

WILLA CATHER

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(THE WILLA CATHER SOCIETY)

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Red Cloud Opera House Renovation Underway

By Harriett DeLay
The Red Cloud Chief

The future is bright for downtown Red Cloud. The 116-year-old building which will be the renovated Red Cloud Opera House has been in the transformation process since late summer, when the partial interior demolition began. Completion is expected in December 2002.

The Morhart family donated the building to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation nine years ago. The Morharts had owned the building for 106 years.

Young Willa Cather both attended and appeared in theatrical productions at the Opera House, and delivered her high school commencement address from its stage.

The once-thriving Opera House was on the second floor of the building. The first floor had been main street businesses for many years, much of the time a hardware store.

The basement of the historical structure had been used for storage. It had a dirt floor and will undergo extensive renovation. It will be deepened, with cement floors and iron supports added.

More structural support will be built into the ground floor to stabilize a mezzanine area, the second floor and roof. Those tasks accomplished, work will begin on the interior of the building. The roof

had been replaced earlier.

A major fund drive has included contributions from a \$150,000 tourism grant from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, a \$200,000 challenge grant from the Peter Kiewit Foundation and \$250,000 from Lucia Woods Lindley. Lindley and her family have a long history with the WCPM, enabling a number of its projects. Woods Lindley was a member of the Cather board for many years and compiled an in-depth photography work on Willa Cather, published by the University of Nebraska Press. She resides on the East Coast.

Dave Garwood, a member of the Cather Foundation board, said the final costs will probably be around \$1.5 million. "The completed project is expected to take about 14 months," he noted.

The Foundation is working to raise another \$1 million to endow maintenance, programming, and operations. A \$275,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities must be matched three-to-one by 2004. Nearly \$60,000 had been raised by July 2001.

Omaha architects Bahr, Vermeer and Haecker prepared the renovation plans. Farris Construction of Hastings is contractor.

Dr. Steven Ryan, WCPM and Educational Foundation Director,

explained the Opera House "will be used as a cultural center for the arts and community events." The Foundation's offices, bookstore and visitors' center will also be located there.

"We're excited the renovation has begun; people have looked forward to this for so long," Dr. Ryan said. "This is a very happy milestone for the foundation and for Red Cloud."

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- Sarah Ross Compares Cather and Emerson
- John Murphy Rebuttal
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Excavation behind the Opera House uncovered this long-buried doorway.

Issue Editor's Note

The theme for this *Newsletter and Review* might well be "continuing conversations." Continuing the Lindemann continuation last autumn of a conversation between John Murphy and Joe Urgo, we have three more comments by John Murphy, Joe Urgo, and Joan Acocella, who have disagreed about agreeing with Lindemann's reply.

In our lead article, however, David H. Porter also extends the suggestion made by Michael Schueth, in the last issue, that Cather was energetically promoting herself as she participated in a "celebrity culture." Her promotional material even included the kind of post card Jay Yost's collection (see Fall issue) helps to illustrate. Porter's discoveries especially illuminate the self-publicist Cather became at the beginning of her career. We are lucky and grateful that Porter has been willing to share his rare collector's items with the rest of us!

Marvin Friedman presents in this issue some answers to questions which I, for one, have been asking for a decade: among them, why does Grenfell's cliffside clearing in "Before Breakfast" have four waterfalls? Further, our issue includes new work on the Cather and Emerson connection, accomplished with the fresh eye of graduate student Sarah Ross of St. Bonaventure. And that conversation will continue when Matt Hokom weighs in on the same subject a year from now.

One continuation appears with our apology: We left out the notes to Nancy Chinn's essay entitled "'My Six Books Would Be': The Cather-Hurston Connection" printed incompletely in last year's winter edition. We'll hope at least to minimize that kind of continuation in the future. Of course the mistake does encourage all to go back and read the article again. Enjoy!

— *Merrill Skaggs, Issue Editor*



Contributors to this Issue

Joan Acocella is a feature writer and dance critic for *The New Yorker*, and has published widely on dancers and contemporary dance. She is also author of *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, published by the University of Nebraska Press and just issued in paperback by Vintage Books.

Marvin Friedman is a native Nebraskan and graduate of the University of Nebraska and Harvard Law School. He served as executive editor of a legal journal for 30 years, but since his retirement has become an independent literary scholar and a regular presenter at Cather seminars and colloquia.

John J. Murphy teaches American literature at Brigham Young University, where he edits the journal *Literature and Belief*. He is volume editor of the University of Nebraska Press Scholarly Editions of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Besides *My Antonia: the Road Home* (1989), he has written over 60 essays on Cather and other American writers.

David H. Porter is Harry C. Payne Professor of Liberal Arts at Williams College. A classicist and musician by trade, he is the author of books on Greek tragedy and Horace, and with composer Gunther Schuller, co-editor of a book on pianist Edward Steuermann. In recent years his book-collecting interests have led to articles on Woolf, Wharton, and Cather. As a pianist he has performed throughout the United States and in the U. K., with a special focus on the works of Ives, Cage, and Satie. He served from 1987-1999 as president of Skidmore College.

Sarah Ross was born in Petersburg, Virginia, May 15, 1979. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Drew University in 2000. Currently, she is finishing a master's in English from St. Bonaventure University, as well as working towards secondary certification.

Joseph R. Urgo currently teaches, and chairs the English Department, at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Besides serving as a plenary speaker in all recent Cather seminars, and as a Board member of the WCPM, he is author of *Novel Frames: Literature as Guide to Race, Sex, and History in American Culture* (1991), *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995), and *In the Age of Distraction* (2000). He co-edits the forthcoming collection of essays culled from the Cather Colloquium at Mesa Verde.

Cather Project Names Electronic Projects Editor

Brett Barney, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was recently made electronic projects editor for the Cather Project. His work will entail a wide range of revisions and enhancements at the project's website (<http://www.unl.edu/Cather>). In particular, he will work to convert materials from HTML encoding to TEI-compliant XML encoding. Doing so is a fundamental step in enabling sophisticated searching and will also help to make the resulting documents more durable and versatile. In addition, new material is constantly being added to the site. In the near future, for example, visitors will be able to access on-line versions of *Cather Studies* and browse a large selection of Cather-related images drawn from several sources, including the rich collections at the Nebraska State Historical Society and UNL Libraries' Archives and Special Collections. Suggestions or comments on any aspect of the site are welcomed and can be sent to Barney either by email, at bbarney2@unlnotes.unl.edu, or post, at Electronic Text Center, 220N Love Library, Lincoln, NE 68588-4100.

Cather on Cather: Two Early Self-Sketches

David H. Porter*, Williams College

Many Cather scholars know the short "Biographical Sketch" of Willa Cather, published by Knopf in 1926, which Cather herself wrote.¹ Two earlier biographical statements, also apparently by Cather, are far less well known. In their original form, both are properly classed as "ephemera." The designation is unfortunately all too appropriate, as very few copies appear to have survived. The first, a brief statement entitled "Literary Note," seems to have been designed as part of a mailing to advertise the 1903 publication of Cather's first book, *April Twilights*. The second more substantial statement, "The Development of an American Novelist," appears in a small marketing brochure created in 1915 at the time of the publication of *The Song of the Lark*.

Although composed early in Cather's career—one of them almost a century ago—these two sketches are filled with insights for Cather readers and scholars. The contrasts between them are fascinating and revealing, as are comparisons between them and such later Cather statements as the 1926 "Biographical Sketch." Although some of the material covered in them appears elsewhere, it does so in excerpted or revised form, and the two statements themselves are not readily available. Given that they represent the author's commentary on her career at two early and significant junctures, we reprint them here in their full and original form.

"Literary Note" (1903)

Joan Crane's bibliographical entry for *April Twilights* includes the following note: "American Book Prices Current for 1930 contains an auction record for a copy of *April Twilights* with a tipped-in 'Literary Note' sold at the Ritter-Hopson Galleries, 6 November 1930. The insertion is noted by Merle Johnson in *American First Editions*, but had never been seen by Jacob Blanck or Frederick B. Adams, who mentions it in his Cather article in *Colophon* ... on the evidence of the Ritter-Hopson Galleries copy" (Crane 5). By good fortune I acquired in 1997 an *April Twilights* that contained a tucked-in copy of this very rare note, which Crane believes was "an announcement flyer for the book" to accompany the publisher's advertisement and order form.²

LITERARY NOTE

Miss Willa Sibert Cather, whose first book, a delightful volume of poems entitled *April Twilights*, will be published at once, was born near Winchester, Va., in 1876. When she was ten years old, the family moved to a ranch in Southwestern Nebraska, and for two years the child ran wild, living mostly on horseback, scouring the sparsely-settled country, visiting the Danes and Norwegians, tasting the wild-

plum wine made by the old women, and playing with the little herd girls, who wore men's hats, and were not in the least afraid of rattlesnakes, which they killed with clods of earth. Even when the family moved later to Red Cloud, she still kept up her friendship for the Norwegian farmer folk, whose business brought them often to her father's office. During the ranch period and for some time after going to Red Cloud, Miss Cather did not go to school at all, and her only reading was an old copy of Ben Jonson's plays, a Shakespeare, a Byron, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which latter she said she read through eight times in one winter. The first two years of her course at the University of Nebraska, where she graduated in 1895, were spent in the hardest kind of study, but then she discovered herself and began to write a little, mostly for her own pleasure and to satisfy the new craving for expression. She edited a creditable college magazine, and did remarkably discriminating dramatic criticism for the *Nebraska State Journal*. With all this she read voraciously, both in French and in English, and laid the foundation of her wide acquaintance with both literatures. Every vacation she went back to the sunflowers and the Norwegians, where she says she found her real life and her real education. After graduation she wrote for the *Lincoln (Neb.) Courier*, and in 1896 she came to Pittsburg [sic], where she was for several years on the staff of the *Leader*, doing clever dramatic and literary criticism in addition to her regular work.



The contents of the "Literary Note," written on a single fragile sheet 7 1/4-by-3 7/16 inches, clearly identify it as a promotional statement for Cather's first book of poems. Its authenticity is further established by its use as a primary source for an article on Cather that appeared in the winter 1903 issue of the journal *Poet-Lore*.³ While the second half of this article briefly discusses Cather's writing, its first half is lifted directly (and without attribution) from the "Literary Note." Unfortunately, the unnamed author of this short piece repeats the misspelling of "Pittsburg," turns Ben Jonson into Ben Johnson, and fails to include some of the note's most distinctive passages. Gone is Cather's description of herself as "living mostly on horseback, scouring the sparsely-settled country... tasting the wild-plum wine made by the old women." The article mentions Cather's "little herd girls" but cuts the details that they "wore men's hats, and were not in the least afraid of rattlesnakes, which they killed with clods of earth." Strangely, the article also omits both Cather's comment that she began writing "mostly for her own pleasure and to satisfy the new craving for expression"

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(Continued)

and the following passage on her college years—including its wonderful second sentence: “With all this she read voraciously, both in French and in English, and laid the foundation of her wide acquaintance with both literatures.⁴ Every vacation she went back to the sunflowers and the Norwegians, where she says she found her real life and her real education.”

Such sentences are probably the best clue to the authorship of this unsigned “Literary Note,” for it is hard to imagine anyone writing them other than Cather herself. That she wrote the 1926 “Biographical Sketch” and the biographical portions of the 1915 statement reproduced below is firmly established, a fact that further argues for her authorship of this early note as well, especially given its affinities of style and substance to these two later publications.

Written when Cather was teaching English in Pittsburgh, with the McClure’s stint still well in the future, this brief note gives a précis of Cather’s career at a time when she had not yet decided to become a full-time, professional writer. Perhaps the first thing one notices is that here, in 1903, Cather is already dating her birth in 1876 instead of 1873, thereby subtracting three years from her age. Her practice of doing so is usually placed later in her career and credited to a suggestion of S. S. McClure, but from this early note it is clear that the revision comes earlier and is hence Cather’s own—and of a piece with the way she consciously reshapes other aspects of her own story.⁵

Interesting also is the occasional awkwardness of the “Literary Note,” noticeable especially in those passages where Cather is making the most she can of her rather modest previous literary and scholarly activities. Thus she describes her early years at the university as devoted to “the hardest kind of study,” mentions her editing of “a creditable college magazine,” and speaks of her “remarkably discriminating dramatic criticism for the *Nebraska State Journal*” and her “clever dramatic and literary criticism” for the *Pittsburgh Leader*.⁶ Passages of this sort belong to what Cather was to describe in 1915 as “the purple flurry of my early writing...my florid, exaggerated, foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spree period.”⁷

For me the greatest delight of this early note, written long before Cather’s “Nebraska” novels, lies in the vividness and vigor of her description of childhood on the Divide. Indeed, among its charms are the very passages cut by the author of the *Poet-Lore* article—passages which in later years Cather herself might also have trimmed as excessive. That said, no one but Cather could have composed the long second sentence, which, despite its exuberant accumulation of detail and its piling up of clauses, already displays the balanced flow and varied rhythms that will characterize her mature prose.⁸

“The Development of an American Novelist” (1915)

The very form of the marketing brochure produced in connection with *The Song of the Lark* reveals the impact of the twelve years that have intervened since the publication of *April Twilights*. To begin with, it is the product not of a somewhat suspect vanity press but of a respected publishing

firm, Houghton Mifflin. And though the brochure’s dimensions (5 15/16-by-3 7/16 inches) are even slighter than those of the “Literary Note,” it is imaginatively designed and handsomely produced. Its front cover carries, in dark green on a slightly pink background, the stylized silhouette of the Jules Brèton painting, “The Song of the Lark,” that appeared also on the new novel’s dust jacket. Both the front and the back of the brochure provide space for brief promotional statements about *The Song of the Lark*, and there is room inside for reviews and notices on Cather’s two previous novels, *Alexander’s Bridge* and *O Pioneers!*. A detachable picture postcard, with instructions for ordering the three novels, is cleverly folded into the back cover.⁹ Most important, the brochure not only includes a full-page portrait of Cather but also allows eleven pages for the statement about her—space for over five times as many words as in the 1903 note, and in fact for half again as many as Cather would use for her “Biographical Sketch” in the otherwise more substantial 1926 Knopf pamphlet.¹⁰

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

The Development of an American Novelist

I. A Prairie Childhood

Willa Sibert Cather was born near Winchester, Virginia, the daughter of Charles Fectigue Cather and Virginia Sibert Boak. Though the Siberts were originally Alsatians, and the Cathers came from county Tyrone, Ireland, both families had lived in Virginia for several generations.¹¹ When Miss Cather was nine years old her father left Virginia and settled on a ranch in Nebraska, in a thinly populated part of the state where the acreage of cultivated land was negligible beside the tremendous stretch of raw prairie. There were very few American families in that district; all the near neighbors were Scandinavians, and ten or twelve miles away there was an entire township settled by Bohemians.

For a child, accustomed to the quiet and the established order behind the Blue Ridge, this change was very stimulating. There was no school near at hand, and Miss Cather lived out of doors, winter and summer. She had a pony and rode about the Norwegian and Bohemian settlements, talking to the settlers and trying to understand them. The first two years on the ranch were probably more important to her as a writer than any that came afterward. The change from mountain-sheltered valleys to unprotected plains, the experiences of pioneering, and the contact with people of strange languages and customs impressed her deeply and inspired in her the broad, human understanding so essential to a writer of fiction. Foreign speaking people often talk more freely to a child than to grown persons, and even though they spoke very little English the settlers were social with the lonely little girl and somehow managed to tell her a great many stories about the old country. Miss Cather says:—

“I have never found any intellectual excitement more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these pioneer women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person’s skin. If one begins that early, it is the story of the man-eating tiger over again—no other adventure ever carries one quite so far.”¹²

II. *Journalism and Editing*

After some preparation in the high school at Red Cloud, Nebraska, Miss Cather entered the State University of Nebraska, graduated at nineteen,¹³ and immediately went to Pittsburgh and got a position on the *Pittsburgh Leader*. She was telegraph editor and dramatic critic on this paper for several years and then gave it up to take the place of the Head of the English Department in the Allegheny High School. While she was teaching she published her first book of verse, "April Twilights," and her first book of short stories, "The Troll Garden."

"The Troll Garden" attracted a good deal of attention, and six months after it was published, in the winter of 1906, Miss Cather went to New York to accept a position on the staff of McClure's Magazine. Two years later she became Managing Editor of McClure's. The duties of this position, the demands of life in New York, and the claims of her new social and business connections occupied her entire attention and for four years she did no writing at all. Then in 1912 she gave up office work and took a house in Cherry Valley, New York.

III. *Her First Novel*

"Alexander's Bridge," a short novel, was published in 1912. Avoiding alike the Western backgrounds and the newspaper and magazine world, with which she felt she was still too closely connected to "see them from the outside," Miss Cather laid the scene of her story in Boston and London.

Bartley Alexander was a builder of bridges. A man of elemental, restless force, he realized that the success which had made him famous had forced upon him exactly the kind of life he had determined to escape. Confronted by the possibility of a calm, secure middle age, he felt as if he were being buried alive. At this critical period he met again a girl whom he had known in his struggling student days at the Beaux Arts. She was like his youth calling to him. Yet he could respond only through deception and he was not the sort of man who could live two lives.

The situation is treated with subtlety, in a manner both restrained and penetrating. Struggle and tragedy are always near the surface, but there is no hint of sordidness, and Miss Cather has told the story with great artistic skill, brilliant and sympathetic in its reflections of character and life.

IV. *"O Pioneers!"*

When Miss Cather first began writing, she tried to put the Swedish and Bohemian settlers, who had so profoundly influenced her childhood, into short stories. The results never satisfied her. In explaining her feeling Miss Cather says:—

"It is always hard to write about the things that are near your heart, from a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort them and disguise them. Those stories were so poor that they discouraged me. I decided that I wouldn't write any more about the country and people for which I had personal feeling.

"Then I had the good fortune to meet Sarah Orne Jewett, who had read all of my early stories and had very clear and definite opinions about them and about where my work fell short. She said, 'Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody's else [sic] way—you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you.

Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants—write the truth and let them take it or leave it.'

"It is that kind of honesty, that earnest endeavor to tell truly the thing that haunts the mind, that I love in Miss Jewett's own work. I dedicated 'O Pioneers' to her because I had talked over some of the characters with her and in this book I tried to tell the story of the people as truthfully and simply as if I were telling it to her by word of mouth."

Perhaps it is the simplicity and truthfulness of it which makes "O Pioneers!" stand out preëminently above the sort of novel which we have come to designate as "typically Western." There is a certain sameness about most Western stories. The characters and the country seem stamped into a mechanical similarity with blurred edges and automatic effects. Miss Cather has departed from conventional lines. She took no pattern, but from her own knowledge and love of her subject she wrote with a virility and art that mark her book as a novel of moment. Alexandra, the woman of the story, is forty years old, has brought up her brothers after the death of their parents, and wrested a subsistence from the land by dint of sheer force of will. She is passionately attached to the country. "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while." That is the note struck throughout and wrought with consummate art into the framework of the story. Even the exquisite and tragic episode of the love of Alexandra's brother for the little Bohemian, Marie Shabata, is handled with a ruthlessness in keeping with the country and the stark simplicity of its moral code. Although pure fiction, the vividly sketched background of Nebraska prairies and the faithful character drawing of a class of settlers who are becoming more and more a power in the political and economic life of the country give to "O Pioneers!" a definite historical value.

V. *Miss Cather's Latest Novel*

In whatever Miss Cather writes the reader may be sure of excellent workmanship and interesting theme. Other than that, one book in no way prepares him for what is coming next.

"The Song of the Lark" is a story of a great American singer, her childhood in the Colorado desert, her early struggles in Chicago, her romantic adventures among the Cliff Dweller ruins in Arizona, her splendid triumphs on the operatic stage.

There is a diverting picture of musical Chicago in the early years of Theodore Thomas's leadership when the young Swedish-American heroine, Thea Kronborg, not yet appreciating the possibilities of her voice, is spending all her money and almost more than all her strength for the sake of her lessons and the drudgery of choir work. There are wonderful chapters on the Cliff Dweller ruins, which first awoke in her the historic imagination so necessary to a great Wagnerian singer and where, away from drudgery for the first time in her life, she grew all at once into a powerful and willful young creature, got her courage, and began to find herself. Thea Kronborg, the Swedes and Mexicans of the little Colorado town where she spent her childhood, the Polish musicians and art-loving German and Jewish capitalists of Chicago and New York—these are to-day as typically American as any descendant of Pilgrim father or southern chevalier.

The author's familiarity with the West has already

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(Continued)

been accounted for. She is equally intimate with New York, and has gained her knowledge of the ways of the operatic world through journalistic work and through personal friendship with many well-known singers.¹⁴

VI. *Present Life and Future Work*

Miss Cather's present home is an apartment in that picturesque and interesting old part of New York known as Greenwich Village. In the summer she goes abroad or returns to the West. This summer she refused a tempting offer to write a series of articles on the war situation in Europe, preferring instead to explore the twenty-odd miles of Cliff-Dweller remains that are hidden away in the southwest corner of Colorado, near Mancos and Durango.

What may be Miss Cather's plans for future work she has not disclosed. One thing is certain—she will not repeat herself. There will never be a stereotyped Cather heroine or Cather hero. She finds the appeal of the West compelling, but "Alexander's Bridge" shows how well she knows and loves not only wild nature and the conquering spirit of the new West but also the old, fine culture and traditions of New England.

Few young authors have so broad a field to choose from, and few are so thoroughly equipped for their work. Three books establish her position in the front rank of American writers. "The Song of the Lark," especially, places her definitely in the little group of American novelists that count; the novelists that present American life with full knowledge and convincing reality.

Like the 1903 note and the 1926 sketch, this statement is unsigned. Crane reports that Ferris Greenslet, Cather's Houghton Mifflin editor, wrote her on July 21, 1915, about plans for this marketing brochure and asked her "to provide a 200—500-word story of her life. The literary history he proposed to write himself." In a letter dated July 26, he indicated that he had received "the biography section of the booklet" (Crane 314). This exchange raises at least the possibility that Cather herself wrote sections I, II, and VI, which focus on her biography, and that Greenslet had a hand in writing sections III-V, which deal with the three novels. On the other hand, the six sections of the sketch mesh so perfectly, and ring throughout so true to Cather's distinctive voice, that one suspects the entire "Development of an American Novelist" may be "the biography section" to which Greenslet refers in his July 26 letter. There is also the fact that Cather always reviewed—and frequently revised—promotional materials for her writings (not least in the case of *The Song of the Lark*: see Woodress 274). Even if Greenslet did draft sections III-V, Cather will have reshaped their substance and language in such a way as to make the final product her own.

One immediately notices a substantial change in tone from the "Literary Note." Whereas in 1903 Cather struggles to enhance the importance of the writing she has done in college and for a few newspapers, by 1915 she can refer not only to a published collection of poetry but also to three previously published prose works, *The Troll Garden*, *Alexander's Bridge*, and *O Pioneers!*. The enhanced self-assurance that characterizes the whole statement is

especially evident in the concluding section, "Present Life and Future Work," where Cather boldly assigns herself to "the front rank of American writers" and locates herself "definitely in the little group of American novelists that count; the novelists that present American life with full knowledge and convincing reality." She also lends additional authority to this piece, and strengthens its third-person, anonymous authorial stance, by frequent citations of her own previous public statements, drawing for all of these on an interview that had appeared in the *Philadelphia Record* in 1913.¹⁵

Given the highly successful publication of *O Pioneers!* just two years earlier, it is not surprising that Cather again emphasizes her Nebraska upbringing (though, in keeping with the more restrained style she is now developing, without some of the more piquant details of the 1903 statement—the little girls killing rattlesnakes with clods of earth, for instance!). In addition, this time she specifically ties this childhood period to her subsequent success as a novelist. Not only does she identify "[t]he first two years on the ranch" as "probably more important to her as a writer than any that came afterward," but she also quotes her own telling comment on how visiting the pioneer women made her feel "as if I had actually got inside another person's skin." She has space here to include a few details about her childhood years in Virginia, and to comment explicitly on the move from Virginia to Nebraska: "For a child, accustomed to the quiet and the established order behind the Blue Ridge, this change was very stimulating."¹⁶ Once again she stresses the importance of her early and close acquaintance with foreign languages and cultures, though here with reference not to her university studies—as in the "Literary Note"—but to her childhood: "...the contact with people of strange languages and customs impressed her deeply and inspired in her the broad, human understanding so essential to a writer of fiction. Foreign speaking people often talk more freely to a child than to grown persons, and even though they spoke very little English the settlers were social with the lonely little girl and somehow managed to tell her a great many stories about the old country."

The 1915 statement does no more than mention *April Twilights*—not surprising, given that as early as 1908 Cather was regretting its publication¹⁷—but it devotes a thoughtful paragraph to *The Troll Garden*. Its major focus, appropriately, is on the three novels being marketed by this particular brochure, with each receiving an independent section. The penetrating comments Cather makes on these three works go far beyond anything that appears in her 1926 "Biographical Sketch," and they gain interest from their chronological proximity to the creation of these novels.

Given the negative assessment she was soon to voice about *Alexander's Bridge*,¹⁸ it is interesting that she speaks of it here with considerable enthusiasm, not only according it a separate heading but also adding a brief but favorable comment in her summation. It is true, of course, that this brochure was promotional in nature, that *Alexander's Bridge* was one of the novels it was marketing, and that throughout her career Cather was—to a perhaps surprising degree—both diligent and adept at promoting herself and her writing. Nonetheless, she never praises herself indiscriminately, and she frequently takes herself severely to task (as, for instance, in her comments in this brochure on her early Nebraska stories, or her remarks in subsequent years on *Alexander's Bridge* and *The Song of the Lark*

itself).¹⁹ That at this point—in 1915—she still speaks of the “great artistic skill” of *Alexander’s Bridge* and calls it “brilliant and sympathetic in its reflections of character and life,” is significant—especially in the context of an essay she has chosen to call “The Development of an American Novelist.”

Noteworthy also are Cather’s detailed comments on *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, the former her first significant success, the second her longest novel—and the one foremost in her mind at the time she composed this statement. Her sharp delineation of the ways in which *O Pioneers!* differs from what she calls the “certain sameness about most Western stories” is significant, as is her concluding remark on the “definite historic value” of this novel. Although much of what she says about *O Pioneers!* comes directly from her 1913 *Philadelphia Record* interview, some of the language she uses of the novel is new and striking—her emphasis on the “virility” of the writing, for instance, or her comment that the tragic episode of Emil and Marie is handled “with a ruthlessness in keeping with the country and the stark simplicity of its moral code.”

In her remarks on *The Song of the Lark* I find particularly interesting the attention Cather pays to her range—even her unpredictability—as a writer. This theme sounds at the start of this section (“In whatever Miss Cather writes the reader may be sure of excellent workmanship and interesting theme. Other than that, one book in no way prepares him for what is coming next.”), and it returns at the end when Cather notes her familiarity not only with the West but also with New York and the world of opera. She returns emphatically to this same motif in the brochure’s concluding section: “What may be Miss Cather’s plans for future work she has not disclosed. One thing is certain—she will not repeat herself. There will never be a stereotyped Cather heroine or Cather hero.” That Cather should so stress this point both suggests her concern at this stage of her career not to be type-cast as a “western writer”²⁰ and also looks forward to the novels that are still to come. For while some of these will return to themes and locations familiar from *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, the range of character, setting, and theme represented in others—*One of Ours*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—is truly extraordinary.

Notes

*My thanks to Thomas Goldwasser and Jeffrey Marks for enabling me to obtain the two Cather statements discussed here; to Ann Romines for her help on several key points; and above all to Merrill Skaggs for her wise and generous advice throughout the preparation of this article.

¹*Willa Cather. A Biographical Sketch, An English Opinion, and An Abridged Bibliography* (New York 1926). Knopf published expanded versions in 1933 and 1941. See Crane 314-315.

²Crane notes that the flyer and order form, with a picture of Cather on the front cover, are illustrated in the U of Nebraska P’s 1962 reissue of *April Twilights* (5). The book was originally published by a vanity press run by Richard Badger of Boston. Badger’s reputation was decidedly mixed, as James Woodress suggests: “Either Cather was too naive to realize that the Badger imprint would be a signal to

reviewers of an unpublishable poetaster or she was desperately eager for an audience” (165).

³“Glimpses of Present-Day Poets: Willa Sibert Cather,” reprinted in Bohlke 3-4.

⁴Cather does not mention her study of French in either her 1915 or her 1926 statement. Does its presence here reflect the six weeks Cather and Isabelle McClung had spent in France during the summer of 1902? On the trip, see Woodress 160-163.

⁵The *Poet-Lore* article follows the “Literary Note” in dating Cather’s birth to 1876: see Bohlke 3. For the usual view on Cather’s revision of her age, see Leon Edel’s note in Brown 17; O’Brien 293-294; Woodress 516. On Cather’s reshaping of her name, see note 11 below.

⁶To note the awkward feel of Cather’s “remarkably discriminating dramatic criticism for the *Nebraska State Journal*” is not to deny the validity of her words. Indeed, in light of the reputation for critical toughness and candor that Cather garnered during her university years, her description is almost euphemistic! See Woodress 91-95.

⁷Cather’s comments are cited by Ethel M. Hockett in “The Vision of a Successful Fiction Writer,” a 1915 article in the *Lincoln Sunday Star* (Bohlke 12). The self-restraint that Cather learned over the years is apparent if one compares her 1903 description of her Nebraska childhood with that which appears in the 1915 brochure, cited below, or with the following passage from the first page of her 1926 “Biographical Sketch”: “Willa Cather did not go to school. She had a pony and spent her time riding about the country and getting acquainted with the neighbors, whose foreign speech and customs she found intensely interesting.” Even in 1926, however, she can get carried away by this particular subject (p. 2): “Those friendships Willa Cather made as a little girl still count immensely for her; and she says she could never find time to be bored in that community where the life of every family was like that of the Swiss Family Robinson. Lightning and hail and prairie fires and drouths and blizzards were always threatening to extinguish this family or that.”

⁸Cather’s lifelong interest in music is well known. That her musical sensibilities helped shape her writing is readily apparent, as Stephen Vincent and Rosemary Benét point out in “Willa Cather: Civilized and Very American,” a 1940 interview in the *New York Herald Tribune* (Bohlke 136): “The ear is as important as the eye,” she comments—the comment of a writer whose style has euphony as well as clarity, music as well as veracity. Conversation should be set down in the mind, she says, “just as a violinist remembers how another violinist played a piece of music ten years ago.”

⁹The postcard, done in the same colors as the brochure’s cover, has on its front side a smaller reproduction of the Bréton painting along with yet one more blurb for the book: marketing would take place even as this order form made its way through the mails! Merrill Skaggs has surmised that Bréton’s picture of the girl with scythe “suggests to Cather Jim Burden’s dream of Lena in her next novel, *My Ántonia*,” an instance of how “one can sometimes spot an idea gestating in Cather’s brain.” In subsequent years Cather became concerned that readers were identifying Thea Kronborg with the “Lark” of Bréton’s title. In her 1932 edition of the novel she removed the painting from the book’s jacket and described it in her Preface as “a rather second-rate French painting in the Chicago Art Museum.”

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(Continued)

See Sherrill Harbison's edition, 421, note 6, and 433.

¹⁰The 1915 statement runs to slightly over 1800 words, the 1926 to slightly over 1200. Despite the efforts represented by this brochure, Cather was not satisfied with Houghton Mifflin's marketing of *The Song of the Lark*, apparently the first step in the sequence of events that led her eventually to change to Knopf: see Woodress 274-275.

¹¹Cather received no middle name at birth. At some point prior to 1900 she herself added "Sibert," a version of "Seibert," her grandmother Boak's maiden name, and a name common among other earlier family members as well. (See, e.g., O'Brien 106-107; Woodress 18-19.) Cather appears in this passage of the 1915 statement to be extending her own spelling of this name to other members of the family—and in so doing to be rewriting their history as well as her own. But Ann Romines has pointed out to me that several versions of the family name were current in the nineteenth century, among them "Sybert" and "Sibert" as well as "Seibert." She notes also that in the second half of the 1800s some members of the family started simplifying the spelling to "Sibert" and suggests that perhaps Willa Cather simply followed their model.

¹²It is significant that Cather here chooses to include this particular passage with its intriguing combination of getting inside another person's skin and being eaten by a tiger. The latter reminds one strongly of Cather's expressed wish to be devoured by her art (see Sergeant 3) and may perhaps, as Merrill Skaggs has suggested to me, carry resonances of Dickinson ("leopard breathes at last!") and even of Blake's tyger (cf. Cather's play on "Blake" in Rodney Blake of *Professor's House* and Rachel Blake of *Sapphira*). The themes of getting inside another person and of being consumed by one's art are especially relevant to the novel being promoted by this brochure, *The Song of the Lark*: see Harbison, esp. 145-146.

¹³Though Cather does not mention her date of birth in this 1915 statement, her assertion that she graduated from the university at age 19 sustains her earlier revision of her age (she was in fact 21 1/2 in June 1895).

¹⁴Worth noting here is Cather's exclusive focus on minority groups—and her strong emphasis that "these are today as typically American as any descendant of Pilgrim father or southern chevalier." The passage prepares for Cather's description of herself in the next paragraph as a sophisticated New Yorker who has a "familiarity with the West"—a familiarity that in fact goes back to a childhood spent among just such minority groups, as she has stressed in the first section of the brochure.

¹⁵"Willa Cather Talks of Work," reprinted in Bohlke 7-11. Cather has made modest editorial changes in the passages cited from this article. The use of external sources such as these is carried considerably further in the 1926 "Biographical Sketch" and its subsequent revisions. The bulk of the 1926 pamphlet is devoted to Alexander Porterfield's "An English Opinion," an extensive article excerpted from *The London Mercury*. By 1941, the expanded pamphlet includes not only this article and Cather's own slightly revised sketch and bibliography but also several additional pieces, among them two previously published letters by Cather herself and articles and reviews

from publications such as *The New Republic*, *The Irish Press*, *The Manchester Guardian*, *John O'London's Weekly*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

¹⁶It is interesting that even though she has less space available in her 1926 "Biographical Sketch," Cather devotes considerably more attention to this early period of her life and to its contrast with what she found in Nebraska (pp. 1-2): "Had she been born in [Red Cloud], she doubtless would have taken these things for granted. But she came to this strange mixture of peoples and manners from an old conservative society; from the Valley of Virginia, where the original land grants made in the reigns of George II and George III had been going down from father to son ever since, where life was ordered and settled, where the people in good families were born good, and the poor mountain people were not expected to amount to much. The movement of life was slow there, but the quality of it was rich and kindly. There had been no element of struggle since the Civil War. Foreigners were looked down upon, unless they were English or persons of title. An imaginative child, taken out of this definitely arranged background, and dropped down among struggling immigrants from all over the world, naturally found something to think about. Struggle appeals to a child more than comfort and picturesqueness, because it is dramatic." In her comments on Virginia she seems already to be looking ahead to themes and characters that will appear in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* many years later (cf. Merrill Skaggs' comment, above note 9, on how the Bréton painting used in connection with *The Song of the Lark* seems to foreshadow *My Ántonia*).

¹⁷See Sergeant 62, 182; Woodress 165-166.

¹⁸See especially Cather's Preface to the second edition (Boston and New York 1922).

¹⁹See her 1932 Preface to *The Song of the Lark*, 433-434 in Harbison's edition.

²⁰A comment from Ethel M. Hockett's 1915 article (see above, note 7) exemplifies what Cather was resisting: "Miss Cather's books all have western settings, in Nebraska, Colorado and Arizona, and she spends part of each year in the west reviewing the early impressions and stories which go to make up her books" (Bohlke 13-14).

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Lifting The Death Chill: "Before Breakfast" As Sequel To *My Mortal Enemy*

Marvin Friedman

I first began to scrutinize "Before Breakfast," Cather's penultimate story, when I noticed an interesting parallel between the names of two characters and those in the literary work to which the story refers explicitly—Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*. Henry Grenfell, the story's central character, is packing the play to take with him on vacation, when his son Harrison picks it up and comments on the volume (OB 153). The ensuing colloquy reveals an estrangement between the father and son that, in many ways, parallels the estrangement between Henry IV and his son Hal in the Shakespeare play. By naming Grenfell *Henry* (or *Harry*) and naming his son *Harrison*, Cather invites us to examine these parallels more closely.

In "Before Breakfast," Cather quotes works by two unnamed authors. The first reference occurs when Grenfell recalls a four-word phrase from Milton—"to avoid worse rape" (PL 1:505, OB 149). The other indirect reference occurs when Grenfell, completing a winding uphill climb, thinks that, "[l]ike Christian of old, he had left his burden at the bottom of the hill" (OB 161). In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian reaches just such a milestone on his salvation-seeking pilgrimage to the Celestial City (PP 115).

All of these literary works share one relevant characteristic. After an interval, each author wrote a second work that was arguably intended to be read as a companion piece to the first. With Shakespeare, it was *Henry IV, Part II*. With Milton, it was *Paradise Regained*. And with Bunyan, it was "The Second Part" of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the pilgrimage of Christian's wife and children.

"Before Breakfast" also refers to one major musical work.¹ In a conversation occurring before he goes to attend the Boston Symphony, Grenfell's son Harrison wonders aloud whether "Koussevitzky will take the slow movement in the Brahms Second as he did last winter" (OB 155). The "slow" movement of that second symphony is the second movement. The music critic Harold Schonberg has observed that:

Brahms often composed in sets of two. Thus there were, only a few years apart, two sextets, two quartets, the two most famous sets of piano variations, two orchestral serenades, two sets of vocal waltzes, two overtures (the Tragic and the Academic Festival), two clarinet sonatas, two piano quartets, two symphonies. As he wrote the first, he seemed to get interested in the problems and they overflowed into a companion work. He kept this habit up to the very end. (LGC 286)

In view of these numerous dyadic references in "Before Breakfast," I began to suspect that "Before Breakfast"

itself might be considered a companion piece to one of her own prior artistic works. If that was her intent, however, had Cather left us any clue about what the earlier work might be?

In "Before Breakfast," Grenfell comments that "his shipwreck had not been on the family rock" (OB 156) and that "[t]he bitter truth was that his worst enemy was closer even than the wife of his bosom" (OB 156). Was the reference to his "worst enemy" a hint that "Before Breakfast" was intended to be a companion piece to Cather's earlier novel *My Mortal Enemy*? I first noticed that both stories involve families in which there are intergenerational estrangements, and both allude to works by Shakespeare serving thematic purposes. Toward the end of her life, Myra Henshawe, who is estranged from her former guardian (her great uncle), recites memorized portions from Shakespeare's plays *King John* and *Richard II* (ME 99). Like *My Mortal Enemy*, both Shakespeare plays involve significant intergenerational family conflicts. In *King John*, the king's efforts to kill his nephew ultimately lead to his own downfall, while in *Richard II*, the king's prior murder of his uncle is a significant factor undermining his reign.

The possibility of a dyadic connection between *My Mortal Enemy* and "Before Breakfast" became even more intriguing when I began to explore a key sentence in *My Mortal Enemy*. In her last illness, Myra asks why she must "die like this, alone with my mortal enemy" (ME 113). Commenting on this "terrible judgment upon all one hopes for" (113), the narrator Nellie Birdseye says: "I began to understand a little what she meant, to sense how it was with her. Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves...against themselves and all their idolatries" (113).

Idolatry, the worship of false gods, is a theme to which Cather has alluded in several places.² One is in her earlier story "Behind The Singer Tower," which subsequently may have affected *My Mortal Enemy* in a particularly subtle way. Immediately preceding the Miltonic phrase Grenfell quotes in "Before Breakfast," Milton lists the "grim idols" who were Satan's compatriots in hell. That list includes the Philistine god Dagon whom Milton describes as one whose hands were "lopped off in his own temple" on the "grunsel edge" (1:460). Milton's description of the lopped-off hands echoes the biblical book of Samuel where the Philistines, after capturing the defeated Israelites' ark containing the two tablets revealed at Sinai, place the ark in the temple of their god, Dagon; they return in the morning and find the idol fallen over with its hands "cut off upon the threshold" (1 Samuel 5:4).

I believe that Cather is alluding to this idol in "Behind the Singer Tower" when she describes an Italian tenor named Graziani who, when he toured the world, had to

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have “whatever was most costly...in every city” (*CSF* 45). In New York, that was a luxury hotel’s 32d floor. His idolatrous worship of the “most costly” ultimately costs him his life when, as the hotel is burning down, he vainly tries to save himself by leaping from the 32d floor toward the “cobwebby life nets” below (45). His hand (like that of the Philistine idol) is later found, “snapped off at the wrist” (45) on a lower floor’s window ledge where he had tried to save himself by throwing out his hand while falling. The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes “threshold” as one definition of “grunsel” (the word used by Milton), but it also includes “window sill” as an alternate definition.

The number 32 may allude to the thirty-second chapter of Exodus where the Israelites, having been liberated from slavery and having arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai, become impatient with Moses’ delayed return from the mountain. They force his brother Aaron to create an idol for them to worship—a golden calf. Moses returns, sees what they have done, and breaks the two tablets of the covenant which include the prohibition against idolatry.³

In determining what idolatries have led to Myra and Oswald Henshawe’s predicament in *My Mortal Enemy*, we might examine Myra’s own worship of the most costly objects and Oswald’s docile willingness to sacrifice his own vocational goals to meet her extravagant demands. Additionally, we might turn to the novel’s final paragraph in which the narrator implies that Myra’s ultimate cry of despair is a consequence of her having “exalted” a “common feeling” (122). The narrator does not tell us what that feeling is but, based on (among other things) Myra’s own comments that “[l]ove brings on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world” (38) and that there is “[n]o playing with love” (41), a good case can be made that the exaltation of “romantic love” represents one of the destructive idolatries.⁴

Unlike the situation she developed in “Behind The Singer Tower,” Cather in *My Mortal Enemy*—like Milton in *Paradise Lost*—seems concerned not only with describing her couple’s initial missteps but, perhaps more importantly, with exploring what they learn from their experience and how they react to any insights they have thereby acquired. That, I believe, is why, in a sense, *My Mortal Enemy* itself is a dyad. It is internally divided into two books, the second exploring Myra’s and Oswald’s recognition that they have failed themselves and each other, as well as their response to this realization. At the very beginning of that second book, I believe that Cather has left us a hint that idolatry remains at the heart of the novel by providing us with an exquisitely subtle allusion to “Behind The Singer Tower.” Just as Graziani had spent the last days of his life as a tenant of a hotel’s “thirty second floor,” Myra and Oswald Henshawe spend the last days of their lives together in an “apartment hotel” (*ME* 72) in which “[h]er room is thirty-two” (74). Myra’s room number thus underscores Nellie’s comment about Myra’s idolatry.

In the second half of *My Mortal Enemy*, we find that Myra has acquired some insight into the failings that have led to the couple’s current predicament. She recognizes that she was always a “grasping” woman (104).⁵ She also knows that Oswald, by idolizing her and passively sacrificing his personal goals at the altar of her idolatrous demands, has allowed her to destroy him. He in turn has imposed on her an unbearable burden of guilt which, in that sense, has made him her mortal enemy (105).

But these insights do not seem to have elicited any redemptive realizations. Recall that, in “Before Breakfast,” Grenfell recognizes that his life has been like a “shipwreck” (*OB* 156). In Book 1 of *My Mortal Enemy*, Nellie Birdseye states that, when “kindness” has left people, it is like a “shipwreck” (64). In Book 2, Myra expressly admits that, in age, when the flowers are so few, she is committing a “great unkindness” to destroy any that are left in Oswald’s heart (104). But her response to that recognition is simply to say: “I’m made so” (105). A few pages earlier, she adopted the same fatalistic excuse when she referred to her uncle’s savagery strengthening in her. She feels compelled by her “strain of blood” (99) which has become like her skeleton.

By contrast, after their fall from grace in *Paradise Lost*, Adam rejects Eve’s despairing proposal of suicide with the words:

But rise, let us no more contend, nor blame
Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive
In offices of love, how we may lighten
Each other’s burden in our share of woe. (10:957 ff.)

Milton here seems to be telling us that the initial fall does not end the story. We must pick up the pieces of our lives and move forward. But forsaking blame and achieving reconciliation may require at least some measure of mutual forgiveness for the past. Myra, however, like her uncle, is unable to forgive or seek forgiveness from the still living Oswald for the harm their idolatries have done to one another. Having secreted away “gold” (*ME* 101) in a trunk, she does not use it to enable them to find better quarters and thereby relieve Oswald from the guilt she instills for their shoddy accommodations. Rather, she seeks to use the gold to buy masses for the dead (Modjeska and, later, herself). This wish is consistent with her belief in “holy words and holy rites” (102). But a parallel might well be drawn to the Israelites’ demand that Aaron use their gold to create an idol to which they can bow down. Idolatrous use of gold cannot save the Israelites, the tenor Graziani, or Myra Henshawe; all vainly grasp for safety from the consequences of their missteps.

So *My Mortal Enemy* ends with the couple seemingly estranged. Myra, in a final extravagant gesture, overpays a poor cab driver to take her to the bare headland that she earlier described as like Gloucester’s cliff in *King Lear*. There she will die alone, overlooking the sea—having left instructions that her body be cremated and her ashes buried “in some lonely and unfrequented place” (119). It is an ending that, like the early morning North Atlantic waters referred to in “Before Breakfast,” bears a “death-chill” (*OB* 165).

But Cather's allusion to *Lear*, I believe, was meant to tell us that this ending was not inevitable and to give us hints of how the death-chill could have been survived. In *Lear*, the deceit of Gloucester's bastard son Edmund has led to a rupture between Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar. Rather than holding himself or Edgar personally responsible for their estrangement and thereby capable of ending it, Gloucester concludes that the cracking of the "bond" twixt son and father is the inevitable result of recent lunar and solar "eclipses" (I.ii.105 ff.). Gloucester's remarks evoke this response from Edmund:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune,—often the surfeit of our own behaviours, —we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion. (I.ii.121 ff.)

Substitute Myra Henshawe's "our strain of blood" (our genes, if you will) for the phrase "the stars" in Shakespeare, and it becomes apparent that neither Shakespeare nor Cather would accept the excuses that Myra (in "temporary eclipse" [ME 76]) gives for her purported inability to alter her conduct and abandon her idolatries.⁶

Gloucester, having been blinded for trying to help Lear escape from his daughter Regan, falls into despair and, like Myra, offers to overpay a poor man to take him to the top of a cliff from which we know that he intends to leap to his death. Gloucester's ultimate guide, however, turns out to be his son Edgar. Edgar hears his father forgive him (the very action Myra is unable to take). Gloucester is saved from committing suicide, and the father/son pair are fully reconciled before the father's natural death. Conversely, the end of *My Mortal Enemy* includes no such reconciliation, for Myra never forgives anybody. Cather's allusion to the possibility of a different outcome seems to have been missed by many readers.

Myra's instruction that, upon her death, she should be cremated and her ashes buried in some "lonely and unfrequented place" (119) provides us with a connective bridge to the beginning of "Before Breakfast." At his desk at "Grenfell & Saunders, Bonds" (OB 147), where he works "like a steam shovel" (152), the "escape-avenue" (147) Henry Grenfell keeps at the back of his mind is also an unfrequented place—an island which isn't even on the map and whose description bears some similarities to the lost garden of Eden.⁷ On this trip, however, Grenfell experiences the first sleepless night he has ever spent on his island—a night of reevaluation in which his entire life history passes before him.

Like Myra at the end of her life, Grenfell—who is effectively estranged from his wife and sons—is trying to understand what has gone wrong. In reviewing her own personal history, Myra Henshawe concluded that what she had really needed was money and that the changes in her feelings for Oswald resulted because the poor and childless couple remained unnaturally focused on each other (ME 105). Significantly, in "Before Breakfast," Cather has given Grenfell the two things that Myra

lacked—wealth and children. But neither gift has brought him fulfillment.

Grenfell is at the point of despair. Rejecting the eyedrops he has been taking for his failing eyes, he asks: "Why patch up? What was the use...of anything?" (OB 148). In their respective autobiographical "audits," Myra and Grenfell each have sought to identify the "mortal enemy" responsible for their shipwreck. In his audit, Grenfell blames his shipwreck on his "bosom"—the humiliation he has suffered as a result of his "hair-trigger stomach" (156). By contrast, by having her narrator in *My Mortal Enemy* associate shipwreck with unkindness, Cather seems to be telling us that her characters' key anatomical concerns must be ones of the heart, not the stomach. Like Oswald Henshawe, Grenfell has sacrificed his true vocational goals on the altar of a potentially fatal idolatry. Unlike Oswald, it was not the passion of romantic love that led Grenfell to marry his wife Margaret and exchange his professional goals for the bondage of his father-in-law's business. "It was his own intoxicated vanity that sealed his fate. He had never been 'made much over' before" (151). But while Oswald and Grenfell have thus falsely exalted different common feelings, the result is the same. Rather than bringing Grenfell fulfillment, his idolatrous sacrifice has left him feeling "spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything" (149).

This last phrase is particularly significant. The word "Bonds" in the title of Grenfell's firm may be seen as a pun. In one sense, it can symbolize the "bondage" of an unsatisfying career.⁸ But recall how Gloucester in *Lear* uses the same word: "the bond crackt 'twixt son and father" (I.ii.111). These are the emotional "bonds" that Grenfell has failed to establish with those to whom he should be closest—a failure that has left him "unrelated to anything," on a rock in the middle of nowhere, in a cabin to which he admits no one and where he is more profoundly alone than Adam before the creation of Eve.

But once again, Cather's allusions seem to imply that, no matter how late in the day it may be, despair is not the inevitable outcome of prior spiritual failures. Not only has Grenfell's "dreadful" night been one of reevaluation; it has also been one of "revelation" (OB 149). The book of Revelation would advise Grenfell: "Anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see" (3:18). Unlike Grenfell's "eye-drops" (148), the "eye-salve" of revelation is not designed to restore Grenfell's physical sight, but rather to enable him to acquire the inner vision (what we mean by the term "insight") that will prompt him to repent and change.

Grenfell has also brought with him the second of the two little red leather volumes that he was placing into his traveling bag—presumably *Henry IV, Part II*. There he will find that King Henry and his son Hal are reconciled when Hal sheds tears of sorrow in response to his mistaken belief that Henry has died and Henry then comes to recognize the loving emotions embodied in those tears—tears which Shakespeare describes as "gentle eye drops" (IV. iv. 218). When he reads these lines, Grenfell may realize that the "eye-drops" he has been using are no substitute for melting the ice between his family members as they forge meaningful bonds to

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each other.

Before taking a familiar trail on the morning after his dreadful night, Grenfell leaves a message in capital letters for the person who cares for his needs on the island—"BREAKFAST WHEN I RETURN" (159).

I believe that the word "breakfast," part of the very title of our story, is intended to prod our looking at the second book in the Milton dyad—*Paradise Regained*. There, Christ has gone into the wilderness where he will withdraw into himself and fast until he comes to a full understanding and acceptance of the self-sacrificial role he has been assigned. During the night, he undergoes several temptations from Satan, who acknowledges that Christ is to be his "fatal enemy" (IV:526). Only after successfully resisting those temptations and accepting his task does Christ return home and "break fast."

The redeeming value of noble self-sacrifice is a message that Cather may have embedded in *My Mortal Enemy* by repeatedly referring to Bellini's opera *Norma*. At the end of the second act of that opera, a changed Norma is prepared to forgive past wrongs and to sacrifice her own life to save those whom she loves—actions that inspire her formerly unfaithful lover to reunite with her at last. Myra Henshawe, however, never gets beyond Norma's "Casta Diva" prayer to the Druid moon goddess in Act 1. Myra never absorbs what is arguably the opera's most important message.

What happens to make the ending of "Before Breakfast" different from *My Mortal Enemy*, I believe, is that, when Grenfell reaches the top of his cliff, he starts a rescue in which he must selflessly risk his life to save the life of another in danger of drowning. So, unlike Myra, Grenfell does not die at the top of the cliff. Instead, he heads down to his cabin feeling that something has sharpened his appetite—he is actually hungry. He's not sure what did it, but one distinct possibility is that, at the top of the cliff, he roused himself by acting unselfishly on behalf of another human being. The moment begins his reawakening to the possibility that, for him, life may still promise satisfying possibilities. By his cliff-top response, he symbolically as well as literally began to "cross the sharp line from the deep shade to the sunny hillside" (OB 166). He finds the door to his kitchen open, echoing the lines from Revelation (3:8): "I know thy works; behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it; for thou hast a little strength and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name."⁹

The feeling this ending supplies is quite different from the hopelessness that pervades the conclusion of *My Mortal Enemy*. Several mirror images seem to signal that this difference in emotional outcome may be part of the author's conscious, detailed design. Both Grenfell and Myra end their upward climb on a "headland," but Myra's is "bare" (ME 87) while Grenfell's is "grassy" (OB 163). Myra's death comes while leaning back against a solitary "old twisted tree" that she has sought out on Gloucester's Cliff (ME 87). Like that twisted tree, the trees in "Before Breakfast" grow leaning away from the sea. Ultimately,

however, like great creeping vines, the trees in "Before Breakfast" "burst into tender leafage" when they reach the sunshine (OB 163). While Grenfell's own "vague objective" also includes a tree, it is identified as a "bushy rowan" (163), a type of tree that has white flowers and red berries—an image that provides us with an allusion to Christ's sacrificial passion. We now understand why Cather had Grenfell refer to Christian's leaving his burden at the bottom of the hill. Christian describes it as his "burden of guilt" and says that, when he saw "one...hang bleeding upon a tree, the very sight of him made my burden fall off my back" (PP 115).

Since Gloucester's cliff presumably faces the Pacific Ocean outside San Francisco, Myra (who is Irish) dies facing the west—in Irish lore, the direction associated with death. While Myra may have seen the sky lighten at dawn, she most certainly did not see the rising of the sun itself. Grenfell's headland faces east, the direction of the rising sun and the direction in which Milton's reconciled Adam and Eve leave Eden to begin their journey together after the fall (XII: 638).¹⁰

Hope, of course, does not necessarily mean optimism. Grenfell's story is not over. That he has a long way to go is shown by Cather's observation that, "as he passed the grandfather tree he waved his hand, but didn't stop. Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age" (OB 166).

The "plucky youth" is presumably the girl on the beach who had been in danger of drowning. Some have interpreted Cather's imagery of the girl as coming out of a seashell (164) as an allusion to well-known paintings of Venus arising from a shell.¹¹ Here is an alternative interpretation that I find more meaningful in the context of the story: Unlike the Venus of the paintings, the girl coming out of the seashell in "Before Breakfast" is wearing a pink bathing-suit. The most familiar pink object that comes out of a shell is a pearl. The name "Margaret" is derived from the Latin and Greek words for "pearl." Cather's description of the geologist's daughter (145) and her description of Grenfell's wife Margaret (152, 155-6) are remarkably similar. At the end of *My Mortal Enemy*, Oswald Henshawe says: "These last years it's seemed to me that I was nursing the mother of the girl who ran away with me. Nothing ever took that girl from me. Nellie, I wish you could have seen her then" (121). Oswald's inability to see Myra realistically by opening his eyes to the connection between the girl then and the woman now crippled his ability to reconnect with Myra in a way that precluded despair. If Grenfell's spiritual pilgrimage is to make progress, he must acquire the insight that will enable him to avoid the same mistake.

Yet Cather may also be saying something else just as important: "Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age." In going into the water at a time when it is covered with a "death-chill," the plucky youth, the geologist's daughter, displays the "flaming courage of youth" referred to on the last page of *My Mortal Enemy*. And the word "courage" in that phrase takes us back to where Oswald tells Nellie that Myra "has enough desperate courage for a regiment" but she "can't endure" (92). While plucky youth may be more bracing, it is enduring age that demonstrates the character needed to resist

despair and overcome the consequences of our human fallibilities. As the chorus of angels declares at the end of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* Oratorio to which Cather repeatedly directs our attention in *Lucy Gayheart*: "He that shall endure to the end shall be saved."¹²

Having noted that idolatry seems to be a key Cather concern in both *My Mortal Enemy* and "Before Breakfast," we note also that Mendelssohn's *Elijah* is singularly focused on the prophet's lifelong battle against idolatry. The *Elijah* libretto is based almost entirely on paraphrases or direct quotations from the Bible. Biblically, the return of Elijah will herald the onset of the messianic age. Most readers are familiar with Isaiah's prediction that, in the messianic age, men will beat their swords into plowshares and learn war no more (Isaiah 2:4). So one would expect that when Elijah returns, he will perform the political tasks needed to achieve world peace. Instead, the words of the *Elijah* (quoted almost verbatim from Chapter 4 of Malachi, the last of the biblical prophets) are revealingly different:

Behold, God hath sent Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children unto their fathers, lest the Lord shall come and smite the earth with a curse.

This message is clearly reflected in the need to bring reconciliation between Henry Grenfell and his son Harrison in "Before Breakfast" (paralleling Shakespeare's key reconciliation of King Henry IV and his son Hal). That Cather was conscious of the overarching importance of that task is evidenced by the fact that, in *My Mortal Enemy*, she seems to have made the absence of reconciliation between Myra and her uncle a critical basis for that novel's unhappy outcome.

Cather once said that, in *The Professor's House*, she had tried to create an effect similar to what she had seen in Dutch pictures of an interior room containing a square open window through which one can see ships "that ply quietly on all the waters to the globe" (*OW* 31). Through the window of that individual room, we see the entire world. In "Before Breakfast," Cather can be seen to have done just that with time as well as space. Through the story of a single day in the life of a single man on a small island too insignificant to be included on any map, she has taken us all the way back to the "first amphibious frog-toad" (*OB* 166) beginning his pilgrimage to find a new water hole and all the way forward into the future through the open door of a room in which the messiah may be waiting. If "Before Breakfast" indeed represents a continuation of an interior literary dialogue between Cather and William Faulkner,¹³ she might well have been echoing the words of the servant Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*:

"I've seed de first en de last... I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (*FR* 220).

From the messianic perspective, however, there is a sense in which all that universal time collapses back into the single decision that every individual makes in every present moment. That is, each step that each individual

takes on the pilgrimage road embraces the entire future of the entire world. To the extent that Cather herself embraced that concept, it may explain why it was unnecessary for her at the late "Before Breakfast" stage of her life to write a story dealing with any of the external horrors of the great world war in which mankind then seemed to be destroying itself—not because she didn't care but, rather, because she had concluded that what happened on the macrocosmic world scale was ultimately dependent on what happened on the scale of the individual human being. It is a position consistent with that of Milton in *Paradise Regained*, where Christ rejects Satan's argument that he can do more good for the world by abandoning his self-sacrificial path and, instead, becoming ruler of Rome (the political power which, in *Norma*, is the mortal enemy of the singer of the "Casta Diva" aria with which Myra Henshawe is associated) or of Rome's sworn enemy Parthia (which is the name of Myra's home town).

In concluding, I would like to return to Harrison Grenfell's speculation as to whether Koussevitsky would take the slow movement in the Brahms' second symphony the same way as the last time he conducted it. His mother responds by saying that she preferred another conductor's reading. Think of the symphony as a universally applicable theme representing a particular aspect of the human condition, and the conductor as an author who interprets that theme by incorporating it into a story. My thesis has been that *My Mortal Enemy* and "Before Breakfast" represent two Cather interpretations of the same theme, and I have tried to show some of the similarities and differences between those two interpretations. By embedding her interpretations in a highly complex allusive structure reaching back as far as the Bible, Cather recognizes that her theme has been of interest to great writers in every age and acknowledges that her exploration of this theme has been enriched by what can be seen as an evolving collaborative effort. In summarizing the result of that effort as represented by Cather's own work, we might appropriately apply Bishop Latour's description of Father Vaillant's onion soup in *Death comes for the Archbishop*: "[W]hen one thinks of it, a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition" (38). But while knowledge of a soup's history adds nothing to its taste, our appreciation of Cather's work is significantly enhanced by our increasing awareness of its multi-layered character.

Notes

¹ There is also a reference (*OB* 155) to one minor musical piece, *Kathleen Mavourneen* (words by Julia Crawford and music by Frederick N. Crouch). Interestingly, even this song may be consistent with the above-noted pattern because it has two verses.

² For example, Merrill Skaggs has drawn my attention to "The Garden Lodge," in which Caroline Noble's mother eloped (like Myra Henshawe) with a man whom she "idolized" (*TG* 47), and Caroline herself most fears "the part of one that sets up an idol and the part of one that bows down to it" (49). Later, illuminated by "moonlight" while thinking of the man to whom she

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(Continued)

seems to have become romantically attracted, Caroline ultimately realizes that she has been “losing her way” and has been “developing with alarming celerity that part of one which sets up an idol and that part of one which bows down and worships it” (51). Compare this with the passage in which Myra Henshawe tells Nellie Birdseye: “See the moon coming out, Nellie—behind the tower. It awakens the guilt in me. No playing with love...” (ME 41).

See also my discussion (later in this paper) regarding the references to Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* oratorio in *Lucy Gayheart*.

³In “Behind the Singer Tower,” Cather has one character describe the Singer Tower as “looking exactly like the Jewish high priest...” (CSF 46). Aaron, it should be noted, was the first of those high priests. In addition, the story explicitly refers to “your Moloch on the Singer Tower” (64). Moloch is another in Milton’s list of grim idols—“besmeared with blood [o]f human sacrifice” (1:392-3).

⁴I delivered a paper at the *Willa Cather on Mesa Verde Symposium* in October 1999, entitled “Borrowed Plots.” The paper maintains that *My Mortal Enemy* contains significant allusions (including the novel’s very title) to Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale”—a story in which the exaltation of “love at first sight” leads two of the principal characters into becoming mortal antagonists.

⁵I am indebted to Robert K. Miller for noting (in an informal conversation at the *Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar* in Winchester, Virginia) a possible connection between Myra’s nonredemptive “grasping” in *My Mortal Enemy* and the tenor Graziani’s vain grasp to save himself while falling to his death in “Behind the Singer Tower.”

⁶Among other possible linguistic and thematic connections between *King Lear* and *My Mortal Enemy* is this subtle but nevertheless intriguing one:

Upon learning of a clause in her uncle’s will (stating that, if she comes to the shelter he has endowed, she is to be received and paid an allowance until the time of her death), Myra states: “How like the old Satan that was! Be sure when he dictated that provision to his lawyer, he thought to himself: ‘She’d roll herself into the river first, the brach’” (ME 98). This is the same uncle who, when threatening to disinherit Myra, advised her: “It’s better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money...A poor man stinks, and God hates him” (22).

Compare the above-quoted words with those of the King’s fool in *Lear* who, when the King threatens to whip him for having criticized the King’s decisions regarding his daughters, responds: “Truth’s a dog must to kennel: he must be whipt out, when the Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink” (I.iv.114-16).

⁷In his elaboration of the Genesis description of Eden, Milton in *Paradise Lost* refers to a “mountain...high raised upon the rapid current” of a stream that is ultimately divided into four, with “murmuring waters falling down the slope hills” (4:222 ff.). In “Before

Breakfast,” Cather describes a spot on Grenfell’s island where “water was rushing down the deep-cut channel with sound and fury,” ultimately ending in “four waterfalls, white as silver, pouring down the perpendicular cliff walls” (OB 162).

⁸At the *International Cather Seminar 2000*, I delivered a paper (entitled “The Samson & Delilah Story: One of Cather’s Lifelong Paradigms”) contending that the use of the word “bonds” in “Before Breakfast” was one of several signals that Cather also intended to draw parallels between that story and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*.

⁹Compare the quoted lines, and Grenfell’s island as his “escape-avenue,” with ones in *The Professor’s House*, where Cather describes the “great fact in [St. Peter’s] life”—the lake that was “his always possible escape from dullness... [I]t was like open door that nobody could shut” (PH 30).

¹⁰The above listing of connective strands between “Before Breakfast” and *My Mortal Enemy* is hardly exhaustive. Here is another intriguing example:

The only way Grenfell has been able to “feel like a whole man” has been to “go shooting” and killing things. His “greatest triumph” was killing a “white bear in Labrador” (OB 157). Yet it is immediately after his review of his hunting experiences that Grenfell recognizes that he has been on the “wrong road” (158). Where will he find the right road—the one that will actually make him “whole”?

In seeking Cather’s intent in this regard, the “white bear” takes us back to that portion of *My Mortal Enemy* where, shortly after Nellie’s arrival in New York City, Myra leaves her in Madison Square which she characterizes as “the real heart of the city” and “why I love living here” (33). It is Christmas eve and Nellie goes into a long description of such things as “friendly” old sweepers who are “very ready to talk to a girl from the country, and to brush off a bench so that she could sit down.” There were trees and shrubs that “seemed well-groomed and sociable, like pleasant people.” An old flower seller had wrapped a bunch of his violets in oiled paper “to protect them from the snow.” Nellie concludes: “Here, I felt, winter brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady” (34-5).

Cather may here be saying that, when people are friendly and pleasant, extend themselves to aid and welcome others, and protect the flowers against the snow (recall Myra’s later recognition that she is destroying the few flowers that are left in her aging husband’s heart, (104-5), it may be possible to tame “the winter of our discontent” (to paraphrase Shakespeare’s *Richard III*).

¹¹See, e.g., Bernice Slotte’s “Venus-on-the-halfshell” comment at p. 92 of her introduction to *The Kingdom of Art*.

¹²Not only does Clement Sebastian have Lucy accompany him on two selections from the oratorio, he points “with his finger” to the exact place he wants her to begin (LG 41) and later asks her whether she has “ever heard the *Elijah* well given” (42).

¹³For a detailed analysis of this subject, see Merrill Skaggs’ “Thefts and Conversation” paper in Volume 3 of

Cather Studies. As noted above (cf. Note 7), Cather in "Before Breakfast" expressly uses the phrase "sound and fury" (162). In 1946, Faulkner first published his explanatory "Appendix" to *The Sound and the Fury*. The "Appendix" is a narrative genealogy of the entire Compson clan. Although all of the characters are discussed at great length, Dilsey is summarized in these two words: "They endured" (FR 251).

That the concept of "endurance" was important to Faulkner is reflected in his 1950 Nobel prize acceptance speech where he stated that man "is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" (FR 4). The content and spirit of "Before Breakfast" suggests that Cather could well have said "amen" to that.

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Nature's Terror and Glory: A Comparison of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Circles"

Sarah Ross

In the spring of 2000, I found myself reading both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Willa Cather. When I began to pick up curious echoes between the two, I checked to find that Cather spoke in her early writing of the "lofty repose and magnificent tranquility of Emerson" (Slotte 34). While she clearly knew him well, what intrigued me were the unexpected parallels between the two authors. One would assume, for example, that many phrases from "The Divinity School Address" would reappear in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but such is not the case. Rather, it is Emerson's "Circles" which seemed to reappear, time after time, in Cather's masterpiece. In the essay which follows, I will explore the importance of this unrecognized source.

"Man was lost and saved in a garden," Archbishop Latour quotes Pascal in Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (438). This protagonist with a continuously evolving relationship to his world finds nature to be a force that both terrifies and appeals to him. Ultimately, Nature provides Latour with refuge. Yet such refuge does not necessarily mean freedom from nature's fury. In Cather's novel, terror and comfort coexist. Importantly, this view of nature in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* echoes the beliefs expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay, "Circles." Here Emerson describes the infinitude of nature as a positive quality which allows for continuous change and advancement. Because man is a creature that longs for stability, however, the infinitude of nature, frightens him. For both Cather and Emerson, nature is an infinite force that terrifies and appeals, sometimes simultaneously. In the woods, as Emerson writes, man is "glad to the brink of fear" ("Nature" 24).

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the American Southwest is described as a dangerous place that can terrify. In the Prologue we learn, "The desert down there has a particular horror; I do not mean thirst, nor Indian massacres, which are frequent. The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand" (279-280). Here, not only is nature unable to satisfy human thirst, but also it allows violent slaughter. Yet the worst "horror" of nature is that it lacks stability. Its canyons and arroyos are multiple and unpredictable as they plunge into the earth. Nature cannot be trusted or fully known; therefore it terrifies.

Similarly in "Circles" Emerson writes, "The natural world may be conceived as a system of concentric



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circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding" (174). This view of a sliding, unstable nature is highly similar to Cather's threatening canyons. In both descriptions, nature deceives man. Nature seems superior to any human audaciously crawling on its surface. Its cracks cannot be anticipated nor its traps avoided. For Cather and Emerson, terrible nature leaves man extremely vulnerable.

Cather describes the effects of Latour's first encounter with this unknown natural world:

A solitary horseman . . . pushed through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico. . . . The country in which he found himself was . . . featureless or rather, . . . it was crowded with features, all exactly alike. As far as he could see on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand hills. . . . [H]e had been riding among them since early morning, and the look of the country had no more changed than if he had stood still. . .

He seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare. (DCA 285)

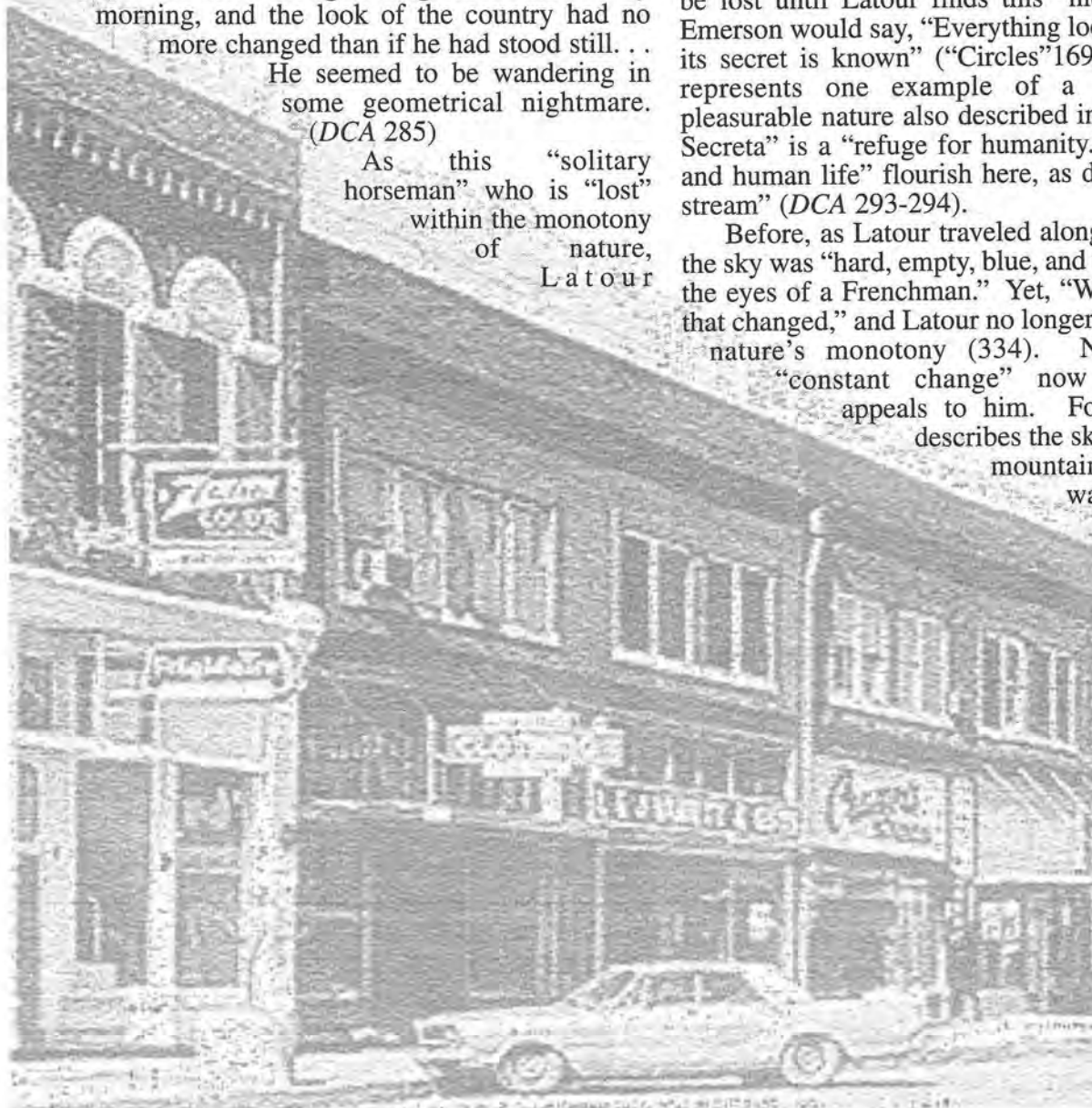
As this "solitary horseman" who is "lost" within the monotony of nature, Latour

travels through "arid" land; yet he gets nowhere because nature continuously repeats itself. This infinite landscape reflects numerous images from Emerson's "Circles." Emerson argues, ". . . there is no end in nature. . . . There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees" (168). Although "nature looks provokingly stable and secular" to Latour, its monotony soon becomes a "nightmare" (169). Latour becomes trapped in an "interminable desert of ovens" and "uniform . . . conical red hills" (DCA 287).

But as man was lost in the garden, so he is also saved. Having spotted "living vegetation" that could not "present more faithfully the form of the cross," Latour finds salvation (286). The "cruciform tree" appears and almost immediately Latour's animals scent the "hidden water." There was "nothing to hint of water until it rose miraculously out of the parched and thirsty sea of sand" as "some subterranean stream found an outlet here" and "was released from darkness . . ." (294). Thus, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, nature seems to have its secrets, and Latour is able to uncover one at "Agua Secreta." Everything appears to be lost until Latour finds this "hidden water"; or as Emerson would say, "Everything looks permanent until its secret is known" ("Circles" 169). "Agua Secreta" represents one example of a rich, fertile, and pleasurable nature also described in this novel. "Agua Secreta" is a "refuge for humanity." "Grass and trees and human life" flourish here, as does a "life-giving stream" (DCA 293-294).

Before, as Latour traveled along the Santa Fe trail, the sky was "hard, empty, blue, and very monotonous to the eyes of a Frenchman." Yet, "West of the Pecos all that changed," and Latour no longer seems disturbed by nature's monotony (334). Nature's power of "constant change" now mesmerizes and appeals to him. For example, Latour describes the sky West of the Pecos mountains: "... here there

was always activity overhead, clouds forming and moving all day long." They could be "dark and full of violence, or soft and white with luxurious idleness" (334). Here, the sky both terrifies and delights Latour. It is the ability of nature to change, however, that appeals to him most: "The deserts, the mountains and



mesas, were continually re-formed and re-coloured by the cloud shadows. The whole country seemed *fluid* to the eye under this constant change of accent, the ever-varying distribution of light" (334). The fact that Cather emphasizes the *fluidity* of nature importantly parallels Emerson's emphasis in "Circles" (168). Moreover, Emerson expresses the appeal of this change: ". . . there is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring. . . . [I]n nature every moment is new . . . [;] nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit" (176-177). The clouds that Latour sees on his journey to Ácoma, mirror Emerson's words. As the clouds renew, so does Latour. The New Mexico wind makes Latour "a boy again" (DCA 443).

Yet as Latour and his guide Jacinto move closer and closer to Ácoma, "dark clouds began boiling up from behind [the Ácoma Mesa] like ink spots spreading in a brilliant sky" (336). "Deafening thunder" breaks overhead and "heavy curtains" of rain shake "in the air before them." The poisonous, "coarse-toothed" nightshade plant even grows along the treacherous stairway they must climb to reach the mesa top (336). Ácoma itself, the village on the rock, overhangs an "abyss" and is a place where the sun blazes down with "insupportable blindness." The Ácoma church is "war-like" and since it is "like a part of the cliff itself," the natural setting of Ácoma also becomes "war-like" (337).

Thus, Ácoma appears an extremely grim and frightening place that is unified with the dangerous nature surrounding it. From Cather's descriptions, Ácoma seems to be the most distressing settlement Latour visits:

[Latour] was on a naked rock in the desert, in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams. Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, rock- turtles on their rock. (339)

This "rock-turtle" people dismays Latour. They live on their rock, which is like "the utmost expression of human need" (335). The Ácoma need stability. They "share the universal yearning for something permanent, enduring, without shadow of change" (336). What appalls Latour is this lack of change and the fixity of the Ácoma and "their rock."

Emerson recognizes the human need for stability when he admits that "people wish to be settled" ("Circles" 177). Yet for Emerson and Latour, stability and permanence are also frightening things. According to Emerson, "The only sin is limitation" (171); "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" (177). It is Emerson that seeks to "unsettle all things" (176). Thus, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour's distaste for Ácoma

inertness can be understood through convictions Emerson expresses in "Circles."

Bishop Latour's experience in Book Four, "Snake Root," also reflects nature's ability both to terrify and succor man. As they journey through the Pecos mountains to reach the sick Father Vaillant, Latour and Jacinto are caught in a terrible storm. The wind blows "like a hurricane at sea" and the air becomes "blind with snow" (DCA 353). To escape the storm, Jacinto leads Latour to a "peculiar formation in the rocks; two rounded ledges . . . [that] suggested two great stone lips" (354). Latour, however, finds this cave to be a very disturbing place. He is "struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place" and even comments, "I feel ill here already" (355). Still, the cave is where Latour is able to find warmth and satisfy his hunger. It is essentially his salvation. As Cather writes, "The shudder of repugnance" Latour feels when he thinks of the cave, is "quite unjustified by anything he had experienced there," since "it had been a hospitable shelter to him in his extremity" (358). Moreover, in Latour's memories of this experience, Cather clearly describes man's contrasting emotions that express themselves in response to an ever-changing and complex natural world: ". . . afterward he remembered the storm itself, even his exhaustion, with a tingling sense of pleasure. But the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror" (358).

From Emerson's perspective, the cave itself is most terrifying because it represents a contained, enclosed, natural place. As Jacinto takes stones and sand to "entirely" close the "solitary" orifice in the cave, he is in a sense, "creating an end in nature" (DCA 355, "Circles" 168). True, there is also an opening in the "great stone lips," but Jacinto has closed a natural window that was previously open. Jacinto

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(Continued)

physically creates an "outside," an "enclosing wall," and a "circumference" to nature and to man. Moreover, the cave is also a place where the sound of a "great underground river," itself "one of the oldest voices of the earth," is "plastered up with clay" (DCA 356). Importantly, this image greatly contrasts to the "life-giving stream" that flows freely through "Agua Secreta," the place of Latour's initial salvation.

As the cave is a part of "a peculiar rock formation," it can be associated with the rock of Ácoma, the most incomprehensible landscape Latour has experienced. Like the rock of Ácoma, this mysterious cave in the desert symbolizes stability in nature. Thus, it eliminates hope because it never changes. The cave can be seen as part of the "ruins of an old planet" that Emerson argues "new continents are built out of . . ." ("Circles" 169). In the cave, there can be no progress. In the storm, where nature is "fluid and volatile," man finds pleasure (168).

Having ventured throughout the dangerously wild Southwestern landscapes, Archbishop Latour ultimately finds in nature a final resting place. He chooses for his home the "few acres in the red sand hills" that once tortured him (DCA 437). Taking shelter in his later years, Latour seems to carry out Emerson's idea of a unification between man and the natural world. As Emerson declares himself to be simultaneously "God in nature" and "a weed by the wall" ("Circles" 171), so is Latour. Latour, as a Bishop, is Vicar of Christ. By making his "recreation . . . his garden," Latour also blends into his acres as naturally as "a weed by the wall." Latour's cathedral is a religious structure that represents a purpose as strong as action and also physically seems a part of the natural environment that surrounds it. For Latour, this union with both spirit or purpose and also place or nature, becomes very appealing. Yet, nature also terrifies, for any union with the natural world creates and requires risks.

Latour's cathedral symbolizes his desired union with nature. His architect says, "Either a building is part of a place, or it is not" (DCA 441). That cathedral also appears to be a part of nature; yet the key to Cather's description is that the cathedral only *seems* to be a part of the hills. The body of the church lies *against* the mountain, not within it. Thus, the cathedral does not represent a complete and flawless unity with nature, but "seemed to start directly out of those rose-coloured hills—with a purpose so strong that it was like action. Seen from . . . [a] distance, the Cathedral lay against the pine-splashed slopes as against a curtain" (444). Thrust forward before its backdrop, the cathedral actually opposes it. And this *opposition* is part of Latour's theology. His cathedral is designed by a French architect; it is "Midi Romanesque" in design, and of the "South" in character. Simply, it is a structure that does not belong in this Southwestern landscape. Further,

Latour has attempted to build something permanent in an ever changing nature. This is Latour's theological flaw. "Permanence is but a word of degrees," and nature cannot be altered (or altared) by man. Although nature may appeal to Latour's wish to "settle" in his later years, and although it may provide a conclusion to "a life of action," this desire is one we must judge sadly (437). Clearly, Latour did not apply to himself the lessons he learned from the Ácoma: that it can be terrifying to satisfy one's desire to "settle."

Ironically, Latour becomes highly similar to the Ácoma "rock-turtles" in his final years. Like the Ácoma's "warlike church" that is "like a part of a cliff itself," Latour's "tawny church" seems to "start directly out of those . . . hills . . ." (337, 441). The Ácoma live on "their rock," and Latour builds his cathedral with "that rock" that "will do very well" (424). The Ácoma "lived upon their Rock; were born upon it and died upon it" (336). Likewise, Latour's cathedral is "the rock" that "would also be his tomb" (424, 442). Perhaps the fact explains Joseph's ambivalence when he is shown these materials (424). Latour echoes Emerson as he "builds for the future" with "no Past at his back" (DCA 424, "Circles" 176). However, Latour does have "a Past at his back," as he himself has pointed out when pondering his onion soup (299). Often, he yearns for his native France, and as he approaches death, begins to speak only French. Ultimately, like the Ácoma, the bishop "wishes to be settled." Yet, again, Latour should have learned that it can be self-destructive to satisfy this desire.

Specifically, the cathedral is often surrounded by terrible storms. As Cather describes them, "the sky above the mountain grew black, and the carnelian rocks became an intense lavender, all their pine trees strokes of dark purple, the hills drew nearer, the whole background approached like a dark threat" (441). Such dark power looms over Latour and his cathedral. Clearly, nature cannot be contained and will forever be "fluid and volatile," regardless of the stone cathedrals that perch on its surface ("Circles" 168). It thus terrifies man who searches for some adequate foundation to build on and greatly fears a nature that is "not fixed but sliding" (174).

Latour's garden is another symbol of the coexistence of terror and appeal in nature. Specifically, Cather uses Pascal's phrase to emphasize this point: "Man was lost and saved in a garden" (DCA 438). Foremost, Latour's first experience of salvation is at "Agua Secreta," an environment filled with beautiful flowers and trees. It is a natural garden, created by a "life-giving stream" that flows from the desert (294). In the final chapter, the site of the garden Latour plants is very similar to the paradisaical "Agua Secreta." Latour's garden is also found by a stream and Latour follows "a stream and comes upon this spot. . . a garden. . ." (437). This garden becomes Latour's "recreation" and enables him to reflect. It is thus very appealing since "reflection" is the "happiest conclusion" to Latour's "life of action" (437).

Yet, Latour's garden is also a place of terror. In his

garden, Latour "domesticated and developed the native wild flowers." He grows fruit that is foreign to the area and that was "hardly to be found even in the old orchards of California . . ." (438). Latour has urged "the new priests to plant fruit trees wherever they went" and has encouraged the Mexicans to "add fruit to their starchy diet." "Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden . . ." (438). In these actions, Latour attempts to overpower and dominate nature. He introduces foreign species into the landscape and even encourages future generations to do the same. Although Latour's actions are similar to Emerson's commands to "build therefore your own world," or "draw a new circle," they are dangerously near an attempt to control a natural world that is infinite ("Nature" 56, "Circles" 178).

Unfortunately, in this way Latour's garden parallels the decayed garden of Baltazar, the "forgotten friar" murdered by the Ácoma. Like Latour, Baltazar "was able to grow a wonderful garden . . . constantly improving his church . . . growing new vegetables . . ." (DCA 340-341). Baltazar uses only the "choicest seeds" as Latour plants "the most delicate varieties" (340, 438). Latour's "little adobe house" rests "high up on the hill side overlooking the orchards" and Baltazar similarly "watched over his garden like a little kingdom" (438, 341).

In the end, Baltazar is killed for having accidentally murdered a native, a right inhabitant of that environment. He is thrown off the "most precipitous cliff" with broken pots and even such "refuse as the turkeys would not eat . . ." (346). In his death, Baltazar is not given any human respect. His goods are simply divided and the women take "pleasure in watching the garden pine and waste away from thirst" and laugh at "the whitening foliage of the peach trees, and the green grapes shriveling on the vines" (346). These women, as they carry the pots of water and nourish the garden, can be likened to nature herself. Thus, it is not only the Ácoma women, but nature that takes pleasure in watching Baltazar's garden waste away. Moreover, the next priest, who is a native Mexican, "finds no ill will awaiting him" as he is satisfied with the native diet and lets the turkey flock "scratch in the hot dust that had once been Baltazar's garden" (346-347). This turkey flock, as it scratches out Baltazar's foreign garden, symbolizes repudiating, revolutionary nature.

In ancient Ácoma, for many years Baltazar's "old peach stumps kept sending pale sprouts . . ." (347). However, centuries later, when Latour visits Ácoma, "two thin half-dead peach trees" still struggle to survive. There is no "new genesis" in Ácoma; man's attempt to enclose the infinitude of nature has merely become pathetic here. And although Baltazar is killed, the native boy is killed first. That is, the first attack is one against a native—one who is "naturally" a part of the place. Then the Ácoma get their revenge by killing Baltazar, but the seeds he has planted are never fully scratched out. The Ácoma "rid their rock of their tyrant," but "on the whole," they had liked "their tyrant" very well (346). As a result, the Ácoma themselves still

recapitulate some of Baltazar's characteristics. Baltazar and the future Ácoma generations have all been "rock-turtles on their rock." Their never-changing world terrifies outsiders, especially Bishop Latour, who has ironically become more like them in his later years.

The connection between Latour and Baltazar we must not overlook is their link with martyrdom. Foremost, Baltazar is a Spanish priest who fills the place of a martyr after the great Indian uprising in the early seventeenth hundreds. It cannot be a mere coincidence that Latour's cathedral is surrounded by hills stained the color of the blood of martyrs. Cather stresses this link: ". . . but no matter how scarlet the sunset, those red hills never became vermilion, but a more and more intense rose- carnelian; not the colour of living blood . . . but the colour of the dried blood of saints and martyrs . . ." (442). In the early chapters, the cardinal even says, "Our Spanish fathers made good martyrs . . ." (280). Thus Baltazar, the Spanish father, is linked to martyrdom. It becomes his blood that taints the hills that surround Latour's cathedral. As the cathedral seems to be a part of the hills, Latour is linked to Baltazar, the "father" in Ácoma. As Latour retreats to the very "red sand hills" that tortured him, he becomes a part of the civilization and nature that once terrified him. As Emerson says, ". . . there is always another dawn risen...and under every deep a lower deep opens . . ." ("Circles" 168). Both Cather and Emerson stress that there is no limit to nature's appeal or to its darkness.

Emerson writes, "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end" ("Circles" 168). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* this primary figure is also repeated, for the pattern of this Cather novel is that of a circle. The novel begins and ends with Bishop Latour in the "red sand hills." The natural cross Latour finds in the desert presages the magnificent cathedral he builds. The paradisaical "Agua Secreta" is revisited in Latour's own garden that lies along a stream. In his first encounter with nature, Latour is tortured greatly, yet finds salvation. Similarly, before his death, Latour again contemplates extinction as Eusabio tells him the fate of the Navajos.

This Navajo journey parallels Latour's first journey into the desert. Like Latour, the Navajo "thirsted in its deserts, starved among its rocks, climbed up and down its terrible canyons . . ." (DCA 445). Also, the Navajo's country "was a part of their religion; the two were inseparable," just as Latour's cathedral is a part of the cliff side as well as an expression of his religion (456). The canyon that nourishes and protects them is their mother. But, most importantly, the Navajo Gods are in their canyon, "just as the Padre's God was in his church" (456). In this last phrase, Cather draws parallels between Latour and the Navajo people. After all, the only remaining "one of the strong people of the old deep days of life," is Eusabio the Navajo. It is the Navajo's voice that spreads word of the archbishop's death. It is the Navajo, the nomad people who have "a superior strength in them," that will live on (455).

Chinn Notes

The bishop's last understandable words importantly connect Latour and the Navajo Indians, and complete the circularity of the bishop's life. Latour murmurs, ". . . I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (458). In this line, Latour comments on the fate of the Navajo and the hope he has for their future. However, the "Indian" whom Latour is speaking of might actually be himself. Latour once thought that he would perish in the desert and now, as he is again near death, he hopes that God will preserve *him*. While Latour is associated with the stable, hopeless Ácoma, he is also linked to the Navajo whose future life continues to evolve.

Thus, in the relationships between these native peoples and their land, Cather shows the infinite power of nature both to terrify and appeal to man. As Bishop Latour is linked to each of these cultures, he too experiences both nature's appeal and terror. His life is a continuously evolving circle, whose end is rather a "new beginning." In his connection with the land, Latour embodies many Emerson ideals. Like Emerson, Latour fears an enclosed, stable nature and delights in nature's constant ability to change. Ultimately, in his later years, Latour seems to long for stability and a union with nature. However, as nature is infinite, he is unable to control it and eventually embraces change. His death is symbolic of the union between man, god, and nature; thus Latour carries out a key Emerson belief. As his body lies in the cathedral, in the red sand hills, he returns to the beginning of his journey. Latour returns not only to Southwestern landscape, but also to the "tip-tilted green field among *his native mountains*" (459). In returning from whence he came he illustrates Emerson: "The life of man is a self-evolving circle . . ." ("Circles" 169). As Latour evolves, nature is his constant companion. It appeals and terrifies, as it shifts from hill to hill and rock to rock. Both transitional and infinite qualities make nature a force. Clearly, in both Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Emerson's "Circles," nature unsettles all things and "only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" ("Circles" 177).

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These footnotes were inadvertently left off Nancy Chinn's article, "My Six Books Would Be": The Cather-Hurston Connection," in the Winter/Spring 2001 issue. The N&R regrets the omission.

¹Research for this article was funded in part by a grant from the University Research Committee of Baylor University. I would also like to thank Katka Prajznerova for invaluable assistance in the research and writing of this article.

²See Awkward, Harris, and Holloway. Two recent book-length studies are also noteworthy: Deborah G. Plant's *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* and John Lowe's *Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy*.

³Two articles exist which link Hurston and Virginia Woolf, one treats Hurston and Fannie Hurst, and another Hurston and Mary Austin. In "Prodigal Daughters: The Journeys of Ellen Glasgow, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty," Lucinda H. MacKethan compares the autobiographies of these three writers, using James Olney's term "autobiographers of memory" to connect them (40).

⁴This quotation appears as the epigraph to the *I Love Myself When I am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*.

⁵The only other Cather connection with a Harlem Renaissance writer is a letter Langston Hughes wrote her dated April 15, 1941, which indicates that Hughes had written her approving of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather's last novel published in 1940 (Stout 270).

⁶Cather's 1922 Pulitzer Prize winner, *One of Ours*, contains its own gourd vine. When Claude Wheeler tells his wife he wants to plant a gourd vine to provide shade on their porch, she says, "Claude is like Jonah. . . . I can think of other vines that might be more ornamental" (146).

⁷In a letter to Ferris Greenslet dated January 21, 1928, Cather said she would not comment in print on another writer's book. Subsequently, Greenslet repeated a comment she made about a new book. When Cather's comment was quoted in advertisements for the book, she was furious and proclaimed in a letter to Greenslet of February 6, 1930, that she would never comment on another living writer's work.



Getting It Straight: Rebuttal to Marilee Lindemann

John J. Murphy

I particularly disagree with two of Marilee Lindemann's statements: "Misreading is better . . . than not reading at all," and "[T]he very work [political criticism] you [Joe Urgo and I] seem to deplore has performed the dirty yet necessary task of making Cather relevant to a postmodern generation" (48). A few lines below the second statement relevancy is equated with being a "hot commodity." Consider these statements together to experience a somewhat negative epiphany on some of the stuff churning out of university presses. Quality will survive neglect but will have a harder time with distortion.

When I complain about distorting art for a political agenda, I don't imply that politics and aesthetics can't be bedfellows. However I envision the "business" of the critic to explore the aesthetics of the politics, to be drawn to the text as a creative achievement, which, of course, involves consideration of its

politics or whatever
else has
generated
it. I am

thinking of Dante. Do we read him still for Florentine politics or for the art in which he embodied it as well as his concept of the ultimate?

Recently I was asked to review a queer theory Cather study by Jonathan Goldberg titled *Willa Cather and Others* (which knocks several aspects of Lindemann's work—unfairly, I think). It is published by Duke, whom Lindemann applauds for its interest in Cather. Goldberg's project relies on gay novels by other writers, biographies of other artists, and photographs by a Cather contemporary in order to reduce "the thing not named" to penis envy and lesbian love. In the discussion of *The Professor's House*, for example, Cather's reference to Richard Wetherill as "Dick" generates the following observation: "he was [not] only Cather's 'Dick.' . . . Edith Lewis also has him 'Dick' . . . their shared Dick, . . . one of the sites where Cather and Lewis meet . . . 'Dick' is a (mis)naming of their relationship" (126-27). Goldberg then adds: "The city [Cliff Palace] is a site of perfect geometry . . . organized around a red tower. The symbolic architecture is, thus, one place toward which Cather's Dick drives" (135). I reserve the right simply to combat critical approaches like this, to paraphrase Lindemann's epigraph. My claiming that right doesn't amount to limiting the role of criticism to neo-Arnoldian tributes, as Lindemann contends. However, it does imply that the price of being a hot item and appealing to Duke UP and the postmodern reader might be too high.

Now let me come out of the closet to reveal that Terry Eagleton is my son-in-law. There is some wisdom in his defense of radical ideas that Lindemann makes her epigraph (some radical ideas are sound), but it doesn't carry the weight for me of an epigraph from Saint Paul or John Paul or, even, Willa Cather, who wrote that unless the artist (and critic, I say) is more interested in aesthetics than in social and political affairs, he or she "ought to be working in a laboratory or a bureau" (*On Writing* 125).

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A Response: Joseph R. Urgo

The arithmetic teacher “made a joking little talk to the children and told them about a very bright little girl in Scotland who knew nearly a whole play of Shakespeare’s by heart, but who wrote in her diary: ‘Nine times nine is the Devil’; which proved, she said, that there are two kinds of memory, and God is very good to anyone to whom he gives both kinds.”

—Willa Cather, “The Best Years”

I disagree with little in Marilee Lindemann’s “Disagreeing to Agree: A Reply to John Murphy and Joe Urgo.” Having written a good bit of political and social criticism, how can I? Since I first began reading Willa Cather, I have been struck by her relevance to current and pressing issues in public realms of existence.

At the same time (here it comes, Marilee), I entertain demons of resistance. Maybe it comes from undergraduates who come to see me, as Chair of a large university English department, because they are afraid that disagreeing with their professor’s interpretation is going to get them into trouble come grade time. Or maybe it’s from conversations with a good friend who directs a university press, who tells me that the very small market for literary criticism is shrinking. It’s hard to account for the mind’s wandering around, but lately, as a professional critic, I find I want to talk about and profess the pleasure of reading. Professor Lindemann says that “taken to an extreme,” such an emphasis on transcendence would result in a condition of amnesia. Well, I would not take it to an extreme. But I still want to talk about the mysterious pleasure of a good read without being accused of some crime against enlightenment.

John Murphy and I started at opposite ends of an issue regarding whether the chief value of a text was to be found in its reference to real things or in its capacity to inspire flights away from material facts. I have admired John’s work since my days as a student, and was more than a little intimidated at the idea of a

formal exchange of ideas. But it seems, as Lindemann laments, we found common ground as we read each other’s letters about this author in whom we have both found such pleasure. Still, John and I disagree on a lot of things. It’s one reason I like to listen to him and read his work. To paraphrase William Faulkner in an unrelated context, “we do not always see eye to eye, but we were always looking at the same thing.”

I doubt either of us wants to return to what Lindemann calls “the good old days when Cather criticism devoted itself chiefly to appreciating the aesthetic and humanistic values of her work.” Yikes, who wants that? At the same time, have we lost a vocabulary of intellectual pleasure? Do we read

solely for information, recognition, and self-validation? Are we afraid to admit to reading solely to be taken by the powerful mind of another, without pre-determined direction? Or, is admitting to beauty something we can do only in the privacy of the classroom (where Lindemann says she dares to do it too), closeted away,

maybe the last thing not named in an era so enamored of secret meaning it has forgotten that truth blinds as often as it creeps.

Pursuing what Professor Lindemann calls an author’s “complex entanglements in social and historical processes” is central to literary criticism. The relationship to the sexual politics of her era and into the complexity of her own sexuality—all this is fair game to the scholar and important work in literary history and social memory. Wishing an end to this is not what I meant, not what I meant at all.

Nonetheless, to get to the epigraph with which I began, there are two kinds of memory. Although I do not know Cather’s work by heart I can hold my own in a parlor game of “name that passage.” But, I write at the end of this response, “Nine times nine is the Devil,” which is about all I can safely say without being misunderstood or risking misrepresentation.



Joan Acocella Comments

Marilee Lindemann's recent article "Disagreeing to Agree" (Fall 2001) has to do with John Murphy and Joseph Urgo, and addresses my book *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* only as a possible bad influence on those scholars (which seems unlikely – Urgo, at least, gave the book an uncomplimentary review), but I must object to certain claims that Lindemann made. First, she writes that by using indirect discourse I caricatured recent political critics' readings of Cather. In fact, I generally used direct quotation. These critics' arguments do not have to be misrepresented in order to appear comical. Second, I do not know if Urgo and Murphy advocate a return to the idealistic/humanistic Cather criticism of the 1950s – I doubt it – but I do not. See pages 32-35 of my book where I describe the general trend of Cather criticism in the 1950s as Cold-War and right-wing. Third, contrary to what Lindemann says, I never set up an "opposition between aesthetics and politics which assumes that in an ideal world the one would have nothing to do with the other." See page 67 of my book, where I say that politics can never be omitted from

literary criticism and that if it is not there explicitly, it will be there implicitly.

Lindemann says that my book has set off "something of a backlash against feminist, lesbian/gay/queer, and various other, roughly oppositional engagements with Cather's work." My complaint, however, was not that such criticism is feminist (my book is a feminist book), or that it is lesbian/gay/queer (I believe that Cather was homosexual, see page 48), or even that it is political, but rather that it is *exclusively* political – that it never engages her as an artist, but only as a failed feminist, failed queer, et cetera. Even stronger is my objection to what Lindemann calls the "oppositional" nature of such criticism, the fact that its primary purpose is to scold an author born shortly after the Civil War for being less up-to-date politically than the critic – indeed, a less virtuous, less decent person. So what we are looking at here is not just an intellectual problem (ahistoricism, indifference to art) but a moral problem (mean-spiritedness, self-congratulation). If my book set off a backlash against such a trend, I am grateful.

Places, Space, and "Unusual Backgrounds": A Message from the President

Dear WCPM Members,

This letter is written on a clear winter morning over the Rockies, as I make my way home to Southern California from the WCPM Board of Governors' meeting in Omaha. Half an hour ago my flight climbed out of Denver over the white brilliance of the Front Range. Now off to the left the wrinkled mountains are falling away south toward Mesa Verde, somewhere in the distance, and beyond to the long brown reaches of the Southwestern desert. Ahead, farther west, I can make out the distinctive shape of the San Francisco Peaks above Flagstaff and Walnut Canyon.

These are all Willa Cather's places as well as my own, and after twenty years of reading and re-reading her prose I can't help but see them largely through her eyes (or, in the specific landscapes of this morning, through the eyes of Dr. Archie, Tom Outland, Godfrey St. Peter, Jean Latour, and Thea Kronborg). Today, from this perspective (about seven miles up), I'm struck forcibly by her appetite, not only for lovingly described places, but for the great distances between them as well, for travel—

for space itself. She was a vigorous traveler, and the lure of long vistas pervades her writing. St. Peter says of Tom Outland that "one seemed to catch glimpses of an unusual background behind his shoulders when he came into the room;" Willa Cather's world is always invoking those "unusual backgrounds," like the ones out my window this morning.

This is why (for me at least) it's impossible to read her works—no matter how domestic, small, or mundane their settings, or how apparently "ordinary" their characters—without thinking in large, liberating ways. Spaciousness, Willa Cather suggests by persistently opening windows onto long views, is a quality of thought as well as of landscape. And spacious thinking, an awareness of the world's largeness and strangeness just beyond our daily experiences, seems to me particularly important to us today: the realest "princely gift" of her art.

Best wishes to all WCPM members and friends,

John Swift, President
WCPM Board of Governors



Letters to the WCPM

Thanks so much for sharing with me the wonderful newsletter and review dealing, among other things, with C-SPAN's recent visit to Cather Country. Needless to say, your hospitality is equaled only by your editorial perspicacity (how's that for a verbal endorsement!). Seriously, I meant everything I said about "the real America." So much so, in fact, that I've decided to take up my own advice and move there – at least to that portion represented by Lawrence, Kansas, where I will become director of the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas in mid-November. I hope the program continues to pay dividends for you and your associates who do such a remarkable job of preserving and interpreting Red Cloud and its rich literary history. It was an honor to be involved.

With warm regards,
Richard Norton Smith

Richard Norton Smith was special guest for the live C-SPAN network broadcast from Red Cloud. —SR

I just wanted to express my congratulations to you for what I hope was a very successful year at WCPM&EF. I happened to catch the C-SPAN rerun this week, and it was outstanding

I was introduced to Cather's work when I was in college at Michigan State. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was required reading in my English class. I fell in love with that book, and have gone on to read all of Cather's novels except *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Cather's short stories are also outstanding. *Five Stories* is a favorite of mine.

It is my great hope one day to visit Red Cloud and WCPM. I just know I would love it. Keep up the good work; I will send in my membership right away.

Steve Whayne
Cincinnati, Ohio
via e-mail

Spring Festival 2002

The 47th annual Cather Spring Festival, "Under the quilting frames": *Memory, Storytelling, and Art*, will be held May 3-4 in Red Cloud. Co-sponsored with the Nebraska Quilters' Guild, the event will celebrate Cather and quilting. Featured texts will be *O Pioneers!*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and "Old Mrs. Harris."

Friday events include a scholarly papers session: a Readers' Theatre production of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*; a viewing of the film, *Quilting Nebraska*; and readings from Cather at a candlelight gathering in St. Juliana Falconieri Church. Saturday events include a service at Grace Episcopal Church, a panel discussion, Catherland tours, and an evening banquet featuring Margrethe Ahlschwede—writer, quilter, and professor—as guest speaker. There will be quilting displays and music by the St. Juliana Choir both days.

The Nebraska Quilters' Guild is holding a quilting contest in conjunction with the Festival, with the winner to be announced at the banquet.

We hope you can be in Red Cloud for these two special days.

UNL Recognizes Mellanee Kvasnicka



Dr. Mellanee Kvasnicka, vice president and longstanding member of the WCPM board of governors, was a Masters Week 2001 honoree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Each fall the school selects outstanding alumni as Masters; the Masters return to campus for a week of interaction with students, faculty and staff.

Dr. Kvasnicka is on the faculty of Omaha South High School, where she is chair of the Department of English and teaches remedial, standard, honors, and advance placement classes. She has received several awards for outstanding teaching.

Dr. Kvasnicka, who received her doctorate in English from UNL in 1997, wrote her dissertation on the educational tradition in the life and works of Willa Cather.



Shenandoah University Holds Benefit for Cather Institute

By F. C. Lowe
The Winchester (Va.) Star

It makes sense to have the Willa Cather Institute here since an individual's earliest memories are so important to development.

This was the sentiment delivered at the institute's benefit dinner October 23 at Shenandoah University by Tracy Fitzsimmons, dean of Arts and Sciences at SU.

"Cather's early memories which are areas of comfort are in her books," said Fitzsimmons, who referred to the strong women characters in Cather's books and the good role model she is for the students.

The dinner, which raised over \$10,000, kicked off the institute's programs, SU President Jim Davis said. He asked for volunteers to form an advisory committee to assist with operations of the institute.

Honorary co-chairs of the event were Stewart Bell Jr. and Nancy Larrick Crosby, both of Winchester.

John Jacobs, SU professor of English, explained how Cather's life paralleled many of SU's goals. Not only was her early career as a teacher, but one of her lifelong ambitions was with the medical profession.

In many of her books, Jacobs said, she mentioned physicians and nurses. Additionally, she had an interest in musical arts and theater and was a reviewer of a traveling opera company in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Professor Ann Romines of George Washington University explored the topic "Willa Cather, Virginian?"

As an adopted Virginian herself, Romines said she feels very strongly that Willa Cather is "one of ours," although not exclusively.

She added that Cather's struggle to deal with her Virginia heritage – birth in Frederick County where she lived for the first nine years of her life – is one of the most interesting strains in her long, rich career.

Romines cited examples of Cather's work, answering the question of her heritage.

- When Cather began to write fiction at the University of Nebraska, Virginia memories were among the first resources used. In "The Elopement of Allen Poole," Cather painted a

precise picture of a place that the young author has not seen for 10 years.

- In 1896, Cather wrote "A Night at Greenway Court" about a familiar figure of Fredrick County history, Lord Fairfax, her great-great grandparents' patron.
- In "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," Cather wrote a study of how memories and relics of Virginia affect the interpersonal balance of a Nebraska family whose wife and husband are from Virginia.
- In 1913, Cather referred to her departure from Virginia in 1883 and remarked that a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it.
- Cather depicted herself as a Virginia child in the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, set in Frederick County.
- Cather's family preserved the Virginia household after moving to Nebraska. They kept up correspondence with Virginia relatives and visited back and forth. They took the Virginia newspaper, cooked and organized the household work Southern style, and preserved Southern stories and relics.
- In "Old Mrs. Harris," Cather returned to an exploration of how Southernness persists – as memory, as cultural baggage and as inheritance – for a Tennessee family (based on the Cathers) who are transplanted to another small town in Nebraska.
- In letters Cather advised readers that *Sapphira* was more of a work of memory than a work of fiction.

Romines encouraged all residents of this area to read Cather's books. "She deserves to be studied in her native county."

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**WILLA CATHER
NEWSLETTER AND REVIEW**

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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 or WordPerfect (8 and up) and should follow *The MLA Style Manual*.

Send essays or inquiries to

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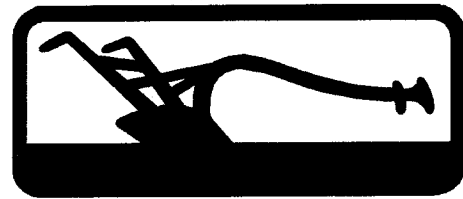
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Essays and notes are listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.



**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.

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The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's UNL Libraries, Cather Project, School of Music, Center for Great Plains Studies and University of Nebraska Press in conjunction with Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, Nebraska Humanities Council, Friends of the UNL Libraries, and Nebraska State Historical Society present:

Great Passions and Great Aspirations

Willa Cather and World War I

April 4-April 5, 1155 Q and Nebraska Student Union

The symposium will focus on Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *One of Ours*, and introduce the recently acquired George Cather Ray Collection. The collection includes letters written by G.P. Cather (Willa Cather's cousin) to his mother during World War I. These letters inspired Willa Cather to create the character of Claude Wheeler, the central character in *One of Ours*. Plenary speakers are Mary Weddle of the Cather family; Richard Harris, volume editor for *One of Ours* of the Cather Scholarly Edition; and Steven Trout, author of the forthcoming *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War*. The symposium will also include panel and paper presentations, exhibits including a World War I poster collection, and musical performances.

For further information call or write: Margie Rine, Cather Project, 1213 Seaton Hall, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0692, 402.472.1919, or via e-mail to mrine@unlserve.unl.edu.

The Bohemian Girl

April 4-7, Kimball Recital Hall

The opera, composed by Michael William Balfe, holds special significance for readers of Willa Cather, who saw the opera in 1888 at the Red Cloud Opera House. Cather's work frequently makes use of its characters, plot, and especially, its music. For more than 70 years, beginning in 1843, it was the most widely performed opera in English when opera was one of the most popular form of entertainment and more than 200 opera companies toured the United States. English Professor James Ford and UNL School of Music Artist in Residence and Associate Professor Ariel Bybee

have taken on the task of reviving *The Bohemian Girl*.

For ticket information contact the Lied Center Box Office at 402.472.4747.

Opera and Literature: Willa Cather and *The Bohemian Girl*

April 6, Nebraska Student Union Building

The symposium will examine the two-way interaction between opera and literature, with special attention to the influence of opera, especially *The Bohemian Girl*, on Cather's fiction. Speakers include Philip Kennicott, Chief Classical Music Critic for *The Washington Post*; Richard Giannone, of Temple University and author of *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction*; Basil Walsh, authority on Irish opera who is writing a biography on composer Balfe; David Breckbill, historian of opera styles from Doane College; and James E. Ford, English Department, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

For more information: 402.472-6066, or via e-mail to jford1@unl.edu.

World War I Tour of Red Cloud and Webster County

April 7

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation will sponsor tours of Willa Cather sites in Red Cloud and Webster County, particularly as they relate to *One of Ours* and World War I.

For further information contact the WCPM at 326 North Webster Street, Red Cloud, NE 68970, by telephone at 402.746.2653, or via e-mail at info@willacather.org. The WCPM's website is www.willacather.org.



Red Cloud Opera House Endowment Fund National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant

The Willa Cather Foundation challenges YOU to be part of a nation-wide effort to preserve the setting for many of Cather's greatest novels and to provide a place where scholars and readers alike can gather to study and celebrate her enduring contribution to American letters.

Please join the many friends of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation in making a contribution today that will help match the \$275,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support programming at the Red Cloud Opera House and to preserve and maintain the Willa Cather archives.

Last year, the Foundation raised \$50,000 to meet the first year's obligation of the three-year challenge grant. This year, we must raise \$200,000 by July 1, 2002, to meet the second year's requirement. Please join us by making a generous gift today.

Yes, I want to help the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation meet the National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge. I understand that my gift will be used to match the grant from NEH.

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