is, use the novel to emphasize the local or the personal.

*Shadows on the Rock* not only emphasizes accommodation but the development of culture and society in a new environment. Cecile takes pride in what she considers to be superior in Canada. She is particularly inspired by its martyrs, the so-called North American Martyrs, the band of Jesuits (Isaac Jogues, Jean de Brebeuf, Charles Garnier, Noël Chabanel, and four others) killed in Iroquois raids between 1642 and 1649. The martyrdoms of the early Christians in Europe “never seemed to her half so wonderful or so terrible”(120) as these. And there are other sources of pride. There is in Canada the makings of a more just society. When Auclair tells Cecile the story of Bichet, a poor knife-grinder the Auclair family sheltered back in Paris, Cecile’s fears of having one day to return to France increase. Bichet was taken to the Chatelet for stealing two brass kettles from a mansion on the rue du Figuier, tortured into confessing a lifetime of crimes he never committed, and hanged. The affair shortened the life of Auclair’s asthmatic mother: “She said she had no wish to live in a world where such cruelties could happen.” Cecile is sympathetic: “I am like my grandmother,” she responds. “I do not want to live there. I had rather stay in Quebec always! Nobody is tortured here, except by the Indians . . .” (110).

Yet this novel is about much more than nation-building, faith, or acculturation. The source of its title, taken from 1 Chronicles (29:15), which in the King James Bible reads, “Our days on the earth are as a shadow,” suggests the evanescence and misery of the human condition, reflected in the novel in discussions of medical practices and in many grotesque characters. Historical ironies and paradoxes permeate the entire text, especially the epilogue, where Auclair and the bishop discuss the futures of the monarchy and the security of Quebec forty-five years before it will fall to the British and seventy-six years before the French Revolution.

I can only reassert here that such issues are far-reaching and varied, as they are in several other Cather novels, and that Willa Cather is blatantly misrepresented when identified (as in so many encyclopedias and dictionaries) as an American novelist who wrote about the prairies, or the Midwestern frontier. Was ever a writer so possessed, not by demons, but by those who want to contain her and pin her down to a locale, or to their sexual orientation or insistent gender concerns? There is also the copyright issue. Her literary executors have not served Cather well in taking so long to allow paperback editions, in virtually restricting publication to a single press, and in withholding the correspondence from publication. Cather’s letters should be as accessible as Emily Dickinson’s, Flannery O’Connor’s, or Edith Wharton’s. The result of such “possession” is that Cather is less known than her major contemporaries. When she is mentioned to a fellow traveler on a plane, for example, eight out of ten don’t know who she is, and one has to mention Hemingway or Faulkner as contemporaries to identify her. On a recent trip to Ireland, I checked out three big Dublin bookstores for their Cather offerings. Two had no Cather, the third had a

copy of *My Ántonia*. But the same stores contained on an average 19 volumes and 9 titles of Faulkner, 15 volumes and 7 titles of Hemingway, 9 volumes and 5 titles of Wharton. As we Catherites huddle together at various meetings we perhaps forget the realities beyond our restricted literary abode.

Willa Cather deserves and needs more exposure, although it has to be of a serious kind. Getting movie stars interested in Cather and inviting them to Red Cloud or adapting her novels into movies will not necessarily get them included in American literature courses in Ireland, France, Italy, or the U.K. But mature discourse will, eventually. Cather wrote several major modernist texts. Her works contain complex universal concerns. She developed a unique style and structural strategies for the narrative. I know firsthand from doing the explanatory notes for *Shadows* and the *Archbishop* that she created a new kind of historical fiction based on the principle of collage, of excerpting historical texts, biographies, even encyclopedia entries, and editing them, arranging them into suggestive patterns. President Jeffrey Holland of Brigham Young welcomed the participants of the 1988 BYU Cather Symposium by insightfully comparing Cather to the Virgin of Guadalupe, who took pains to arrange flower petals on the tilma of Juan Diego and produce a legendary portrait. Cather lifted the Guadalupe story from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and inserted it into the first book of the *Archbishop*. I wonder if she identified with the miracle-worker as she herself took pains to arrange her multiple sources into the shimmering book that just might be the great American novel of the 1920s, itself a miraculous achievement.

### Works Cited

- Bennett, Mildred R. *The World of Willa Cather*. 1951. New edition. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1961.
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. 1967. New York: Anchor, 1990.
- Cather, Willa. *Collected Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. 1927. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Charles W. Mignon and John J. Murphy. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999.
- . *A Lost Lady*. 1923. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Frederick M. Link, Charles W. Mignon, and Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- . *My Ántonia*. 1918. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Charles W. Mignon, Kari Ronning, and James Woodress. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994.
- . “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle.” *The Nation*, 3.7 (1923): 236-38.
- . *One of Ours*. 1922. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Richard Harris and Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2006.
- . *The Professor’s House*. 1925. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Frederick M. Link and James Woodress. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2002.
- . *Shadows on the Rock*. 1931. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Frederick M. Link, John J. Murphy, and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Ash Wednesday*. 1930. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, 1963. 83-95.
- Virgil. *Aeneid*. Trans. C. Day Lewis. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1953.
- Winthrop, John. “A Model of Christian Clarity.” 1630. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Nina Baym et al. Vol. 1 (1620-1865). New York: Norton, 1998. 214-25.



St. Genevieve meets two bishops, St. Germain and St. Loup. This is the first triptych in the Puvis de Chavannes murals in Paris's Pantheon to which Cather was indebted in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

## Voice of the Prairies? Willa Cather and the International Modernist Scene

Catherine Morley  
Rothermere American Institute  
Oxford University

### *Spring Conference 2006*

Although often cast in homey portrait, Willa Cather considered herself a modern writer facing the artistic and social challenges of the New World. This sense of personal purpose and destiny is deeply imbued in her writing as a kind of artistic manifest destiny, and reveals something of a debt to the American transcendentalist heritage. Indeed, this is most apparent in her appreciation of the robust democracy embodied in the verse of Walt Whitman. However, besides this awareness of an American inheritance, Cather was enormously influenced by European culture. Her early reading ranges from Gustave Flaubert to Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Mann, and she was a great admirer of A. E. Housman.

It is customary to think of Cather as an elegist of the American pioneer tradition, but her fictions are very much characterised not so much by loss but, as Dorothy Van Ghent observes, by “a sense of the past . . . as persistent human truth repossessed” (5)—salvaged and redeemed by virtue of memory and art. Indeed, Cather’s art is profoundly influenced by the great European tradition, including Homer, Virgil, and Tolstoy (as a child in Nebraska, she’d been introduced to Greek and Latin history and classics by her grandmother and a local tutor). Though many critics and her contemporaries perceived her commitment to the stories of the Nebraska immigrants as traditional and folksy, Cather’s creative vision is not at all parochial but quite modernist in the international sense and includes interest in the primitive and archaic. Her sensitivity to the land and its regenerative qualities are as related as the vegetative myths in *The Waste Land* (1922) to the modernist aesthetic. Indeed, in her engagement with such ancient myths as early as 1913, Cather might be heralded as a predecessor of those modernist giants T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Cather’s internationalism can be considered in three specific ways, beginning with the impact upon her consciousness as a writer of her early travels to Europe, drawing attention to her reading, her perceptions of the European landscapes and modern cities she visited, and her interactions with the European writers she encountered. Then Cather’s writing needs to be addressed formally in terms of European comparisons, since much of her theory of narrative form is derived from her engagement with European literature and art. Finally, I will argue that the qualities Cather shares with James Joyce, the European modernist *par excellence*, underscores her internationalism, even her transnationalism, concluding that Cather used these international connections paradoxically to illuminate the specifically American modern scene.

My purpose here is to question the pre-conceived notions of simplicity and parochialism that still surround Cather’s writing and, as part of a wider research project on Cather and Dos Passos, to link Cather scholarship and criticism to international modern culture and American modernism.

### The Context

Hopefully, my book, *Mapping American Modernism in Literary Lives: Willa Cather and John Dos Passos* (the working title), will not only bring together two of the most important (but often most underrated) writers of modern American literature but, in the current climate of comparative study and transatlantic exchange and dialogue, encourage a timely reappraisal of the dynamics of Europe and America’s literary relationship. One might question the motives for linking a writer like Cather to a writer like Dos Passos; however, in considering the case, I was interested in the fact that Dos Passos and Cather seemed to

## Voice of the Prairies?

(Continued)

operate at opposite ends of the literary spectrum throughout their lifetimes and were frequently described as the antithesis to each other—most famously so in the scathing remarks of Hemingway and H. L. Mencken in their reviews of *One of Ours* (1922). I was also intrigued and attracted to the fact that in November 1947, Dos Passos was elected to the recently deceased Cather's seat in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

On the surface, the differences between Cather and Dos Passos could not be clearer: the former was the child of the American Midwest, seemingly committed to traditional, old-fashioned American life; the latter was the cosmopolitan *par excellence*, dedicated to an avant-gardism and operating at the fringes of metropolitan communist activity in the 1920s and 1930s. But for all their seeming antitheses, both had much in common. On researching both writers, I was fascinated by their responses to the American landscape, their love-hate relationship with the American literary academy, their at-times questionable politics, and their shared embrace of political conservatism in later life. Both were deeply interested in the writing style and the principles behind the work of Walt Whitman. Both were experimental—Cather in terms of her quest for simplicity in writing and Dos Passos in his abstract expressionism. Both were influenced profoundly by the theatre and by music; indeed, the dramatic arts are implicit factors in their writing. Both, in short, were profoundly American modernists—experimenting with literature as a means of articulating the innovations and confusion in the emergence of modern American culture. Moreover, as products of their time, both wrote about the war, both found in Europe an inspiration seemingly lacking in the American scene, and both were politically committed to the masses in terms of the opportunities of the great democratic experiment. Certainly this portrait of Cather interferes with the efforts of those who try to pigeonhole her as a prairie elegist.

### Early Travels to Europe

Cather's first journey to Europe took her to England and to France. She docked at Liverpool Harbour in 1902, moved on to Chester, Ludlow and Shrewsbury in Shropshire, to London, Rouen, Paris, and the Midi. Cather recorded her impressions and regularly sent them home for publishing in the *Nebraska State Journal*. They were later gathered with commentary by George Kates and republished by Knopf in 1956. The articles are interesting in and of themselves, but perhaps what is most interesting from a Cather scholar's perspective is the development of an artistic consciousness in the young writer. The articles drawn from the trip document Cather's immersion in contemporary European masters and her encounter with A.E. Housman, a favourite poet, and they offer insights into the later fiction—for instance, her account of Rouen Cathedral is later utilised in *One of Ours* in Claude Wheeler's experience of France during the war.

Cather is ever the careful observer, watching society from the sidelines and describing her experiences in terms of the musical

note or the artist's canvas. What is often notable is the purpose of the comparison. She observes and draws on aspects of French and English life in order to offer clearer perspective on matters American. On first docking at Liverpool, she describes the scene thus:

Although the whole effect was remarkably gay, there was nothing of the smartness and neatness and trimness of an American crowd. The square as a whole presented a beautiful variation of line and colour, but the majority of the individuals who made up these dark splotches on the yellow plane were far from lovely. The dress of Englishwomen and Englishmen of the working class is frankly a shock at first, no matter how catholic one may be in such matters. . . . However, I am not at all sure that I would be willing to exchange the pretty voice. After hearing only English for a few days, the first American voice you hear in a boarding house is very apt to suggest something of the nature of burrs or sandpaper. (*WC in Europe* 6-8)

Similarly, later in the trip, at Barbizon, France, she describes the "wheat fields beyond the town [as] quite as level as those of the Nebraska divides. . . . To complete the resemblance, there stood a reaper of a well-known American make, very like the one on which I have acted as super-cargo many a time" (121-22). In both instances (and many more throughout the fourteen articles), while Cather observes that which most interests her—the crowd at the harbour, the wheat fields, and so on—she makes sense of it through a comparison to an American object or phenomenon. Quite expectedly, one might surmise, given that this is the first voyage out from her native land of a young writer aware of her readership, which for the most part was *au fait* with the local indicators she included in her descriptions. Yet there is something more to be garnered in these emergent, self-conscious American and European juxtapositions.

From this very early stage of her writing, Cather identifies the creative possibilities in the collision and juxtaposition of cultures—which we see most clearly in such later works as *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

(1927), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *One of Ours*—books which formally exemplify the collision of cultures or present without translation different languages in tandem. Needless for me to point out, the notion of cultures jarring against each other, with the one illuminating aspects of the other, is a central and sacred tenet of much modern literature, from Joyce's use of ancient Greece to illuminate the grubby streets of Edwardian Dublin through to Eliot's employment of Sanskrit to make sense of his modern London waste land. In these early articles, we can observe not just Cather's internationalism in terms of her appreciation of Europe but her arousal in Europe as a modern American artist. She paradoxically assimilates the culture through which she moves to consolidate what will later come to be recognized as a particularly American artistic vision.



Ruins of the tragic theatre at Arles, Provence. Cather found the theatre "impressive," imagining its marble columns as a "splendid . . . noble background for the toga-clad players" (*WC in Europe* 174). Photo by J. Murphy.



At another level, it is worth emphasizing the scope of Cather's vision. Returning to the quotations just cited, we can see that Cather adjusts her prose to encapsulate not just the particular and the local instance but the "whole" of the scene, indeed, the whole culture. She describes "the whole effect as remarkably gay," "the square as a whole," "the English voice," and "the working classes." Phyllis Rose makes a discussion point of Cather's wide panoramic fictions, viewing them as indicative of her modernist inclinations (124 and passim). Certainly Rose has a case here in terms of the modernist will to artistically translate mundane aspects of life toward the eternal and the immutable. What the early travel articles also reveal are Cather's awakening interests in the ancient and the primitive, which we see realized so clearly in the fiction that came later. This is especially so in her travels to France. Returning again to her article on Barbizon, she describes the landscape thus:

The further we went from the hotel, the more simple and primitive did the houses become; little huts of mud and stone, draped with vines and made less gloomy by a clump of poppies or marigolds flaming upon the roof. Two-wheeled carts, grindstones, scythes, rakes and various implements of husbandry were strewn about the doors of the dwellings. (121)

It is easy to set this extract next to any number of descriptions from *O Pioneers!* (1913) or *My Ántonia* (1918) to point out certain similarities: the sensitivity and particularity of details, the rural setting, the sense of a lost world.

What is crucial, though, is the fact that this interest in the primitive, which was later to inflect so much of Cather's prose and become regarded as that which defined their regional specificity, is not solely indigenous to the landscapes of Cather's fictions. Her sense of the ancient is much more inclusive and belies the regional tag her fiction has been assigned. Later, in 1912, when Cather visited the American Southwest this interest in the primitive was rekindled in her in the monumental canyons and Indian cliff-dwellings she visited. My point is not simply to demonstrate the impact of Cather's first trip to Europe upon her formation as a writer or to deny the importance of the prairies in her work; rather, I want to assert the inclusive nature of her imagination in terms of this internationalist dimension. Like many of her modernist compatriots writing from the banks of the Seine in the decades following her first visit, Cather's encounters with Europe, its cathedrals, monuments, and ruins, allowed her to see America more clearly. Paradoxically, Cather's engagement with the European landscape and culture in these formative years, coupled with her immersion in the art and literature of the Old World, later facilitated the channelling of the monumental and primitive truths of her Nebraskan and Southwestern landscapes. We see the paradox most clearly in *My Ántonia* when Jim Burden reflects on the immigrant girls of his youth. Jim likens himself to Virgil when he says, "I shall be the first if I live to bring the Muse to into my country." (256). Here, many years after her articles on that first visit to Europe, Cather, via Jim, likens herself to an ancient poet of Europe in her quest to reveal America—in all its transnational elements—through art.

### European Alignments and Matters of Form

Though Cather shrugged off the movements commonly associated with modern literary art and often encouraged a reading of her work as nostalgic, her literary manifesto "The

Novel Demeublé" (1922) called for a kind of stripping down and unfurnishing of the novel that one could bracket alongside abstraction and symbolism. Indeed, for Cather the symbol was the utmost, that through which the literary work should reveal itself gradually. As she progressed through her career to works such as the *Archbishop* and *Shadows*, Cather came to renounce plot and focus upon symbol in her artistic methodology. Such principles recur in much international modernist writing: the urge to divest art of excess verbiage and clutter, a refusal and negation of the mimetic function of art, and a will towards embracing older, more ancient forms which came closer to communicating the elusive essence of human truths, what Cather referred to in "The Novel Demeublé" as "the thing not named" (50).

Catherine Downs's excellent study of Cather's journalism, *Becoming Modern* (1999), makes the case that Cather is the product of the emergence of the U.S. presses, the liberation of women and the women's suffrage movement (which she was against for political reasons), and the growth of the immigrant voice—that she was a product of "the modern," but not of modernism *per se*. I want to take this a bit further and argue that she was, in fact, a modernist in her approach to her fictions, and that she was, in fact, a modernist of the international mould. Cather's modernist tendencies are evident in her juxtaposition of fact and fiction, the integration of autobiographical elements in her fiction, the foregrounding of the immigrant voice, the playing with narrators, the shifting sexes in narrative voice, her integration of opera and dance in her writing, and her aspiration for fiction to aspire to the aesthetics of painting. John Murphy, Cristina Giorcelli, and Clinton Keeler have discussed Cather's artistic relationship with the symbolist artist Puvis de Chavannes, and, indeed, the writer herself has famously reiterated her literary debt to his artistic method:

I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève in my student days, I have wished that I could do something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. ("On Death" 9)

What is striking here is Cather's alignment of the methods of fiction writing with those of the painter—a characteristic emphasized by Henry James and passed on to later modernists—and her desire to show the subject as it is, without accent, without the baggage and implication of language and without the "artificial elements of composition." The desire to attend to the external object in and of itself and without the shading and implication of language is a tenet of High Modernism, as described by F.S. Flint and Ezra Pound in their respective Imagist manifestoes. Cather's statement also reveals a fatigue with the methods of composition to which the writer is accustomed—again, a feature of modernists weary of the heavy plotting and description of realism. Also, Cather's shift away from realist modes toward the more experimental, for instance the symbolism in *A Lost Lady* (1923), the tendency towards dream-reverie in *The Professor's House*, and the increasing plotlessness of later works associates her with Joyce and with Eliot. Critics have not been slow in identifying Cather's sympathies with the Oxford critic Walter Pater and his aesthetic pronouncements on the place and function of art (see Woodress 423).

## Voice of the Prairies?

(Continued)

As early as 1949, Bernard Baum in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* aligned Cather thematically with Eliot, Lawrence, Huxley, Waugh, Crowe Ransom, MacLeish, Tate, Fitzgerald, and Bishop, all of whom he conjectured “had in common a profoundly disturbing sense of modern civilization as bankrupt morally and intellectually” (591). Baum observes how *One of Ours*, which was published in the same year as *The Waste Land*, contained a record of “Death by Water.” He further identifies the surface discontinuity in the narrative of *The Professor’s House* as analogous to that of *The Waste Land*, aimed at “inter-illumination through contrasted portions of experience” (591).

Where Cather, I feel, most identifies with the European modernists—much more so than with her contemporary American modernists—is in her attempts to transcend the complexities of modern life by hewing her fictions to overriding myths. European modernists were much more ambivalent than their American counterparts about the potential of the modern, mechanised, industrial world. In her suspicion of modernity, Cather shares more with a writer like D.H. Lawrence than she does with Dos Passos in his integration of the movie camera into his fiction. Like Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Lawrence (whom she both admired and disliked), Cather allies her stories of quotidian lives to the enduring stories of human existence: to the vegetative, seasonal myths in *O Pioneers!*, to the mythical and primitive lives of the cave dwellers in *The Professor’s House*, to the liturgical rhythms of the lives of the Catholic bishops in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and to the legendary lives of the saints in *Shadows on the Rock*. The process is articulated by Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!*:

“[T]here are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.” (110)

Linked to a chain of European counterparts from Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Lawrence and Eliot, Cather sought to appeal to the most elemental aspects of her reader’s consciousness.

### Artistic Self-Consciousness

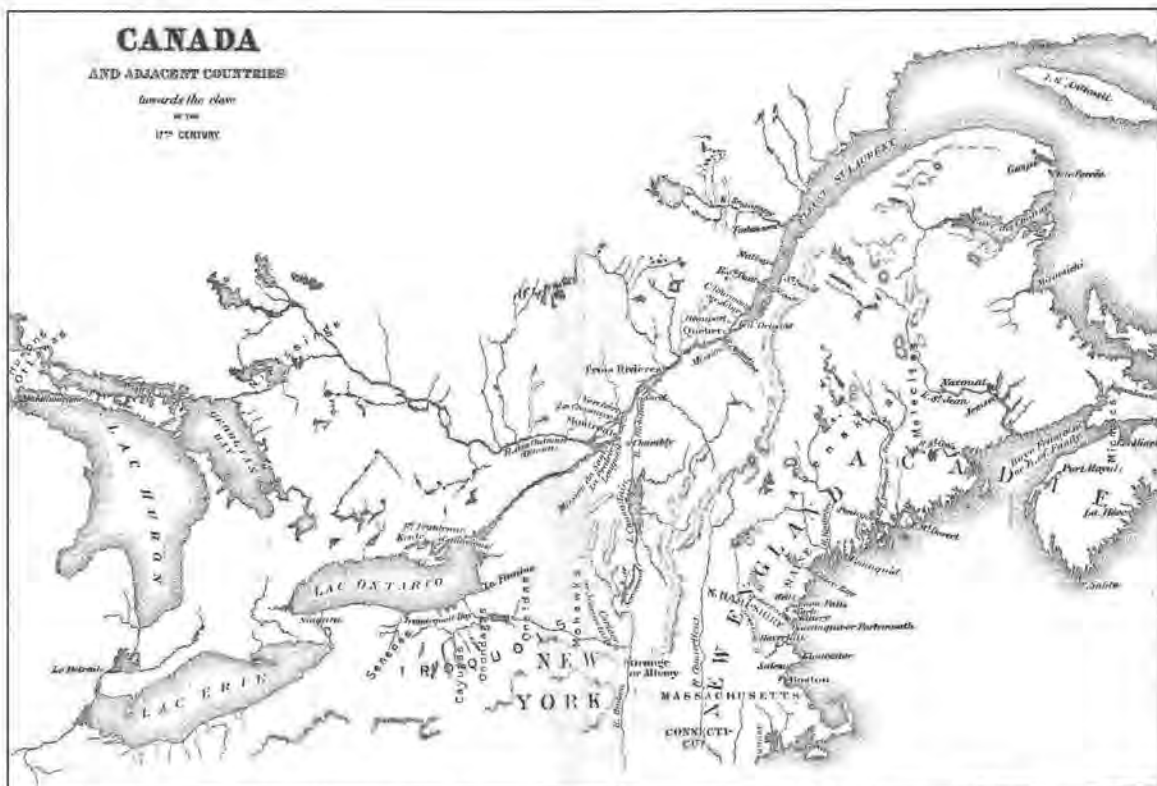
To conclude, I wish to reiterate, briefly, some of the points made, and gesture towards some new connections, some new ideas. In many ways, as I suggested, Cather shares some characteristics with the Irish writer James Joyce. Around the time that Joyce wrote his breakthrough novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Cather composed her own portrait of an artist, *The Song of the Lark* (1915). While we are not given lengthy streams-of-consciousness in Thea’s narrative, Cather, like Joyce, demonstrates a minute attention to the realistic portrayal of musical scores, opera, and other art forms, while self-reflexively considering the role and the duty of the modern artist. As a singer, Thea Kronborg comes to represent the difficulties faced by the modern writer struggling against the confines of parochialism to articulate in an artistic voice—a problem faced by Stephen Dedalus as well as by Joyce and Cather. All struggle with the landscape of their youth—simultaneously hemmed in by it and inspired by it. In later writing, both Cather and Joyce underpin their fiction with mythic structures: they make epic stories—national and regional epics—out of the everyday, quotidian lives of ordinary folk. And,

in their quests for simplicity, their later writing is characterised by a kind of abstraction.

Because of all its internationalism, what is often overlooked in Joyce’s writing is his sense of national duty. And it is here that Cather joins him in shared artistic purpose. At the end of *Portrait*, Joyce’s alter-ego, Stephen, undertakes a vow to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (244). From here, Joyce went on to write Ireland’s national epic, *Ulysses* (1922), in its manifold pluralities of scope, discourse, form, and voice. He used the structure of Homer’s *Odyssey* to write a book that would explain the nation to itself, wrench it free from the paralysis he’d described in *Dubliners* (1914). Similarly, Cather’s use of the mythic structures she encountered in her reading of the great European classics and her observation and attunement to the rituals of primitive cultures in Europe and in the Southwest are utilised in the composition of a fictional corpus that is quintessentially “American”—in all the manifold, transnational pluralities invoked by that term.

### Works Cited

- Baum, Bernard. “Willa Cather’s Waste Land.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 48 (1949): 589-601.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. 1918. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Charles Mignon and James Woodress. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994.
- . “The Novel D meubl .” 1922. *Not Under Forty*. By Willa Cather. New York: Knopf, 1936. 43-51.
- . “On *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” 1927. *On Writing*. By Willa Cather. New York: Knopf, 1949. 3-13.
- . *O Pioneers!* 1913. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Susan Rosowski and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.
- . *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey*. Ed. George N. Kates. New York: Knopf, 1956.
- Downs, Catherine. *Becoming Modern: Willa Cather’s Journalism*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 1999.
- Flint, F. S. “Imagisme.” 1913. *Imagist Poetry*. Ed. Peter Jones. London: Penguin, 2001. 10-11.
- Giorcelli, Cristina. “Willa Cather and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes: Extending the Comparison.” *Literature & Belief* 23.2 (2003): 70-88.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. Vintage International edition. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler with Walter Hettche. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Keeler, Clinton. “Narrative Without Accent: Willa Cather and Puvis de Chavannes.” *American Quarterly* 17 (1965): 119-26.
- Murphy, John. Historical Essay. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. By Willa Cather. Cather Scholarly edition. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. 325-71.
- Pound, Ezra. “A Few Don’ts By an Imagiste.” 1913. *Imagist Poetry*. Ed. Peter Jones. London: Penguin, 2001. 12-14.
- Rose, Phyllis. “Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather.” *Modernism Reconsidered*. Ed. Robert Kiely. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. 123-45.
- Van Ghent, Dorothy. *Willa Cather*. Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 46. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1964.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.



A map of New France and adjacent countries toward the close of the 17th century, the time of Cather's setting of *Shadows on the Rock*.

## “A Kind of French Culture”: Cather, “Canada,” and the Québécois

Robert Thacker

St. Lawrence University

### Spring Conference 2006

I hope you will indulge me a bit as I begin with a brief reminiscence. During the Fifth International Cather Seminar, held in 1993 up in Hastings, I worked myself into something of a lather over one of the plenary presentations on *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). It really irritated me in the way professors get irritated, for I found that what I was hearing about that book was not just wrong, it was wrong-headed. The speaker's identity makes no difference now, and probably did not make much then either, but the pique I got into has stuck with me ever since. Simply put, I was astounded to hear this speaker talk about Cather's characters in the novel—the Auclairs, Count Frontenac, Bishop Laval, and the others—as if they were merely French. That is, this speaker—a person who had published some important Cather essays, articles I knew and admired—was asserting that Cather's intention in *Shadows on the Rock* was to define French culture in some significant way, and he missed entirely what seemed to me the more pressing and unavoidable fact: although culturally Cather's characters in the novel *are* French, her real point was that they were becoming Québécois. After all, in *Shadows* she opts on occasion to spell the name of the place “Kebec”—recalling the Algonquin name for it and also insisting on its proper oral rendering as opposed to the frequently heard and incorrect “Qwee-bec” Americans and other Anglophones often manage. And one of her overarching conclusions in the epilogue is that Cécile and Pierre's sons, “four little boys,” Auclair tells the just-returned Bishop Saint-Vallier in August 1713 as the book ends, are “the Canadians of the future.” “Ah yes,” the Bishop replies, “the Canadians of the future,—the true Canadians” (320). Such people, despite what

they might have thought themselves, are not so much French as they are some other thing, a hybrid, becoming something else. Literally, Cather was right in 1931: something else was then well-denominated as “Canadian.” Today, after two referendums on the question of Quebec's separation from Canada, that term is most emphatically “Québécois.”

Actions are stronger than words, of course, and so part of my reaction to the plenary speaker's construction of Cather's characters in *Shadows on the Rock* as French was to hold the next International Seminar, in 1995, in Quebec City: It began on June 24<sup>th</sup>, Quebec's “Fête Nationale”—the “national” feast day of its patron saint, John the Baptist—and ended on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Canada Day. As I said then, and still say now, I wanted Cather seminarians to get both sides of the argument that was, and is, Canada. I think many did while we were there and Quebec was approaching its most momentous Referendum moment. I was certainly well aware of the drama myself, and I was pleased to talk to many among the group who saw signs and felt the cultural crisis going on around us in Quebec. In October 1995 Quebecers voted in a Referendum that brought them to the very brink of separation from the rest of Canada—the No side won, but it did so by a margin smaller than the difference indicated by the number of spoiled ballots. It could not have been much closer. Looking now through the prism Cather gave us in *Shadows on the Rock*, that moment was one that she anticipated, for she defined a sense of unique cultural difference in Cécile and Pierre that lives on in Quebec today. The “Canadians of the future,” indeed.

## “A Kind of French Culture”

(Continued)

Given this perspective, what I want to do today is talk a bit about the people Cather was drawn to, the Québécois, not as the colonists that appear in *Shadows on the Rock* but rather as a people who have endured, persisted “as if by a miracle, on this great un-French continent,” as Edith Lewis wrote in *Willa Cather Living* (154). To conclude *Shadows*, Cather offers this final paragraph describing Auclair’s thoughts after his visit with the very much changed Bishop Saint-Vallier:

While he was closing his shop and changing his coat to go up to his daughter’s house, he thought over much that his visitor told him, and he believed that he was indeed fortunate to spend his old age here where nothing changed; to watch his grandsons grow up in a country where the death of the King, and the probable evils of a long regency, would never touch them. (321)

Cather is here offering the same characterization found in Quebec’s best known and most mythic novel, Louis Hémon’s *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916), where Maria—a character whose situation symbolizes that of Quebec itself—is found toward the end of book realizing that “in this land of Québec nothing has changed. Nothing will change because [the Québécois] are here to bear testimony to it.” Maria also recognizes herself as one of a “people” who “belong to a race that does not know how to die” (185). Both writers—each of whom were outsiders, since Hémon was French—fixed on this singular quality in Quebec culture, the seeming unchanging verities of tradition: the Church, the Land, the Language.

Yet in closing her book, Cather has Auclair looking forward into a future she knows but he does not. Set in August 1713, Cather’s epilogue returns Bishop Saint-Vallier to Quebec during the same year France signed the Treaty of Utrecht, which, among other things, ceded its claims to what is now Maritime Canada to the British. Eventually, that act led to the deportation of the Acadians to Louisiana in 1755. The Peace of Utrecht—which literally ended the War of Spanish Succession—“foretold,” according to Peter J. Moogk in his recent, excellent cultural history of French Canada, “the settlement of the Seven Years’ War: overseas territories would be sacrificed to recover lost ground in Europe” (14). The work of W. J. Eccles on the politics of this period should also be consulted.

Moogk’s history tells a story that utterly complements Cather’s, although typical of professional historians he makes no mention of *Shadows on the Rock*. Part of the power of the story he tells is that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries France had what amounted to a massive colonial enterprise in North America, at least in terms of the extent of area claimed and influence exerted: the “French shore” of the island of Newfoundland, where French fishing communities were established during the late-sixteenth century; the Acadian farming settlements in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia around Port Royale; the military fortifications at Louisbourg atop the northern shore of Cape Breton Island; French settlements on Isle Royale, now Prince Edward Island; and, of course, Quebec—“Canada,” as Cather knew it was then called. From Quebec, as Pierre Charron and the Jesuits (from whose *Relations* Cather lifted whole passages of her novel [see Thacker]) demonstrate, the French ventured up the St. Lawrence and the Ottawa rivers and across the whole of what is now Canada by canoe, seeking furs, to the Illinois Country, which they settled in some numbers, and to Louisiana on the Gulf of Mexico.

Yet most of this conquest was doomed, as the Canadian novelist and essayist Hugh MacLennan wrote ruefully in his singular novel of the French-English relations in Canada, *Two Solitudes* (1945). In it, he creates Athanase Tallard, a character descended from seigneurial stock, whose very ancestry summarizes French-Canadian history. At one point, considering that history and his family’s long presence on their seigneurial lands outside Montreal, he muses on how

[h]is earliest Canadian ancestor had come up the Saint Lawrence with Frontenac, not so long after Cartier himself. That Tallard had found nothing but a forest here, but his Norman instinct had smelled out the good land underneath the trees, and his military imagination had been gripped by the invulnerability of this whole river area. With Quebec City like a stopper in a bottle, the English fleet could never touch him here. And fanning out behind the river and the shield of the Appalachians, he and his brother officers had planned the vastest encircling movement in recorded history: a thin chain of forts through Montreal, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Saint Louis, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, penning the English into the narrow strip of the continent by the Atlantic. That was imagination on a grand scale. If there had been the same imagination at the court of Versailles to back them up, this whole continent could have been French for good. (99-100)

Peter Moogk notes that Versailles’ unimaginative thinking began with the Treaty of Utrecht and anticipated the 1763 Treaty of Paris. He thus summarizes the whole:

Eighteenth-century [French] strategists valued New France because it confined the British possessions to the Atlantic Coast and prevented Great Britain from dominating the North American continent. The threat of French incursions from the north kept British colonists on the defensive and discouraged attacks on the smaller French settlements to the south. From an economic viewpoint, however, *la Nouvelle France* was judged to be an unprofitable drain on the royal treasury. This was the viewpoint that prevailed . . . Those who negotiated the 1763 Treaty of Paris felt that they had done well to retain access to the Newfoundland fishery; the loss of Canada was not regretted. (14)

Moogk makes the case, citing Rabelais as early as 1533, that Canada in the popular French imagination was a dire and threatening place. “According to Baron de Lahontan, a person needed a body of brass, eyes of glass and brandy for blood to survive a Canadian winter.” And one man who served as the government’s Indendant in Quebec in the 1680s commented that “Canada has always been regarded as a country at the end of the world, and as an exile that might also pass for a [sentence] of civil death.” Moogk also cites an author publishing in France in 1664 who “acknowledged the colony’s drawbacks: long winters, mosquitoes, rattlesnakes, and the threat of ‘the Iroquois, our enemies’” (14). This view of Canada is encapsulated in “Voltaire’s flippant remark in *Candide* (1759) that the war in North America was being fought for ‘a few acres of snow’ . . .” Moogk continues that such a view “reflected the superficial thinking of his day. Ironically, New France proved to be the most successful effort at overseas colonization

undertaken by the French, and its people endured, despite being abandoned by the founder state” (14). The Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years’ War—which in Quebec is called “the War of the Conquest” and the rest of us call the “French and Indian War” (history is how you see things)—and ceded Canada to the British. It also helped set the stage for the American Revolution, since Britain’s undisputed claim to Canada allowed it to pass the Quebec Act in 1775, one of the “intolerable acts” attributed to the British Crown by the Declaration of Independence.

Cather knew all of this, of course, for as John Murphy and David Stouck demonstrate abundantly in the new scholarly edition of *Shadows on the Rock*, she had done her research. And that she used Parkman’s histories of the French and English in North America to produce a book sympathetic to Québécois culture is all the more remarkable, given Parkman’s persistent anti-French bias, but she had another story to tell. As we know, hers is much less a matter of the grand strategic designs of the



Detail from the portrait of Count Frontenac hanging in the lobby of the Chateau Frontenac since the early twentieth century. Cather would have seen this portrait during her stays at the hotel. Photo by J. Murphy.

warring European nations than it was a way of defining and illustrating both the persistence and the gradual change of a culture as it adapts to the New World. In 1933, just as *Shadows* was still keeping Cather in the spotlight as her most widely read book upon publication, Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote that “the only real subject of all [Cather’s] books is the effect a new country—our new country—has on the people transplanted to it from the old traditions of a stable, complex civilization” (qtd. in Woodress 452). Cather made this point best, as applied to *Shadows on the Rock*, when she wrote to Wilbur Cross that “a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages. Those people brought a kind of

French culture there and somehow kept it alive on that rock, sheltered it and tended it and on occasion died for it, as if it really were a sacred fire—and all this temperately and shrewdly, with emotion always tempered by good sense” (*On Writing* 16).

What all this means as we consider *Shadows on the Rock* here today is that in the novel Cather presents a prescient story, and she shapes her central characters toward her prescience. Beginning atop Cap Diamant in October 1697, sending her action from the point-of-view of Euclide Auclair, “the philosopher-apothecary of Quebec,” considering the demise of both the King and of his Governor-General, Frontenac—all this makes Cather’s moment in *Shadows* critical to the history of New France. With Frontenac and Bishop Laval in decline, and the interest of the French crown clearly on the wane (1663 saw New France proclaimed a Royal Colony, bringing about a period of extended settlement in Quebec—a period that was over as *Shadows* begins), Cather’s story is set at a moment of transition for Quebec—the book ends, as already noted, in 1713, just as France’s claims in North America are beginning their slide through the Treaty of Utrecht.

Incorporating such historical figures as Frontenac, Laval, and Marie de l’Incarnation, Cather cinches her story by her creation of the Auclairs, living there behind the shop on the Rue de la Mountain. Describing the physical layout of Quebec, Moogk writes:

Late-seventeenth-century Quebec . . . was sited on a headland and was divided into an upper and lower town. The physical division was functional as well. Above was the governor-general’s palace, the residence of the colony’s bishop, a seminary for training priests, and other ecclesiastical communities. Here, wrote a traveler in 1701, “live all persons of distinction.” The Upper Town was the metaphorical head of *la Nouvelle France*—the continental headquarters of its church, government, and armed forces. The Lower Town was the stomach, where merchants coexisted with butchers, seafarers, metalworkers, and building tradesmen. The royal intendant, who concerned himself with the day-to-day existence of the colony, shared their company. This was stratification without segregation: artisans and tavern-keepers were scattered throughout the town. With nearly eight thousand residents in the 1750s. Quebec was the nearest thing to a city in New France, followed by Louisbourg. (9)

Knowing this history, having walked herself between upper and lower towns during her visits there, Cather created and situated the Auclairs in space and time to serve her subject. At the beginning of the book, as Euclide descends from the Cap to his shop, they are established midway between the two sections of the city as a link between the two. More importantly, the Auclairs are there in 1697, he longing to return to the Paris of his youth should the Count be recalled, Cécile equally longing to stay in Quebec, the only home she has really ever known. Given the times and their relation to Count Frontenac, their fate is tied to his. As he tells Auclair late in the novel, “His Majesty prefers that I shall die in Quebec” (275), so his apothecary will remain there too. As we know, Frontenac did die in Quebec, and does again in Cather’s book.

In numerous ways, and as many critics have argued, Cécile Auclair is the key to all this. Just as Book Five, “The Ships from

## “A Kind of French Culture”

(Continued)

France,” ends, Cather takes Cécile (despondent over the impending return to France and neglecting her duties at home) out of doors to enjoy the Quebec autumn: “The glorious transmutation of autumn had come on: all the vast Canadian shores were clothed with a splendor never seen in France; to which all the pageants of all the kings were as a taper to the sun” (262). Worried about what will become of Jacques when she and her father return to France, Cécile implores Bishop Lavel for his help. Later, she confides with the boy:

“I wish you and I could go very far up the river in Pierre Charron’s canoe, and then off into the forests to the Huron country, and find the very places where the martyrs died. I would rather go out there than—anywhere.” Rather than go home to France, she was thinking. (268)

Thus while Cécile thinks her return to France an inevitability—one she accepts but does not at all wish for—her imagination is pulled west, into the continent in Pierre Charron’s canoe, not east toward France. Thus she continues to imagine a future return:

But perhaps, after she grew up, she could come back to Canada again, and do all those things she longed to do. Perhaps some day, after weeks at sea, she would find herself gliding along the shore of the Île d’Orléans and would see before her Kebec, just as she had left it; the grey roofs and spires smothered in autumn gold, with the Récollet Flèche rising slender and pure against the evening, and the crimson afterglow welling up out of the forest like a glorious memory. (269)

Her father, by contrast, is pulled toward France, yet as the sixth book, “The Dying Count,” details, circumstances do not align so as to effect their return. Treating Auclair’s relation with his patron prior to the latter’s death, Cather has Frontenac recounting the circumstances of his own second return to Quebec as Governor-General. Detailing his last two interviews with the King, prior to his return, the Count reveals to Auclair his concerns over the colony’s position at the Court of Versailles: “Perhaps I offended His Majesty by trying to teach him geography. Nothing is more unpopular at Court than the geography of New France. They like to think of Quebec as isolated, French, and Catholic. The rest of the continent is a wilderness, and they prefer to disregard it. Any advance to the westward costs—and Quebec has already cost them enough” (275-76). Frontenac’s pessimism comes from his last interview with the King, when he was invited to accompany him as he fed the royal carp at Fontainebleau. When the Count had previously met with the King, the latter had been full of a plan to seize the English ports along the coast of North America, but that notion had now vanished, as he tells Auclair: “That was the end of his bold project to snatch the seaports from the English and make this continent a French possession, as it should be. I sailed without troops, without money, to do what I could. Unfortunately for you, I brought you with me” (277-78).

At this point Count Frontenac offers Auclair his return passage to France and sufficient funds to make a new start there. But because the Count cannot return himself, Auclair respectfully refuses the offer: “I came to share your fortunes” (278), he tells his patron. Frontenac tries to persuade him—“But you have your daughter’s future to consider . . . if I terminate my days here, you will be adrift, and I doubt if you will ever get home at all. You are

not very adept at practical matters, Euclide” (278-79). At the end of the interview Cather writes, “the Count looked after him with a shrug, and a smile in which there was both contempt and kindness” (279), and she follows that with Frontenac’s recollection of the Auclair family’s loyal devotion to him.

Like Frontenac’s smile, containing as it does “contempt and kindness,” *Shadows on the Rock* offers—borrowing a phrase from W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts”—what should be called “the human position” of Quebec as an enclave of French culture in North America. Auden writes of life happening “[a]nyhow in a corner, some untidy spot,” and Cather’s Quebec is just such a corner (albeit a tidy one). Begun with such assertion and promise in 1608, and but one instance of France’s broad colonial project, the Quebec Cather first saw in 1928 (and saw by accident, really) was but a pale reflection of its initial promise. As Louis Hémon, Hugh MacLennan, and others have detailed, after the Conquest signified by the 1763 Treaty of Paris, and after some initial attempts at assimilation brought to an end by the American Revolution, Quebec entered a two-hundred-year-long inwardness during which time cultural survival was its highest goal. It was a goal Québécois—obtained by focusing on their own cultural project: their language, their religion, and their land. (It is not for nothing that the Separatist anthem is entitled *Mon Pays*.) Although then very much still in its deep slumber, the Quebec Cather first saw in 1928 when she looked down on the Lower Town from the Chateau Frontenac embodied the very cultural history of her own deepest theme, as Fisher was to express it: the effect of a new country on persons from the old. A “new society” really does begin with the salad dressing.

### Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. “Musée des Beaux Arts.” *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 1976. New York: Vintage, 1991. 179.
- Cather, Willa. *Shadows on the Rock*. 1931. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Frederick M. Link, John J. Murphy, and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005.
- . *Willa Cather On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. Foreword Stephen Tennant. 1988. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- Eccles, W. J. *France in America*. Rev. edition. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1990.
- Hémon, Louis. *Maria Chapdelaine*. 1916. Trans. Alan Brown. Introd. Roch Carrier. Montreal: Tundra, 1989.
- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living*. 1953. Intro. John J. Murphy. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000.
- MacLennan, Hugh. *Two Solitudes*. 1945. Toronto: Macmillan, 1981.
- Moogk, Peter. *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada—A Cultural History*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2000.
- Thacker, Robert. “Voyaging into Substance Through *The Jesuit Relations*.” *Bulletin of the Friends of the Owen D. Young and Launders Libraries* 27 (1997): 7-17.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.



Pottery from Mesa Verde. From Gustav Nordenskiöld's *The Cliff Dwellers of Mesa Verde* (1893).

## Preserving and Commodifying the Past: Allusions to the Classical World in *The Professor's House*

Theresa Levy (Queens College, CUNY) and Sean Lake (Fordham University)

Willa Cather once remarked that “Economics and art are strangers” (*On Writing* 27), and she defined art as “a search for something for which there is no market demand, . . . where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values” (103). Although some critics (Paula Kot and John Hilgart in particular) have noted the theme of commodification in *The Professor's House* (1925), no one has explored the systematic way Cather uses Classical allusions to express this theme. Most of these literary and historical allusions address the plundering of the ancient European (and sometimes Near Eastern) world and are used to underscore the similar exploitation of Native American culture. Cather equates the commodification of Native American artifacts with the exploitation of the antiquities of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Near East, drawing particular attention to the archaeological expeditions and looting that took place just prior to and during her life.

Cather's education in Classics has been well-documented by Edith Lewis, Elizabeth Sargeant, and Cather biographers, especially Sharon O'Brien. In addition, L.V. Jacks, Mary Ryder, and Erik Ingvar Thurin have written at length on Cather and the Classics. As these critics and others point out, Classical allusions recur from her early college essays and stories in *The Hesperian* and poetry in *April Twilights* (1903) to the posthumously published “The Best Years.” Cather was not only a Classics enthusiast but, in fact, very well educated in both Classical literature and languages—she taught Latin at Central High School in Pittsburgh in 1901. In *The Professor's House* alone there is a wide range of allusions to Greek and Latin authors and references to Classical history, archaeology, and contemporary developments in these fields.

Cather uses three types of allusions to the Classical world in *The Professor's House*: the first is to literary, mythological, and historical figures; the second is to material culture, that is,

the subject of archaeology; and the third is to the contemporary plundering of the ancient world. It should be noted that many of these Classical allusions fall at closures in this novel, finalizing certain episodes or scenes.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Virgil is noted in a variety of Cather works,<sup>2</sup> and this greatest of Roman poets plays a crucial part in this novel as well. The earliest allusion to Virgil occurs during Tom Outland's initial encounter with Professor St. Peter, when Tom reveals that he has had no formal schooling but that he has read Virgil and Caesar with a French priest. “The boy began: ‘*Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem*’” (96), which translates as “You command me, Queen, to retell an untellable sadness.” This is a carefully chosen quotation, since in the middle book of the novel, Tom, like Aeneas, retells in the first person an untellable sadness. Cather introduces this sad tale as “a story of youthful defeat, the sort of thing a boy is sensitive about—until he grows older” (155).

In addition to this quotation, Virgil's *Aeneid* is also central to Tom's experience on the mesa and his memory of the events that took place while he was there. Tom comments on his reading of the *Aeneid*, that “[i]t was the first time I'd ever studied methodically, or intelligently” (227). Tom ingests the text, memorizing passages so that when he goes back to the *Aeneid*, the mesa is always there. Near the end of the last chapter of “Tom Outland's Story,” Tom admits, “When I look into the *Aeneid* now, I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green pinons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection” (228). His painstaking reading of this Classical author—he “began to commit long passages of Virgil to memory”—is therefore forever yoked to his experience on the mesa. H. Horwitz uses another aspect of this confession by Tom

(Continued on page 17)



## A Message from the President

Dear Members of the Cather Foundation,

I've had the good pleasure recently of writing a recommendation for publication / review of a new manuscript called, so far, *The French Connection*. Its French author, Stéphanie Durrans, writes well (in English, no less!) and addresses a subject that has long deserved greater attention. From the title, you may have conjured up images of Gene Hackman racing under the El, but despite that you will guess that the subject is the

ubiquitous influence of French history and culture in the works of Cather and how those influences helped shape her own ideas about art and her sense of herself as a writer.

One thing that struck me as I read the ms. is how little Cather cared about particular settings in and of themselves. She rendered locales so beautifully precisely because she understood that, whatever our area or community or region, it bears the stamp of human history. She always explored that history as well as the place. She seemed always to be asking herself how a particular culture inscribed itself into the lives of the particular people in that place, and how, in turn, those people left their own mark, part of the history that the place comes to signify.

The place, of course, could be the Divide, or Black Hawk, or the Blue Mesa; it could be a house or a cathedral or a rock. Wherever it was, it was a space in which a passion began, a passion touched by the place but bigger than any place. By the time the place passes through Cather's imagination and into her fiction, it comes to life again before our eyes; and we are transported not only to other worlds but to something beyond any one world, something precious and timeless.

Just as with her own idea of the "incommunicable past," this is the "incommunicable" experience of reading Cather. I was privileged to speak to this at Fort Hays State University recently, where, at Steve Trout's instigation, we faculty and students engaged once again in sharing that experience. However "incommunicable," Cather does manage to communicate it; that was part of her genius. And we will be communicating it as well, each in her or his own way, as we share that experience at Spring Conference in Nebraska and the upcoming Seminar in France, as we do in classrooms and book groups, as we do with ourselves each time we open her pages again.

The road leads through many places, but it always leads onward, leads beyond!

Hoping to see many of you in Red Cloud, Paris, and Avignon,

Chuck Peek

## THE BIG READ Features *My Ántonia*

*My Ántonia* has been chosen as one of the focus books for a new reading program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. Communities across the country are invited to participate in The Big Read, an initiative designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA is sponsoring The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A teaching guide and a CD have been created for each of the focus books. The *My Ántonia* CD features Garrison Keillor, of the famed Prairie Home Companion; Ted Kooser, former U.S. Poet Laureate; former Secretary of State Colin Powell; Cather scholar Sharon O'Brien, and Cather Foundation Executive Director Betty Kort, among others. Cather scholars have been invited to participate in events at various sites in Illinois, South Dakota, Iowa, and elsewhere chosen to feature *My Ántonia*. The one-month events include author and theatrical readings, panels, and speakers.

The NEA intends to promote classic American novels in a wide variety of locations for a wide range of audiences.

According to the NEA, "The Big Read answers a big need. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, found that not only is literary reading in America declining rapidly among all groups, but that the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young. The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture would study the pages of this report in vain." The Big Read is intended to address this issue.

Novels featured in The Big Read include *The Great Gatsby*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *My Ántonia*, with plans for more novels coming soon. NEA is now accepting grant applications. Go to [www.neabigread.org/](http://www.neabigread.org/) for further information.



## Preserving and Commodifying the Past

(Continued from page 15)

to link Virgil to the subject of archaeology in the Southwest. In explicating Tom's statement that "I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place" (227), Horwitz explains how

Southwestern ruins excited interest because they endowed the nation with a prehistory distinct from, and rival to, that of ancient Greece or Egypt. Moreover, the Anasazi ruins for a time supplant Tom's devotion to Latin, which he can resume and better appreciate only after having been duly inspired by the mesa. A better way to put this point is to say that the ruins actually fulfill the goal of studying Latin, since at Cliff City Tom learns the true meaning of "filial piety." In his obsession to preserve the relics, we might say that Tom is enacting his idealization of Virgil by reenacting Aeneas's defining act of piety—escaping Troy bearing on his shoulders not just his father but, as importantly, his household idols. By paralleling the achievement of old-world antiquities, Southwestern antiquities conferred on America a distinctive identity, making this nation no longer the epigone of old-world sophistication. (363-364)

This insight certainly echoes in Roddy Blake's complaint to Tom that "You might have given me some of this Fourth of July talk a little earlier in the game" (221), that is, before Blake sold the relics. Tom's "obsession to preserve the relics" is comparable to Aeneas's similar sense of duty. Cather integrates the two in Tom's use of the term "filial piety," providing a translation of the Latin word *pious*, which is the most common epithet for Aeneas in Virgil's epic. Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary* defines the term *pious* as used for one who "performs what is due to the gods and religion in general, to parents, kindred, teachers, country," and it cites Virgil's use of the word to describe Aeneas "on account of his filial love for [his father] Anchises."

Virgil is not the only Latin poet Tom reads, however. The other is Lucretius, whom Tom and Professor St. Peter read together at the end of the last chapter of "The Family." Lucretius, a Roman adherent of Epicurean philosophy, is the author of *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), a didactic poem written around the middle of the first century BC. The Epicurean philosophical school cultivated an ethic which prescribed the moderate pursuit and enjoyment of worldly pleasures and, perhaps more importantly, the avoidance of discomfort or displeasure. The means to attain this ideal state, called *ataraxia* or "freedom from disturbance," was to be achieved primarily through limiting one's desires. Godfrey St. Peter himself exemplifies the particular blend of self-denial and self-conscious disdain for excessive consumption with a moderate self-indulgence that one would expect from an Epicurean, and the following details in the passage where Lucretius is named suggests St. Peter's Epicurean disposition:

When he cooked a fine leg of lamb, *saignant*, well rubbed with garlic before it went into the pan, then he asked Outland to dinner. Over a dish of steaming asparagus, swathed in a napkin to keep it hot, and a bottle of sparkling Asti, they talked and watched night

fall in the garden. If the evening happened to be rainy or chilly, they sat inside and read Lucretius. (155)

In other words, Tom and St. Peter read the definitive Epicurean text when they could not enjoy their Epicurean delights in the garden. It should be noted that "The Garden" was the name of Epicurus's philosophical school.<sup>3</sup>

Besides Lucretius and Virgil, Tom also reads the prose of Julius Caesar. Caesar's literary work is evoked twice in the novel, first in chapter ten of "The Family" (96), when Tom and St. Peter first meet, and again in chapter one of "Tom Outland's Story," when we learn that Tom reads one-hundred lines of Caesar a day during his job as a cowboy (167). Despite the positive portrayals of his political, self-promoting writings, Caesar was a great plunderer of Egypt and other lands in which he fought. In fact, a significant source of his wealth and of the "pay" his soldier took home came from the booty carried off from his conquests. Cather includes Caesar's protégé Marc Antony in a significant passage suggesting this context of material gain and plunder. Professor Crane, Tom's former scientific mentor and St. Peter's colleague, informs St. Peter that he intends to go to court to get some of the money he feels he is owed from Tom's invention. St. Peter, disappointed in this pitiful, uncharacteristic display of greed in a good man, recalls a lament quoted from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (4.5.16-17): "If Outland were here to-night, he might say with Marc Antony, 'My fortunes have corrupted honest men'" (131). Of course, it is not only Crane who desecrates Tom's legacy. The Marselluses, for example, build a new home with the wealth they earn from Louie's marketing of Tom's engine, and then name their ostentatious new place "Outland." Professor St. Peter's daughter Kathleen complains to her father, "Yes, and now he's all turned out chemicals and dollars and cents, hasn't he? But not for you and me! Our Tom is much nicer than theirs" (112-3).

Besides these Latin authors, two Greek authors are referred to in *The Professor's House*, namely, Plutarch and Euripides. Euripides is evoked twice, once by implication as the author of *Medea* and once biographically. When the Professor reflects on the past joys in his old house during the childhood of his daughters, he wonders whether there is any way to keep children unadulterated and pure, to preserve their "generous impulses" (107), other than to destroy them as Medea did. Later, St. Peter shares his depression with his wife Lillian: "I was thinking, about Euripides; how, he went and lived in a cave by the sea, and it was thought queer, at the time. It seems that houses had become insupportable to him. I wonder whether it was because he had observed women so closely all his life" (136). The Plutarch allusion (59) is to the story of the Spartan boy's wolf from his biography *Lycurgus* (the traditional name of the founder of the Spartan constitution) in *Parallel Lives*, and functions as an analogy for St. Peter's son-in-law Scott's vanity and frustrated literary ambition. It is a brief story about the importance of stealing for young men in Sparta. According to Plutarch, Spartan youth over twelve years of age were deprived of all but the barest necessities so that they would have to steal to provide for themselves, and the Spartans put a serious value on a young man's ability to steal without being caught. In Plutarch's story, a young boy actually died trying to protect a fox he had stolen. The boy held the cub in his cloak, concealing it until it disemboweled and killed him. Plutarch writes that

## Preserving and Commodifying the Past (Continued)

Spartan boys stole things with such ardor that it is said that one young man, having stolen a fox cub and hidden it under his cloak, endured his stomach being torn apart by the cub until he died, in order to keep the cub concealed. This is not an unbelievable story considering what the Spartan youth of today undergo, for I have seen many of them die from a whipping at the altar of Artemis. (*Lycurgus* 18.1, our translation)

All three Greek literary allusions relate to St. Peter's disillusionment over the death of "generous impulses" in a society devoted to acquisition.

\* \* \*

The science of archaeology, strongly associated by Cather with material culture, was in its infancy when she wrote this novel and, even more so, during her school years, and it provides a major context for *The Professor's House*. The seminal archaeological work *Description de l'Egypte*, the result of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798-1801), was not published until the early nineteenth century (1809-1822). In addition, discoveries like the Rosetta Stone (in 1799) sparked an era of Egyptomania in many European countries.<sup>4</sup> Also in Egypt, the ancient town of Oxyrynchus started to yield its literary treasures with the countless papyrus fragments found by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt in 1897. These scraps of papyrus contained legal, domestic, and governmental documents along with fragments of literary works that had been lost for fifteen centuries. The first edition of these fragments was published in 1898, and Grenfell and Hunt had been involved in the publication of nine more volumes by the time *The Professor's House* was written. A bit earlier than the Oxyrynchus find, the ancient world of Homer (Mycenae in mainland Greece, Odysseus's island of Ithaca, and Troy in Asia Minor) had been excavated for the first time by Heinrich Schliemann, who published his works on ancient Troy and Mycenae between 1868-1878.<sup>5</sup> Scientific archaeology on the island of Crete began subsequently in 1900 with the first excavations of Sir Arthur Evans, who considered what he discovered to be the oldest civilization in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, in North America, Swedish explorer Gustaf Nordenskiöld published

his book on Mesa Verde in 1893, a book Cather knew (Horwitz 163). Shortly after its discovery by Richard Wetherill in 1888, Mesa Verde had begun to be excavated and its relics removed, often by amateurs. In fact, the Wetherills themselves were at one point accused of corrupting the ancient site by allowing the tourists they brought to the mesa to carry off artifacts (Kot 397).

Cather demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of contemporary archaeological methods in her novel. The most significant example is the kind of notebook Tom keeps and the specific nature of his entries. Although not formally trained in archaeological methods, Cather had "the opportunity for face-to-face exposure to the major archaeologist at Mesa Verde," Jesse Walter Fewkes, when she visited there in 1915 (Harrell 66-67), and she certainly displays enough knowledge to make Tom, an uneducated young man at this point in his life, surprisingly proficient in his first stab at archaeological investigation.<sup>7</sup> Cather's emphasis here is to contrast altruistic Tom's relatively sound and scientific methods to those of amateurs, tourists, and looters merely out to plunder the mesa and cart off its antiquities as souvenirs or for big profit. Through his methodic and rigorous approach, Tom's intentions are revealed to be intellectual and aesthetic rather than materialistic. Tom, in fact, keeps a notebook so valuable that the esteemed historian Godfrey St. Peter chooses to edit it and write an introduction for its publication.

It has been noted that there is an element of ambiguity in Tom's evaluation of the things he finds and that perhaps he does not fully realize the nature of his own relationship to these artifacts, that even removing them to a museum is somehow corrupt. Paula Kot, however, overextends her argument when she claims that Tom is really just another materialistic speculator and his excavations "economically motivated" (413). She is also wrong in equating Louie Marsellus's venture, his ostentatious Outland mansion and commercialization of Tom's invention, with Tom's venture in the Cliff City (417-18). Rather, Cather clearly contrasts Marsellus, a shrewd and successful entrepreneur the Professor accuses of "convert[ing] Tom's] very bones into a personal asset" (36), and Tom, who, before going off to war, imprudently left the results of his research to the Professor's daughter Rosamond in a



Third-century BC Pottery from the Greek island of Milos. Discovered in 1829 and taken to England, these pieces are now in New York's Metropolitan Museum.

haphazardly drawn will. Commercialization, in fact, seems alien to his nature, which is why he condemns Roddy Blake so mercilessly for selling off the artifacts they had gathered on the mesa. Kot misses the fact that there are two approaches to the material culture of the past: that of the speculator and that of the archaeologist. For example, Blake equates the relics to “a gold mine or a pocket of turquoise” (221) that he assumed he and Tom would “realize on,” since, as Blake explains, everything “come[s] to money in the end” (220). But Cather is at pains to show that Tom’s enjoyment and appreciation of the artifacts are scientifically and aesthetically oriented and clearly distinguished from Blake’s misguided attempt to profit from the lode they had struck. There are a number of passages which prove this point. Subsequent to his dismissal of Blake (for which he later feels guilty), Tom has his epiphany on the mesa; he explains, “For me the mesa was . . . a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed” (226-27). And Tom reveals his scientific and scholarly interest in the artifacts when he complains that the museums “don’t care about our things. They want something that came from Crete or Egypt. I’d break my jars sooner than they should get them” (102). He goes on to describe his pieces of turquoise as “just the way they come out of the mine, before the jewelers have tampered with them and made them look green. The Indians like them this way” (102). The latter passage particularly emphasizes the intrinsic value that Tom finds in these artifacts. Cather sums up his character in this regard near the end of the novel, when St. Peter reflects that Tom “had made something new in the world—and the rewards . . . he left to others” (237). As the Blooms conclude, “Tom Outland, himself tortured by the conflict between the acceptance or renunciation of material values, adheres finally to the *modus vivendi* of the cliff dwellers as he translates their standards and course of action into his own” (91).

Tom’s sound archaeological method, indebted as it is to the discovery of ancient material culture in the Old World (the larger context of the mesa story), is one of several essentially Classical allusions in the novel. The first and most direct is in the fifth chapter of “The Family,” where the frieze of the Parthenon is used to describe Professor St. Peter’s head in a visored rubber bathing cap as he swims in Lake Michigan: “his head look sheathed and small and intensely alive, like the heads of the warriors on the Parthenon frieze in their tight, archaic helmets” (57). The comparison anticipates Cather’s theme of commodification in that these sculptural reliefs are the quintessential examples of the looting and plundering of the ancient world. Thomas Bruce, 7th Lord of Elgin, began removing various works of sculpture from the Athenian Acropolis in 1801, and although it had not become a significant political issue for the Greek government until 1983, it had been a British concern since their removal, motivating public figures, including Lord Byron, to demand their return. Cather anticipates this allusion to the frieze twice in the first chapter of “The Family,” both times extending her Classical context. In the first, Kathleen compares her father’s head to a statue’s:

high, polished, hard as bronze . . . the close-growing black hair threw off a streak of light along the rounded ridge where the skull was fullest. The mould of his head on the side was so individual and definite, so far

from casual, that it was more like a statue’s head than a man’s. (5)

In the second, in a cluster of paragraphs (8-10), Augusta’s dressmaking mannequins are playfully referred to as forms and, at one point, evoked as “her archaic forms” (22).<sup>8</sup> They are headless torsos (one is armless), like so many ancient statues, and Augusta refers to one as “the bust” (9), which describes its considerable breasts but also puns works of sculpture confined to the head and upper body. The fact that these belong to the only character with a Classical name is also significant.<sup>9</sup> Early in the novel, St. Peter protests Augusta’s attempt to remove her forms from his attic study, implying that such archaic forms are necessary and familiar company for him as he works (12-13).

Perhaps the most significant linking of ancient Old World and ancient New World material culture occurs when Tom Outland first shows an example of his Native American pottery to the Professor’s family. Cather describes this “earthen water jar [as] shaped like those common in Greek sculpture, and ornamented with a geometrical pattern in black and white” (101)—precisely the kind of well-publicized artifacts (c. 1000-725 BC) beginning to be recovered in Troy, Mycenae, and Crete less than a generation before Cather published her novel. This comparison is confirmed later by Father Duchene, who compares the design of Anasazi pottery to that of early Cretan pottery, the so-called Cretan geometric period. Duchene also theorizes that the cliff-dwellers were probably destroyed for their hides, clothing, and weapons (197-99), drawing a contrast between the Anasazi (who are presented as pure and ideal by Duchene) and their conquerors and exploiters (who carry off the booty of the Anasazi).

\* \* \*

Thus, Cather writes at a time when the British and French, primarily, as well as unscrupulous individuals from other countries were continuing to remove countless works of art to the great museums of Europe and North America. Napoleon, the namesake of the Professor (Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter [143]), had carried off artifacts from Egypt (as mentioned above) and elsewhere; St. Peter jokes that his daughter’s shopping was “like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces” (135). A few pages later (138-39), the Marselluses and the St. Peters discuss shopping for antiquities in Paris to furnish the new Outland house, although the Professor will have nothing to do with the shopping trip. His great academic work is also relevant to the discussion of looting the ancient New World. He writes about the Spanish conquistadors, those early Spanish explorers who were among the first Europeans to carry off the art, treasures, and other booty of Native Americans.

The harsh reality that Cather depicts is that the art and material relics of the Native American past were indeed being commodified in her own day. Throughout the novel she emphasizes how this has happened by drawing comparisons to the looting of the ancient European and Near Eastern world. Of course, she also shows such commodification and corruption within the Professor’s own family and house. Although Tom (the purest *possible* expression of resistance to commodification) has died and his name and achievements been transformed into material goods, nonetheless the struggle against commodification is continued by St. Peter. He preserves Tom’s memory; he preserves Tom’s notebook, *and* he resists the shopping sprees and excessive consumption of his wife and daughter Rosamond. While he, like Tom, is not without flaws in regard to material

## Preserving and Commodifying the Past

(Continued)

pleasures, he is fastidiously Epicurean in his enjoyment of them and stubborn in his resistance to exploitation. Cather does not present pure and idealistic characters, but she does maintain a consistent argument against materialism and the corruption of the past. If Cather's language sometimes blurs the materialistic and the archaeological value of the artifacts, this is precisely her point. The ambiguity is meant to draw attention to the difficulty in separating the commodification of artifacts from the ideal appreciation of them.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The end of chapters five, ten, thirteen, fourteen, and seventeen of "The Family" end with Classical allusions. In chapter one of "Tom Outland's Story," the penultimate paragraph mentions Tom's reading of Caesar. It is also notable that Cather ends two of her short stories, "Flavia and her Artists" and "The Way of the World," with Caius Marius among the ruins of Carthage.

<sup>2</sup> For example, *My Ántonia* begins with an epigraph from the Georgics (3.66-67): "*optima dies . . . prima fugit*," which Cather translates in book three as "in the lives of mortals the best days are the first to flee." *Shadows on the Rock* contains two quotations from the *Aeneid*: "*Inferretque deos Latium*" (1.6) in the novel's second book—"And he brings his gods to Latium"; and a translation of "*Non ignora mali miseris succurrere disco*" (1.630) in the third—"Having known misery, I have learned to pity the miserable."

<sup>3</sup> See Michael W. Price for an excellent discussion of the Epicurean allusions in this novel and the ways in which Cather portrays St. Peter's Epicurean lifestyle.

<sup>4</sup> Systematic excavations of Egypt continued to yield exciting finds throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1922, a few years before *The Professor's House* was published.

<sup>5</sup> *Ithaka, der Peloponnesus und Troja* (1868), *Trojanische Altertümer* (1874), *Troja und seine Ruinen* (1875), and *Mykenä* (1878).

<sup>6</sup> Sir Arthur Evans published his monumental work on the ancient Minoan archaeology of Crete, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, between 1921–1935.

<sup>7</sup> See David Harrell's book for an exhaustive study of Cather's knowledge of Mesa Verde, her visits there, and how they are reflected in "Tom Outland's Story."

<sup>8</sup> Erik Thurin argues that the insistent use of "forms" is meant to be an ironic allusion to Aristotle's concept of what determines the essence of a thing (278, note 6).

<sup>9</sup> Augusta is one of many characters named for Classical figures throughout Cather's works, but the only character with such a name in this work. For discussion of the significance of Augusta's name refer to Klaus P. Stich, who argues that the name suggests the goddess Juno Augusta and is akin to the "virgin and mother side of the not always ominous Crone or Atropos aspect of the Triple Goddess" (238).

### Works Cited

- Bloom, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom. "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: A Study in Thematic Symbolism." *American Literature*. 21.1 (March 1949): 71-93.
- Cather, Willa. *On Writing*. New York: Knopf, 1949.
- . *The Professor's House*. 1925. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Description de l'Égypte*. Paris: Commission des sciences et arts d'Égypte. 1809-1828.
- Evans, Sir Arthur. *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*. Vols. I-VI. London: Macmillan, 1921-1935.
- Harrell, David. *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1992.
- Hilgart, John. "Death Comes for the Aesthete: Commodity Culture and the Artifact in Cather's *The Professor's House*." *Studies in the Novel*. 30.3 (1998): 388-99.
- Horwitz, H. "Selling Relics, Preserving Antiquities: *The Professor's House* and the Narrative of American Anthropology." *Configurations* 3.3 (1995): 353-89.
- Jacks, L.V. "The Classics and Willa Cather." *Prairie Schooner* 35 (1961-1962): 289-96.
- Kot, Paula. "Speculation, Tourism, and *The Professor's House*." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 48.4 (2002): 393-426.
- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living*. New York: Knopf, 1953.
- Nordenskiöld, Gustaf. *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde, Southwestern Colorado: Their Pottery and Instruments*. Trans. D. Lloyd Morgan. Stockholm/Chicago: P.A. Norstedt and Sons, 1893.
- O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Harvard UP, 1987.
- "Pius." *A Latin Dictionary*. Revised edition. Ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford: Clarendon, 1956.
- Price, Michael W. "Epicurus in Hamilton: St. Peter's Contemplative Retirement to the Attic Study and Garden in *The Professor's House*." *Cather Studies* 4. Ed. Robert Thacker and Michael A. Peterman. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. 264-83.
- Ryder, Mary. *Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus*. Lewistown, NY: Mellen, 1990.
- Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. 1953. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1963.
- Stich, Klaus P. "The Professor's House: Prohibition, Ripe Grapes, and Euripides." *Cather Studies* 4. Ed. Robert Thacker and Michael A. Peterman. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. 225-43.
- Thurin, Erik Ingvar. *The Humanization of Willa Cather: Classicism in an American Classic*. Lund, Sweden: Lund UP, 1989.

## Cather Foundation Remembers Dee Yost

The Cather Foundation Board of Governors lost one of its own on March 26, 2007. It is with genuine fondness and appreciation that the Cather Foundation remembers Dee Yost. Dee served as the Public Service Librarian at Hastings College and was a member of the National Library Association, Nebraska State Library Association, the Hastings Public Library Board, and the Friends of the Library Association. As an active member of the Cather Foundation Board, Dee worked hard to support the activities of the Foundation. Always ready with her camera, her photographs often appeared in the *Newsletter*, particularly following Spring Conference events. In 2005, she helped lead the One Book One State Nebraska Reads *My Ántonia* project. Dee routinely sponsored student members of the Hastings College Sigma Tau Delta Fraternity in projects that included painting the Cather Childhood Home, cleaning the Baptist Church, and cleaning the furniture in the Red Cloud Opera House Auditorium. Memorials in her honor can be sent to the Cather Foundation, 413 North Webster Street, Red Cloud, Nebraska, 68970.

# Sanctuary and Transformation: Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*

Ann Moseley

Texas A&M University-Commerce

Willa Cather was deeply influenced by the art and religion of the Middle Ages, particularly by the architecture of the Gothic cathedrals that she visited during various trips to France. Indeed, according to Edith Lewis, it was this "Catholic theme" (155) and Cather's "discovery of France on this continent" (151) in the city of Quebec that inspired her to write *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). In this novel, set in the late seventeenth century, Cather employed a technique that she called "anacoluthon" (*On Writing* 15), which involves "a temporary suspension of completeness" (Bloom and Bloom 198) and recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque as reflecting "a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (24) in the folk carnivals of François Rabelais's time. Paradoxically then, in *Shadows*, Cather not only captures a civilization frozen in time like the grotesque sculptures in medieval cathedrals but also one in the process of cultural and spiritual change.

## Sanctuary and the Vertical Universe

Cather's lifelong fascination with the medieval period and with France in particular probably began in college with her reading of major French writers (later encouraged through friendship with the Seibels in Pittsburgh), including Victor Hugo (Lewis 55, 43-44), himself deeply influenced by Rabelais. In 1898, Cather asserted that a reader who wanted to know what it was like to live in the fifteenth century—the century of Rabelais's birth—should read Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), which she described as

a perfect representation of Gothic art and of the life which fed the roots of that art. You begin to understand, as you read, how out of that weltering chaos of wickedness, lawlessness, superstition and fear, the great cathedrals reared their towers of impregnable stone, like the very fortresses of God. . . . Over this lawless Paris, over this mad crowd of tricksters who live by their wits, ruffians who live by their swords, priests who live by their cunning, this motley world of princes, beggars, knights, cutthroats and monsters, towers always the cathedral of Notre Dame, the only stronghold of succor left to desperate humanity. It was there at last that Claude [Frollo] and Esmeralda and even poor Quasimodo found shelter. (*World & Parish* 373)

Vital to *Shadows*, central to several other Cather works, and representative of the medieval worldview are vertical images such as towers and the theme of sanctuary, both introduced in



Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris. Photo by J. Murphy.

this passage. As John J. Murphy and David Stouck assert in their "Historical Essay," the rock of Quebec is "a sanctuar[y] symbolic of the church" (337), and, I might add, specifically of cathedrals such as Notre Dame. Murphy and Stouck continue that Cather "drew on religious and biblical imagery . . . to overshadow the refuge aspect of the city and fashion it into a bastion of orthodox, almost medieval tradition" (346). I would further argue that in recreating this medieval imagery in her novel, Cather also employed the transformative principle of the grotesque, the movement from the demonic and the ugly to the sublime and the beautiful, represented by parallel imagery and characters in both *Hunchback* and *Shadows*.

In the preface to his book *Cromwell*, Hugo argues that "to recover the vigor it had had in the time of Rabelais . . . drama had to be changed to embody a

struggle between two opposing principles. The beautiful and the ugly, the comic and the tragic, the grotesque and the sublime—these are the forces which must come face to face in order to produce strong emotions" (qtd. in Maurois 503). In arguing for this literary dialectic, Hugo is, in effect, calling for a replication of the spiritual dialectic found in Gothic architecture, which he comments on in *Hunchback* as follows:

[W]hen an edifice was complete, there was almost as much of it underground as above. Unless it were constructed upon piles, like Notre Dame, a palace, a fortress, or a church had always a double foundation. In the cathedrals it was some kind of second subterranean cathedral, low, dark, mysterious, blind, and mute under the upper nave, which was always resplendent with light and resounded with organ music and the pealing of the bells night and day. . . . These mighty buildings . . . not only had foundations, but, as it were, roots that branched out underground into chambers, galleries, and staircases, like the structure above it. The cellars of an edifice thus formed yet another edifice, into which you descended instead of ascended. . . . (315-16)

Symbolically visualized here in the vertical spaces of the cathedral is the transformation from the demonic to the sublime.

Although Cather mentions the cathedral of Quebec, it is the "rock-set town" itself with its Norman Gothic roofs and spires (8-10) that is the true cathedral in *Shadows*. Cather describes the town as a multi-layered structure like that of a cathedral, "a mountain rock, cunningly built over with churches, convents, fortifications, gardens, following the natural irregularities of the

## Sanctuary and Transformation

(Continued)

headland on which they stood; some high, some low, some thrust up on a spur, some nestling in a hollow, some sprawling unevenly along a declivity" (9). Quebec's cathedral itself does not sit on the highest ledge of rock, for just "behind the Cathedral the cliff ran up sheer again, shot out into a jutting spur, and there, high in the blue air, between heaven and earth, rose old Bishop Laval's Seminary. Beneath it the rock fell away in a succession of terraces like a circular staircase . . ." (9-10). This rock stairway parallels the "winding stairway connecting the two halves of Quebec," "the Upper Town with the Lower" (13), a literal relationship that suggests transformation.

If the rock of Quebec is a natural representation of cathedral structure, the altar of the church of Notre Dame de la Victoire is its microcosm. Cather portrays the city of Quebec itself as "an altar with many candles" (195), and when the apothecary's daughter Cécile Auclair takes waifish little Jacques to Notre Dame de la Victoire to pray, Cather describes the church's high altar as a representation of a feudal castle, all stone walls and towers. The outer wall was low and thick, with many battlements; the second was higher, with fewer battlements; the third seemed to be the wall of the palace itself, with towers and many windows. Within the arched gateway . . . the Host was kept. Cécile had always taken it for granted that the Kingdom of Heaven looked exactly like this . . . (77)

Cécile's view of this altar as "a reproduction" of the spiritual realm "made in France by people who knew" (77) confirms Emile Mâle's reminder that the people of the Middle Ages saw "the world as a symbol" and believed that, just as a great work of art is in the artist's mind before it becomes a physical creation, "so the universe was in the thought of God from the beginning" (29). The Quebec nuns share this medieval perspective of world order and symbolism; indeed, they had probably imparted it to Cécile, for in

Quebec as well as at home in Dieppe or Tours,

they had the same well-ordered universe about them: this all important earth, created by God for a great purpose, the sun which He made to light it by day, the moon which He made to light it by night,—and the stars, made to beautify the vault of heaven like frescoes . . . There was sin, of course, and there was punishment after death; but there was always hope, even for the most deprived . . . (115)

Symbolized in what Cather describes as a "lovingly arranged and ordered universe" (115) is the idea of—and the hope for—spiritual transformation that medieval architects sought to reproduce in the cathedral.

### Degradation and Transformation

The dichotomous yet transformative dimension of the demonic and the sublime at the heart of *Hunchback* and *Shadows* is present not only in cathedral structure but also in sharply contrasting characters. On different levels, Hugo's gypsy girl, Esmeralda, and Cather's Cécile represent innocence and purity, whereas Quasimodo, the deformed bell ringer of Notre Dame, and Blinker,

the misshapen man who carries wood for the Auclairs, represent the transformative power latent in the grotesque.

The imagery used to describe Esmeralda and Cécile is remarkably similar. Both girls are associated with youthful innocence and happiness as well as with fire and maternity—but in different ways. Readers are introduced to Cécile through her singing, an activity also associated with Esmeralda. Furthermore, Cécile's hair and eyes, like Esmeralda's, are dark. As she greets her hero Pierre Charron, her eyes, "a very dark blue, almost black" (15), appear "to be dancing" (197) while the couple holds hands, swinging them back and forth rhythmically. When the reader first sees Esmeralda, she is dressed in a golden bodice and multicolored gypsy skirt, but later, in the cathedral cell where she obtains sanctuary from the lecherous designs of Archdeacon Claude Frollo, she is dressed in pure white. Her constant companion is a white goat, associated with witchcraft in medieval times but also evoking the maternal care of a shepherdess. At the bonfire at the Place de Grève, Esmeralda dances and sings for the crowd, her lovely face following "with singular expressiveness every capricious variation of the music, from its wildest inspiration to its almost chaste dignity" (67). In a parallel contrast, the fire associated with Cécile is the hearth fire, which, as Ann Romines suggests, "validates domestic life" (159).

Both Esmeralda and Cécile show great kindness to the unfortunate, and both are described in terms of divine motherhood. When Quasimodo calls out for water as he is being tortured on the pillory after having been whipped unmercifully for an hour, Esmeralda is the only one who answers his call. As Hugo observes, "Anywhere it would have been a touching scene to watch that beautiful girl, so young, so pure, so charming,

and at the same time, so weak, thus piously hastening to the relief of such wretchedness, deformity, and malice. But on the platform of the pillory, it was sublime" (232). Cécile continues the practice begun by her mother of inviting the poor and disfigured Blinker into her kitchen

for a bowl of soup each night after he delivers the Auclairs' wood. Moreover, after Blinker carries the box with the figures of the Christmas crèche into the living-room for her, she "asked him to come in and sit down by the fire. Her mother had never done that, but today there seemed no way out of it. The fête which she meant so especially for [the child] Jacques, turned out to be even more for Blinker" (127).

Although Hugo first queries whether Esmeralda is "a young girl, or a fairy, or an angel" (63), he later sees in her "that serenity which Raphael later found at the mystic point of intersection of virginity, maternity, and divinity" (100). However, she retains a pagan aura, whereas Cécile's connection to divine motherhood is unambiguous. Cather's reference to the blue cloak of the Blessed Mother who stands with her Child "high up among the shadows" (78) of Notre Dame de la Victoire foreshadows the "blue silk dress" (245) Cécile is sent by her aunts. Susan J. Rosowski observes that in the sledding scene "Cécile's tender care of Jacques, the colors of holy blue and gold, the echo of 'celestial' (heavenly) with 'Cécile' and 'clair' (light) with Auclair, the halo-like afterglow behind the figures, the ascent 'into paler and paler levels of blue air'—all

link Cécile to the Virgin Mother” (*Voyage*186). From these observations, she concludes that in *Shadows* Cather “wrote a saint’s life to tell of the apotheosis of a French girl into a Canadian Holy Mother” (184).<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Esmeralda and Cécile are archetypal female figures, Quasimodo and Blinker are typical medieval grotesques. However, both Quasimodo and Blinker undergo a spiritual transformation that belies their appearance. At the beginning of *Hunchback*, the bourgeois multitude clamor for the contest of the Pope of Fools. Almost unwittingly participating, Quasimodo displays his distorted face through the circular window set up for the contest:

[T]he sublime face . . . now dazzled the assemblage. . . . We shall not try to describe that tetrahedron nose, that horseshoe mouth, that small left eye obscured by red bushy eyebrows; the right eye which disappeared completely under an enormous wart; those jagged teeth, with gaps here and there, like the battlements of a fortress; that horny lip, over which one of those teeth protruded like the tusk of an elephant; that forked chin, and above all, the expression on the whole face, a mixture of malice, astonishment, and sadness. (51-52)

Blinker is introduced as “a terrifying face” (19) also seen through a window, and his appearance sharply recalls Quasimodo’s. A “short, heavy man,” Blinker “spoke out of the side of his mouth, as he looked out of the side of his face. He was so terribly cross-eyed that Cécile had never really looked into his eyes at all,—this was why he was called Blinker. Eating was difficult for him,—he had once had an abscess in his lower jaw, . . . and pieces of the bone had come out. His face was badly shrunken on that side, under the old scars” (19). Blinker even has “woolly red hair” (21) like Quasimodo, and Cather calls him a “mis-shapen fellow” (20) and “so ill-favoured that”—just as Esmeralda couldn’t bear to look at Quasimodo—“nobody wanted him about” (21).

Hugo tells Quasimodo’s history in flashback. Abandoned in the trough for orphan babes in front of Notre Dame, Quasimodo is rescued by Archdeacon Claude and trained by him to ring the bells at the cathedral. Quasimodo is inextricably linked with the cathedral itself; according to Hugo,

This hoary cathedral was his carapace. . . . Moreover, not only did his body seem to have fashioned itself after the cathedral, but likewise his mind. It would be difficult to determine the state of that soul, what folds it had contracted, what form it had taken under that knotty covering, in that savage mode of life. (149)

In this home he experiences the inherent poles of the spiritual universe, for “[t]he saints were his friends, and blessed him; the

monsters were his friends, and protected him.” Hugo calls the cathedral “his maternal edifice” (151) and implies that ringing the bells is the expression of his soul.

Blinker tells his own story to Auclair one winter night during a bout with insomnia. The son of a torturer in the prison at Rouen, Blinker and his family were socially ostracized and he himself forced to take up the torturer’s trade. He is in torment for having forced a confession out of a laundress falsely accused of murdering her missing son. After the woman was hanged, Blinker began to suffer decomposition of the jaw bone and during painful, sleepless nights was haunted by the ghosts of all those he had tortured. Compounding his troubles, the dead woman’s son returned after a voyage as a sailor, causing Blinker to anguish over how many of these were innocent victims. He sought escape in the New World and thought that if he could get to a place where no one knew him as an executioner, he could begin life anew. But the faces continued to haunt him. “They are inside me, monsieur,” he laments to Auclair; “I carry them with me” (188).

In Hugo’s novel Quasimodo’s transformation is linked to the carnival atmosphere prevailing over the joint observance of the Day of Kings (Epiphany) and the Feast of Fools. Bakhtin

explains that carnival is “the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (10), and indeed, subsequent to Quasimodo’s being carried upon a litter in the ridiculous parade for the new Pope of Fools, Frollo’s intrigue implicates him in the kidnapping of Esmeralda and initiates a dramatic change in his life.<sup>2</sup> Accused of keeping company with a witch (Esmeralda) and a sorcerer (Frollo), Quasimodo is tortured on the same platform upon which he had reigned as Pope of Fools. Whipped unmercifully for an hour, he calls out for water in a scene reminiscent of Christ’s Passion, a connection Cather (who had declared Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* as “the most Christ-like character ever put into a novel” [*World & Parish* 344]) could not have missed. In his interpretation of the grotesque, Bakhtin declares that “[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation” (19), but that “[d]egradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply . . . absolute destruction; but to hurl it down to the reproductive . . .

zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (21). Both Esmeralda and Quasimodo are thrust into such depths—he on the pillory and she, later, in the pit awaiting execution for murder and witchcraft. Quasimodo’s sudden transformation occurs when he rescues the girl from the porch of the cathedral as she does penance. He carries her inside, shouts, “Sanctuary!” and “at that moment Quasimodo was really beautiful” (347).



The sundial in the Quebec Seminary courtyard with the inscription *Dies nostri quasi umbra*, “Our days as if a shadow” (1 Chronicles 29:15), echoed in the title *Shadows on the Rock*. Photo by J. Murphy.

## Sanctuary and Transformation

(Continued)

Hugo's story of torture and false accusation corresponds not only to Blinker's story but to that of Bichet, another Old World character in *Shadows*. A poor knife-grinder who had lodged in the Auclairs' cellar in Paris and was tortured and executed for taking two brass pots from a deserted mansion, Bichet becomes an instrument in the transformation of Blinker. Overhearing Auclair explain that the French law had wronged Bichet in "reckon[ing property] worth more than a poor man's life" (110), Blinker is given courage to tell his story and confess his guilt to Auclair. Blinker's experience is perhaps the best example in Cather's novel of the transformative power in the grotesque. Indeed, as Joseph Murphy points out, Blinker's very name—which recalls the flickering, shadowy lighting in the novel—suggests "the redemptive power of the character's suffering" (36). And Auclair tells Blinker, "When God sent you that affliction in your face, he showed mercy to you" (188). Thus, his own grotesque affliction as well as the effect of Bichet's story are major elements of Blinker's transformation. A third transformative one is the manifestation of the Holy Family during the setting up of the Christmas crèche, when Cécile marvels that "she had never seen [Blinker] come so far out of his shell; she had supposed that his shrinking sullenness was a part of him, like his crooked eyes or his red hair" (126). Finally, Blinker—and all of Canada—is regenerated through the angelic mending of the spinning wheel in recluse Jeanne Le Ber's solitary cell; indeed, it is Blinker who carries the news of Jeanne's miracle, thus becoming a transformative agent himself.

In contrast to Cather, who, like Bakhtin, unambiguously views the grotesque as a transformative means to the sublime, Hugo questions its permanency. For only a limited time does Quasimodo's clarity and adoration raise Esmeralda and himself to a higher world, symbolized by the "little cell, built over one of the side aisles, under a flying buttress, which overlooked the cloister" (361) to where he takes her for sanctuary. When he visits her there, she can see only his ugliness even as he contemplates her beauty. She dies without realizing the difference between spiritual and profane love, and in Quasimodo's faithful devotion, clutching her body in his arms in her burial place until he too dies, grotesque is joined to grotesque, and lasting transformation is denied. Thus, as Bakhtin observes, Hugo ultimately "reduces the intrinsic value of the grotesque by declaring that it is a means of contrasting the sublime" (43).

No clear evidence exists that Cather drew directly on Hugo's novel in writing hers, published during the centennial of his. However, clear interrelationships suggest an indirect influence—one of those influences that "'teased' the mind for years" (*On Writing* 48) and worked itself subconsciously into her writing. Hugo's influence may indeed have contributed to Cather's use of architectural imagery and characterization to depict the transformative process of divine power. In *Hunchback*, Hugo believed that "the Word was enclosed in the edifice" (176) of the cathedral, that "not only every religious symbol, but every human thought has its page in that vast book" of stone (177). Yet stone is humanized and transcended in *Shadows*. Whereas Blinker's spiritually tormented "twisted face" reminds Auclair of the

"terrible weather-worn stone faces on the churches at home,—figures of the tormented in scenes of the Last Judgment" (189), the final image we have of Blinker is one of renewal. During the "glorious transmutation of autumn" before the ships from France return home, a mountain ash "by Blinker's cave" is "loaded with orange berries," and the "ragged cliff-side" behind Cécile's kitchen door is "beautiful" with crimson and yellow foliage (262). In the novel's epilogue, Cécile herself is transformed by the fulfillment of her maternal promise as Madame Charron—the mother of "the Canadians of the future" (320).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In her essay "Willa Cather's Magnificat: Matriarchal Christianity in *Shadows on the Rock*," Rosowski further develops Cécile's symbolic transformation into a Madonna figure as well as other transformations in the novel.

<sup>2</sup> Cather, too, employs a carnival atmosphere in her novel—to introduce Cécile's heartbreaking fear of returning to France, Frontenac's neglect by the king and subsequent death in Quebec, and Auclair's feeling of abandonment in losing his patron. The whole of Quebec gathers—"[n]ot even on feast-days did one see so many people come together" (235)—in colorful costume to cheer the coming of ships from France. Yet the subsequent purgatorial atmosphere will be transformed into "becoming, change, and renewal" with the final arrival of Pierre Charron and in the epilogue chapter.

### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1968.
- Bloom, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom. *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1962.
- Cather, Willa. *Shadows on the Rock*. 1931. Cather Scholarly edition. Ed. Frederick M. Link, John J. Murphy, and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005.
- . *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. Foreword by Stephen Tennant. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1949.
- . *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Ed. William M. Curtin. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970.
- Hugo, Victor. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. 1831. Trans. Walter J. McCobb. New York: Signet, 1965.
- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. 1953. Intro. by John J. Murphy. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000.
- Mâle, Emile. *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*. 1913. Trans. Dora Nussey. New York: Harper, 1958.
- Maurois, André. "Afterword." Trans. Phyllis La Farge. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo. New York: Signet, 1965. 501-11.
- Murphy, John J. and David Stouck. "Historical Essay." *Shadows on the Rock*. Cather Scholarly edition. U of Nebraska P, 2005. 331-81.
- Murphy, Joseph C. "Shadows on the Rock and To the Lighthouse: A Bakhtinian Perspective." *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* 31.3 (1987): 31-37.
- Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Rosowski, Susan J. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- . "Willa Cather's Magnificat: Matriarchal Christianity in *Shadows on the Rock*. *Literature & Belief* 8 (1988): 66-75.

Visit the Cather Foundation Book Store and Events Calendar  
[www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org)



# Cather's Nod to Mickiewicz: *Pan Tadeusz, O Pioneers!*, and the New World Epic

Mary R. Ryder  
South Dakota State University

While critics generally acknowledge that Cather borrowed her epigraph to *O Pioneers!* from Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* or *The Last Foray in Lithuania*, no extensive study exists of why Cather chose this particular epigraph, how she would have known the Polish national epic, or how the work is reflected in or may have influenced the writing of her first Nebraska novel. While the exact connection of Cather to Mickiewicz and his work may never be known, Cather's conscious choice of this epigraph signals that she conceived of *O Pioneers!* as an extension



"[T]he open face of the country . . . seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intrmingled, as if the one were the breath of the other."—*O Pioneers!*  
Photograph by David E. Scherman.

of the epic tradition, thus confirming Ronald Weber's claim that it was "not plot that stirred Cather . . . but character, place, and emotion arising from a remembered past on the Divide" that "held epic proportion in her imagination" (132).

*O Pioneers!*, more than any Cather novel (with the possible exception of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*), is most often referred to as epic. David Stouck, as early as 1972, described Cather's imaginative mode in the novel as an "epic vision of the land and its first people" ("*O Pioneers!*" 23) and identified Alexandra Bergson as "an epic heroine" (26). Cather's debt in this novel to both the epic and pastoral visions of Virgil, whether through the *Georgics*, *Eclogues*, or the *Aeneid*, has been thoroughly examined. Susan J. Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous* presents a compelling argument for the precedence of the *Eclogues* over the *Georgics* as the model of Virgilian pastoral that most influenced Cather (47-53), while my own *Willa Cather and Classical Myth* and Janis Stout's recent biography *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* offer variant readings that suggest the primacy of the *Georgics* or a combination of Virgilian texts in shaping Cather's text. Stout concludes that "Cather, who knew her Virgil very well indeed, was blurring that distinction [between Virgilian forms]" (110). Guy Reynolds extends the novel's epic ties to the concept of Manifest Destiny and notes that its narrative structure offers a combination of the traditional genres of epic or pastoral with "a mobile adaptability" more characteristic of film (58, 51).

In spite of Cather's claim that her novel was a "two part pastoral" (Sergeant 86), the epic qualities inherent in the text remain. Hardly inadvertent was the choice of her title, drawn

directly from Whitman, a writer who likewise conceived of the western progress of America as heroic and epic. Epics, as J. B. Hainsworth points out, "take their titles . . . from their characters or their events" (7), and in Cather's chosen title she combines both. If the land is the central factor, as she asserts, the pioneers who attempt to tame it are the heroes, and pioneering itself is the central action. Reynolds sees in the title "nationalist triumphalism . . . offset by the novel's epigraph" (67), while Stouck asserts that the title reinforces the reader's "epic response"

to the heroic struggle ("*O Pioneers!*" 31). Regardless of one's interpretation of the title, Cather's choice of an epigraph from another work in the epic tradition, from the Polish national poem *Pan Tadeusz*, indicates that she intended to imbue her work with epic dimensions.

As Cather turned to her Nebraska experience for a novel, the appeal of Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* must have been strong; according to Józef Wittlin, the work "might easily appear as not unlike a highly poetic and romantic 'Western story'" (72). While structured as a traditional epic in closed heroic couplets, thirteen-syllable meter, and twelve books, and while often "likened to the epics of Homer," its subject matter is closer to a "well-constructed novel" (Wittlin 70). Its characters are real and ordinary people, a point of contention for Mickiewicz's contemporaries; its descriptions include details of quotidian life, and its plot involves a Romeo and Juliet love match between feuding families. The nostalgic but unsentimental tone of the work matches Cather's own, and, as the Invocation illustrates, the poem deals "largely with [Mickiewicz's] own feelings and attitudes toward his homeland" (Welsch 118). In this, the poem is much like *O Pioneers!*, in which Cather responded to Jewett's injunction to write about what she knew, to hit the "home pasture" (Woodress 240), and to cease to admire and begin to remember (Sergeant 107). What both Mickiewicz and Cather remembered was a frontier region that bred a "special type of person: sturdy, self-reliant, proud, men [and women] of action, not much given to books," as Marian Coleman notes about the people among whom Mickiewicz grew up (i). Like *O Pioneers!*, *Pan Tadeusz* portrays sometimes archetypal figures in a particular

## Cather's Nod to Mickiewicz

(Continued)

landscape and time, leaving critics even today to argue about its classification as genre. With traits of epic, narrative, poem, idyl, pastoral, and psychological novel (Welsh 153), *Pan Tadeusz* is an experiment in form for exploring both the author's private feelings and the complexity of the human experience.

The question of Cather's access to the poem is rooted in the publishing history of Mickiewicz's work. Written between 1832 and 1834 while Mickiewicz was in exile in Paris, *Pan Tadeusz* was first translated into French in 1859 and into English in 1885 by Maude Ashurst Biggs. By the 1890s, German translations were available, and Siegfried Lipiner's 1911 German translation was the primary source of George Noyes's 1916 English prose translation published in London and Toronto. Cather may have known one or more of these editions, though what records exist of her library and of her family's books make no mention of Mickiewicz's work. One might speculate that she encountered one of the German or French versions in the library of the Weiners, her well-read Old World neighbors, or even that Mr. Ducker, the local pharmacist who tutored her in the Classics, might have introduced her to the Polish poet. That she would have known the poem from acquaintance with Polish people is far less likely. A review of the Webster County census for 1870 and 1880 reveals no families claiming Polish origins. While the young Cather is known to have enjoyed the talk of immigrant families whom she visited in her first year on the prairie and to have had a keen interest in Slavic cultures, her opportunities to know Polish-Lithuanian culture firsthand were apparently quite limited.

Most Poles in Nebraska lived in Sherman and Howard counties, north of Grand Island, where in 1877 three hundred families had settled. The Polish Roman Catholic Union of America had sponsored settlement on lands offered by the Burlington and Missouri Valley Railroad and intended to establish a Polish seminary there. But, by 1880, three years before the Cathers arrived in Webster County, the Polish colony was in marked decline, and by 1884 the land bought for the school had been sold ("Early PRCU History"). In 1885, the largest Polish community in the state was in Platte County (Luebke 102), and within five years the first wave of Lithuanian immigrants had arrived in South Omaha to work in the stockyards (*Mes Lietuviai* 160). Cather's encounter with Polish culture and literature, though, may have been furthered during her residence in Pittsburgh, where by 1903, fifty thousand Poles lived, their number having increased ten-fold in about twenty years ("The Poles of Pittsburgh"). By the time she relocated in New York, the New York Public Library undoubtedly had in its holdings the English translation of *Pan Tadeusz*, and possibly other European language editions as well. In 1911, Monica M. Gardner's English biography of Mickiewicz was released in both New York and in London (Noyes xiii).

Cather's subsequent trips to Europe would also have brought her into contact with Mickiewicz's legacy. Mickiewicz had penned his epic during his émigré life in Paris, and "up until the end of his life [Paris] was to be the main terrain of his activity," as Manfred Kridl notes (9). In 1840, Mickiewicz was appointed Professor of Slavic Literature at the prestigious College de France, where he lectured until 1844. With the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1855, he organized a Polish legion to aid the Turks in their fight against Tsarist Russia, and in that same year died of cholera while in

Constantinople (Kridl 10). He was returned to France for burial in the Polish cemetery at Montmorency, a town outside Paris where aristocratic Polish exiles had settled, but in 1890 the body was removed to the cathedral in Krakow. While her account of her visit to France in 1902 makes no mention of having gone to Montmorency, Cather may have done so, for as George Kates notes in his commentary in *Willa Cather in Europe*, she was "drawn by her real worship of great writers, the honored dead, whose work for so long had made the richness and meaning of her life" (101). If she had not yet encountered Mickiewicz's work by 1902, though, she must have encountered it before 1913, the date of *O Pioneers!*

Another avenue by which Cather may have come to know Mickiewicz's work is through her interest in Victor Hugo, who was asked to speak at the dedication of the monument to Mickiewicz at Montmorency. His letter to Mickiewicz's son, dated May 17, 1867, was reprinted in the 1898 Houghton-Mifflin edition of Hugo's letters. Cather counted Hugo among her favorite French writers but attributed to him a kind of "exaggerated idealism" (Slote, *Kingdom of Art* 38, 330), which is confirmed in the high praise he lavished on Mickiewicz. He writes that Mickiewicz "was a reminder of all the classic virtues which have in them the power of making us young again; he was a priest of the ideal; his art is in the grand manner; the deep breath of sacred forests is in his poetry; he understood both humanity and nature . . ." (qtd. in Kridl 207). Cather could have read Hugo's laudatory lines, but her first introduction to Mickiewicz will likely remain a mystery.

What is fact is that by the time of her writing *O Pioneers!* she indeed knew *Pan Tadeusz*, or at least its first book, "The Farm," from which she gleaned the epigraph to her novel. Yet the source of her wording of the epigraph remains problematic. Maude Ashurst Biggs's 1885 translation of the Invocation well expresses Alexandra Bergson's vision of the untamed Nebraska tablelands; however, the wording does not match Cather's, even though the syntactical structure is the same:

Bear thou my soul, consumed by longing, to  
Those wooded hills, unto those meadows green  
Broad stretching on the azure Niemen's shore;  
Towards those fields, rich hued with various grain,  
Golden with wheat and silvered with the rye,  
Where amber rape, where buckwheat white as snow,  
Where with a maiden blush the clover glows . . .

The line Cather used, "Those fields, colored by various grain!" (epigraph, *O Pioneers!*), is more likely her own translation from the French. It obviously could not have come from Noyes's yet to be published English translation from the German, which reads, ". . . bear my grief-stricken soul . . . to those fields painted with various grain . . ." (*Pan Tadeusz* 1-2). However close to Cather's wording, this sentence lacks the emphatic exclamation point that Cather used to end her line.

What is important is the sentiment toward the land that Cather clearly found appealing in Mickiewicz's epic. What he expresses, regardless of slight variances in translation, is what Alexandra Bergson shared with Cather, a futuristic vision of the homeland, in this case Nebraska rather than Poland. Alexandra, like the epic poet, senses the strength and beauty of what the land will become. She wistfully remarks that this land will someday "be worth more than all we can ever raise on it" (58), and the narrator envisions the acres laid out in blocks of

golden grains: "From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light" (73). Acting as a Demetrian protector, Alexandra represents "the fertile earth as cultivated by the farmer" and symbolizes "justifiable earthly desire" (Diel 99). Her success will come from loving the land as a patron deity.

Whereas Reynolds focuses on the various grains of the Mickiewicz poem as "replac[ing] the unitary native soil (an American land for a single American people) with a diverse, patchwork country" (67), the epic tone adopted by the poet is in celebration of the land itself as greatly productive, beautiful in its colors, nourishing to the soul. "Bear thou my soul, consumed by longing" to these fields, he writes. Cather's epigraph, too, is a cry for the home pasture. Just as for the wandering epic hero, "Those fields, colored by various grain!" call her. Her longing for home, though, might well have extended to the place she had left behind when coming to Nebraska. Virginia, too, was home, and Cather's traumatic break with that childhood home of lush meadows and secure hills was, no doubt, part of her cry. Cather's emotional tie to place is reflected in Alexandra's realization that "[s]he had never known before how much the country meant to her" (69). Such longing for home is an epic convention: Odysseus longs for his Ithaca and Aeneas for a new Troy.

It was this very longing for home that Mickiewicz felt. He escaped the Russian occupation of his tripartite homeland through deportation to Russia only because of his involvement in a literary organization whose ancillary political sentiments were strongly nationalistic. He was never again to return to Poland. However, befriended by several prominent Russian writers, he traveled freely and only attempted a return to Poland when a short-lived revolution, started by young men who were avid



The land of Poland: a peasant countryside patterned by family-owned strips of soil.

readers of his work (Kridl 9) set up a provisional government. Mickiewicz was turned back at the border by news of the collapse of the revolutionary government, and he withdrew to Dresden and then to Paris. While writing *Pan Tadeusz* there, Mickiewicz comforted himself, as Coleman notes, "by recalling the beloved homeland of his childhood complete and intact, faithful in every detail to what the old life had been" (ii). *Pan Tadeusz* is a paean to the land that Mickiewicz believed would play "a singular role in the rebirth of Europe" (Kridl 9).

If Cather knew the poem in more than its striking Invocation, she could not have failed to notice the parallels it offered to the story she was telling. Lacking the political overtones of *Pan Tadeusz*, *O Pioneers!* evokes the same "courteous way of life lived close to the land"; both stories are about "youthful

romance, rural labors, the role of the church, nostalgia for an old civilization, and the love of one's country" (Stouck, "Willa Cather and the Russians" 4). Bernice Slote, who has to date offered the most comprehensive yet still quite brief account of the possible relations between *Pan Tadeusz* and Cather's work, notes that Mickiewicz shared with Cather themes "of memory, of exile, of country places and people, all those varied days of youth" ("Secret Web" 13).

The poem's story focuses on the youth Pan Tadeusz (Thaddeus), who returns to his ancestral home only to fall in love with Zosia, the daughter of the family that harbors an historical feud with his own. The feud reaches its climax in a foray of one house against the other, the inopportune arrival of occupying Russian troops, the disappearance of the Russian commander through betrayal at the hands of his Polish sympathizer captain, and the final coalition of the feuding families against their common oppressors. The background action involves the age-old crime of Pan Tadeusz's father, now the mysterious and penitent Bernardine monk Father Robak, whose killing of Zosia's grandfather wrongly led to his being branded a Polish traitor. Mickiewicz presents this plot with a "strong vein of realism" (Welsch 139), with emphasis "on ordinary characters and their everyday life" (Weintraub 626). *Pan Tadeusz* is "not a descriptive poem but the portrayal of human figures in a

landscape" (Welsch 18), "[n]ature and the life of animals occupy an important place in the whole picture . . ." (Kridl 24).

Of special attraction to Cather would have been Books I and II, "The Farm" and "The Castle," for each pictures a life, like Alexandra's, close to the rhythms of the land, and each is striking in its "epic calm" (Noyes xvi). Book II opens with a nostalgic cry for the days when the land ran on without boundaries, where the roamer could "[talk]

with the earth, which, though deaf to city-dwellers, whispers into the ear with a multitude of voices" (*Pan Tadeusz* 34).<sup>1</sup> "Who does not remember such days of youth?" Mickiewicz asks. The sunshine falls "over the fresh, dark-green, fragrant hay" and "tease[s] the faces of the sleepers with its morning beams, like a village girl awakening her sweetheart with an ear of wheat" (35). The lark, "hidden as deeply in the sky" as is the land rail in the meadow, "Sounds the bell of early spring" (34), its notes undoubtedly the same five notes that Carl Linstrum says the larks have sung for thousands of years (Cather 110). A neat, kitchen garden lies beyond Judge Soplica's manor house, the setting for the central action of the epic. An orchard and fences, fruit trees planted in rows, and vegetable beds define this charming country estate. "Here the maize lifted its tassels . . . [and] the beds

## Cather's Nod to Mickiewicz

(Continued)

were intersected by furrows" (47). The poet then comments on the "flock of butterflies," flashing amid the tall poppy stalks, and among them "a round sunflower, with a great glowing face, turned after the sun from the east to the west" (48). Mickiewicz continues his description with the attractive scene of a girl bending among the green leaves of the cucumber patch, her head "shaded with a straw hat" (48). At once, one is reminded of Alexandra Bergson's orderly garden where she, too, raises cucumbers amidst the "feathery asparagus" and "gooseberry and currant bushes" (Cather 50). The same butterflies float over the Nebraska fields, bearing the souls of the "young ones" (Cather 242). In Mickiewicz, Cather found her childhood landscape, a productive and beautiful land that offers promise to those who tend it and guard it well. One must turn toward such a land "with love and yearning," she writes, accepting its "fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty" (64, 21).

Nature in the Polish epic also serves as an Emersonian hieroglyph, an acknowledgement of the Romanticism that dominated the age of the poem's composition. In a passage reminiscent of the plow inscribed within the sun disk in *My Ántonia*, Mickiewicz describes trees outlined against the setting sun:

... already the gleaming circle was descending on the summit of the grove, ... and the grove showed black like an immense building, and the sun red above it like a fire on the roof; then the sun sank; it still shone through the branches as a candle through the chinks of window shutters . . . . And suddenly the scythes that were ringing far and wide among the grain, and the rakes that were being drawn over the meadow, became quiet and still . . . . (7)

As in *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, the work of husbandry stands silent before the immensity of Nature. Mickiewicz's poetry thus evokes a "universal geography," as Slotte calls it ("Secret Web" 13), and a kind of "spiritualized realism" (Wittlin 78) that must have spoken to Cather as it does even to modern readers.

The secondary plot between Zosia and Pan Tadeusz (Thaddeus) cannot but recall the relationship between Emil and Marie in *O Pioneers!* Thaddeus, arriving home from college, runs to his old room to find it apparently occupied by a young woman. As in Marie Shabata's house, the window sills are filled with potted flowers—geraniums, asters, and violets—and, as he gazes from the window, he sees in a tiny garden the footprints of a "small foot that had been without shoe or stocking." The print "was clear but light; you guessed that it was left in quick running by the tiny feet of someone who scarce touched the ground" (*Pan Tadeusz* 4). (The image also recalls Lucy Gayheart, whose quick, light step was her telling trait.) Thaddeus then looks up to see in the garden the scantily dressed Zosia, who laughs, claps her hands, and "like a white bird" flies through the garden and into her room, "light as a moonbeam" (5). Alarmed to find a man in her bedroom, she disappears as quickly as she came. Like Marie, Zosia is sensual and lively, and, like Emil, the young Thaddeus wrestles with his response to her: Should he feel "amusement or shame or joy?" (5). While one would be loathe to suggest that Cather drew directly from Mickiewicz in fashioning the secondary plot of her novel, the

fortunes of youth set against the epic canvas of historic empire-building shifts both Mickiewicz's and Cather's work to a very human level, to those unrecoverable days of youth. Also, as in *O Pioneers!*, no truly vicious character appears in the world of *Pan Tadeusz* (Weintraub 627). The penitent Father Robak, whose name means worm and reflects his own self-loathing, remains apart from the life of his son Thaddeus and, like Frank Shabata at the close of *O Pioneers!*, is a penitent sinner. Father Robak's mysterious past, unusual behaviors, and prophetic but unexplained warnings to young Thaddeus also suggest parallels to Ivar. Like Ivar, he lives humbly and under the shadow of some long endured sin.

An ever-conscious artist, Cather uses Mickiewicz's epic to bring full circle the emotional impact of her novel. As yet unnoted is the echo of the *Pan Tadeusz* Invocation in the final lines of *O Pioneers!*. Alexandra, coming to terms with Emil's death, is restored to life and sustained by her connection to this land of various grain, which Cather invokes a final time: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (274). Mickiewicz similarly invokes Litvia (Lithuania) and its protective deity (the Holy Virgin) as the source of restored health and eventual return:

Litvia! My country, like art thou to health,  
For how to prize thee he alone can tell  
Who has lost thee. I behold thy beauty now  
In full adornment, and I sing of it  
Because I long for thee.

.....  
Restore us thus by miracle unto  
The Bosom of our Fatherland! Meanwhile  
Bear thou my soul, consumed by longing, to  
Those wooded hills, unto those meadows green

.....  
Towards those fields, rich hued with various grain, . . .  
(Biggs)

Here is a hymn both to the land and to those who turn "toward it in love and yearning" (Cather 64).

Just as Mickiewicz "transformed his village idyl into a national epic" (Noyes xiv), so did Cather transform Alexandra Bergson's story into a New World epic that called for a new way of seeing and responding to the land. She equips her female protagonist with such special vision. Alexandra feels the future stirring in the wild things and tall grasses; she develops "a new consciousness of the country" (Cather 68), and she orders life within its natural rhythms. Waiting patiently for the land to awaken to its potentialities and respond to her efforts, she respects its fierce beauty and strength, rather than attempting to subdue it. In a unique way, Alexandra's and Cather's optimism for the country's future curiously parallels the nationalist fervor Mickiewicz conveys in *Pan Tadeusz*. Equally convinced that his country will again be unified and regain its national identity, Mickiewicz captures the sense of wholeness inherent in the epic genre itself and, in particular, in the New World westering myth. Harold Simonson has argued that the western experience "includes the full mythical sense of sublime wholeness . . . [and] that this wholeness is our destiny, to be reached . . . by going back to truths intuited by primitive consciousness" (28), back one might say to those two or three human stories that "go

on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before" (Cather 110).

Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* after choosing to break geographically from the land that had nourished her imagination and served as the first material of her art. Such was the case with Mickiewicz, though his removal was not by choice. Distance, no doubt, is a source of inspiration. The verses Mickiewicz "wrote as an epilogue for *Pan Tadeusz*, but which he never finally revised and which were never printed during his lifetime" (Noyes xvi), capture well the tone of both the Polish epic and Cather's novel: "One happiness remains: . . . [to] muse and dream of your own land . . . . That land will ever remain holy and pure as first love; undisturbed by the remembrance of errors, not undermined by the deceitfulness of hopes, and unchanged by the stream of events" (qtd. in Noyes xvii, xix). Alexandra feels this, too. The unfulfilled hopes she had for Emil, the deaths of Emil and Marie, and the error of her own blindsidedness to human relationships do not diminish the land. She makes Carl Linstrum promise not to take her away from the land, and he understands. "You belong to the land," he says. "Now more than ever." "We come and go, but the land is always here" (Cather 272). Her epic, like Mickiewicz's, is not a story of the people as much as it is of their country. The greatness of *O Pioneers!*, like that of *Pan Tadeusz*, lies in its power to evoke intense feelings of "ardent love of country" (Noyes x), for all that the land is and can be.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>All prose passages are cited by page number from the translation by George Noyes.

#### Works Cited

- "Adam Mickiewicz." Adam Mickiewicz Institute. Redakcy Intervetowa, Polskie Radio. 26 April 2006. <[www.radio.com.pl/polonia/article.asp?tid=19469](http://www.radio.com.pl/polonia/article.asp?tid=19469)>.
- Biggs, Maude Ashurst, trans. *Master Thaddeus: or the Last Foray in Lithuania*. 2 vols. London: Trübner, 1885.
- Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!* Cather Scholarly edition. Eds. Susan J. Rosowski and Charles W. Mignon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.
- Coleman, Marion Moore. Foreward. *Zosia and Thaddeus or An Ancient Feud Ended (a prose retelling of Pan Tadeusz)*. Cheshire, CT: Cherry Hill, 1974.
- Diel, Paul. *Symbolism in Greek Mythology: Human Desire and Its Transformations*. Trans. Vincent Stuart, Micheline Stuart, and Rebecca Folkman. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1980.
- "Early PRCU History." 2006. Polish Roman Catholic Union of America. 26 April 2006. <<http://www.prcua.org/news/earlyhistory.htm>>.
- Hainsworth, J. B. *The Idea of Epic*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Kates, George N. Introduction. *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey*. New York: Knopf, 1956.
- Kridl, Manfred. "Adam Mickiewicz." *Adam Mickiewicz: Poet of Poland*. Ed. Manfred Kridl. New York: Greenwood, 1969. 11-34.
- Luebke, Frederick C. *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1969.
- Mes Lietuviai: We Lithuanians*. Ed. Benediktas C. Sulskis. N.p.: n.p., 1984.
- Mickiewicz, Adam. *Pan Tadeusz or The Last Foray in Lithuania*. Semicentennial Publications of U of California, 1868-1918. Trans. George Rapall Noyes. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1917.

- Noyes, George Rapall. Introduction. *Pan Tadeusz or The Last Foray in Lithuania*. By Adam Mickiewicz. ix-xxi.
- "The Poles of Pittsburgh and Western PA." 2001. Polish Genealogical Society of America. 26 April 2006 <[http://www.pgsa.org/US/pittsburgh\\_poles.htm](http://www.pgsa.org/US/pittsburgh_poles.htm)>.
- Reynolds, Guy. *Willa Cather in Context*. New York: St. Martin's, 1996.
- Rosowski, Susan J. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- Ryder, Mary Ruth. *Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen P, 1990.
- Sergeant, Elizabeth. *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. 1953. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1963.
- Simonson, Harold P. "The West as Archetype." *Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature*. Ed. Barbara Howard Meldrum. Troy, NY: Whitston, 1985. 20-28.
- Slote, Bernice, ed. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966.
- . "Willa Cather: The Secret Web." *Five Essays on Willa Cather: The Merrimack Symposium*. Ed. John J. Murphy. North Andover, MA: Merrimack College, 1974. 1-19.
- Stouck, David. "O Pioneers!: Willa Cather and the Epic Imagination." *Prairie Schooner* 46 (1972): 23-34.
- . "Willa Cather and the Russians." *Cather Studies* 1. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990. 1-20.
- Stout, Janis. *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.
- Weber, Ronald. *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Weintraub, Wiktor. "Adam Mickiewicz." *European Writers: The Romantic Century*. 5. Eds. Jacques Barzum and George Stade. New York: Scribner's, 1985. 607-634.
- Welsch David. *Adam Mickiewicz*. New York: Twayne, 1966.
- Wittlin, Józef. "Pan Tadeusz." *Adam Mickiewicz: Poet of Poland*. Ed. Manfred Kridl. New York: Greenwood, 1969. 66-88.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.

---

## Willa Cather Series At Fairleigh Dickinson University Press

Fairleigh Dickinson University Press announces the inauguration of a book series devoted to the life, writings, influence, and legacy of Willa Cather. They welcome single-author works and essay collections (of previously unpublished materials) but will not consider textbooks or editions. Unrevised dissertations are discouraged. Good prose is requested. Ideal length is 60,000-90,000 words (about 250-350 double-spaced manuscript pages). Proposals and inquiries should be sent simultaneously to Series Editor Dr. Merrill M. Skaggs (Baldwin Professor of Humanities, Drew University), 9 Woodcliff Drive, Madison NJ 07940, and to Dr. Harry Keyishian, Director FDU Press M-GH2-01, 285 Madison Avenue, Madison NJ 07940. Email proposals are welcome and may be addressed to [fdupress@fdu.edu](mailto:fdupress@fdu.edu) and to [miskaggs@drew.edu](mailto:miskaggs@drew.edu). For further information, see [www.fdu.edu/fdupress](http://www.fdu.edu/fdupress).



**WILLA CATHER  
NEWSLETTER AND REVIEW**

Issue Editor: John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University  
Assistant Issue Editor: Sally Murphy  
Managing Editor: Betty Kort  
Associate Editors: Jan Offner and Eric Reed

**EDITORIAL BOARD:**

Virgil Albertini, Maryville, Missouri  
Bruce P. Baker II, Omaha, Nebraska  
Susan Maher, University of Nebraska-Omaha  
John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University  
David Porter, Williams College  
Ann Romines, George Washington University  
Merrill M. Skaggs, Drew University  
John N. Swift, Occidental College  
Robert Thacker, St. Lawrence University  
Joseph R. Urgo, University of Mississippi

The *Newsletter and Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters to the Managing Editor. Scholarly essays should not exceed 2500-3000 words; they should be submitted on disk in Microsoft Word and should follow *The MLA Style Manual*.

**Send essays or inquiries to**

Ann Romines  
Department of English  
The George Washington University  
Washington, D.C. 20052  
(annrom2@cs.com)

**-or-**

Merrill M. Skaggs  
Department of English  
Drew University  
Madison, NJ 07949  
(mskaggs@drew.edu)

**-or-**

John N. Swift  
Department of English  
Occidental College  
Los Angeles, CA 90041  
(swiftj@oxy.edu)

**Send letters and news items to**

Betty Kort  
Cather Foundation  
413 N. Webster  
Red Cloud, NE 68970  
bkort@gpcom.net

Essays and notes are listed in the annual *MLA Bibliography*.

**WILLA CATHER  
PIONEER MEMORIAL  
& EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION  
(The Willa Cather Society)**

Founded 1955 by Mildred Bennett

Mrs. Bennett and seven other founding members of the Board of Governors defined the Foundation's mission, which has evolved into these

**AIMS OF THE WCPM**

To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with The Nebraska State Historical Society.

To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.

To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.

To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

**BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

Virgil Albertini	Bruce P. Baker II
Charles Cather	Don E. Connors
Carol Cope	James L. Fitzgibbon
David B. Garwood	Joel Geyer
Jane Renner Hood	Ron Hull
Ruth H. Keene	Susan Maher
Gary L. Meyer	Fritz Mountford
John J. Murphy	Charles Peek
Glenda Pierce	David Porter
Guy Reynolds	Ann Romines
Steve Shively	Merrill Skaggs
James Southwick	Robert Thacker
Gary Thompson	Steven Trout
Joseph R. Urgo	Lu Williams
Dee Yost †	John A Yost

**ADVISORY BOARD**

Laurie Smith Camp	Robert E. Knoll
Mellanee Kvasnicka	Catherine Cather Lowell
Dale McDole	Nancy S. Picchi
John Swift	

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Betty Kort

# Pianos, Pianos, Pianos!

*Except when the father was at home, the Harling house was never quiet . . . and there was usually somebody at the piano.*

~My *Antonia*

Three pianos! Yes, three pianos have been donated to the Cather Foundation within the past four years.

The most recent acquisition is a beautiful seven-foot ebony Steinway.

According to Programming Coordinator Stephany Thompson, the level of performance at the Red Cloud Opera House will be considerably enhanced by procurement of this fine instrument. Concert pianists prefer Steinways and will often refuse to play instruments of lesser quality, according to Thompson. This particular Steinway is only three years old and virtually unused. The donor has chosen to remain anonymous.

The Steinway will replace a Henry F. Miller (Boston) grand piano donated by the Red Cloud Eastern Star and the Red Cloud Mason Chapter when the Opera House reopened its doors in 2003. At the time, Helen Mathew of Red Cloud contributed funds to move the piano to the Opera House Auditorium. This piano has made possible many fine musical performances. The Miller piano will be moved to the Gallery on the first level of the Cather Center following the 2007 Spring Conference. The piano will be used during receptions and other planned events in the Gallery.

David Porter, Visiting Professor of Liberal Arts at Williams College, a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors, and an internationally known pianist, will play both



Recently donated Steinway piano at the Red Cloud Opera House. Photograph by Betty Kort.

the new Steinway grand and the Miller grand in a concert at the Opera House Auditorium on Saturday evening, April 28, during the 2007 Willa Cather Spring Conference.

The third piano recently donated to the Cather Foundation comes from the home of Stephany Thompson, who contributed her antique upright for use in the Harling House, made famous as a setting for the novel *My Antonia*. Although in the novel Mrs. Harling is an accomplished pianist, as is her daughter Frances, until now tour guides have had to admit that the Harling House does not have a piano. This unhappy situation has now been resolved.

The Cather Foundation Board of Governors wishes to express its appreciation to each of the donors of these pianos. Readers may remember that a plea for a Steinway went out in the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* a few years back. There was no response at that time. However, in 2007 the Foundation finds itself replete with pianos, including the highly valued Steinway. Participants at the 2007 Cather Spring Conference are likely to hear from the keyboards of all three pianos.



## *The Executive Director's Report*

This issue of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* should be in your mailboxes just before Spring Conference. It is, in many respects, a very special issue. John Murphy, who served as editor of the *Newsletter* for many years, returns to serve as the issue editor, and his fine editing skills can be seen throughout the publication.

Of primary importance is the fact that the issue is dedicated to Marge Van Meter, who served over forty years on the Board of Governors with marvelous and continuous dedication. I consider myself fortunate during my thirteen-year tenure on the Board to have had her as a friend and colleague. We even roomed together on occasions when the Board met. I appreciated our deep friendship and admired so much about her. In her quiet way, she helped establish the legacy that women, myself included, enjoy today in the workplace. Not only is the issue dedicated to her, but memorials given to the Foundation in her name are helping to pay for the elegant formatting and extra length of this particular issue. I know I speak for the Cather Foundation Board of Governors in expressing our thanks to Marge's family for its decision to use the funds in this manner.

It is also of importance that this issue is devoted to the first Cather Spring Symposium, held during the 2006 Spring Conference. The essays included were presented at the symposium, and the issue is prefaced by John Murphy, who was in charge of the event. We are pleased so many scholars came from far and wide to participate. The success of this venture has led the Board of Governors to decide to hold a Spring Conference Symposium in Red Cloud in June of every other year, alternating with the Cather International Seminar. Thus, *Newsletter* readers can plan on another three-day conference including a symposium in June of 2008.

Finally, this *Newsletter* is representative, I think, of the distance the Cather Foundation has traveled in its fifty-two-year history. The *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* began in a very modest way, with short articles about acquisitions coming to the Foundation and newsy events taking place in Red Cloud and elsewhere that related to Cather, the Foundation, and its mission. Today, this thirty-two page, MLA indexed publication includes essays written by established Cather scholars and is delivered to colleges and universities throughout the country and to a worldwide audience. Copies will be distributed to participants at the Cather Foundation sponsored International Seminar in France this summer. In many ways, the broad acceptance of this publication reflects the continued general appreciation of the works of Willa Cather and world-wide Cather scholarship.

*Willa Cather: A Writer's Worlds*  
*The 11th International Seminar*



*Musée d'Orsay*



*Palais des Papes*



*Roussillon*

**De Paris en Provence**  
**24 June—1 July 2007**

Photography by John J. Murphy.



**Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial  
and Educational Foundation**  
413 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

**Nonprofit Org.**  
**U.S. Postage**  
**PAID**  
**Red Cloud, NE**  
**Permit No. 10**