

Willa Cather

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City of Pilgrims: Willa Cather's Washington

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Willa Cather made three trips to Washington in her lifetime, all of them ostensibly to visit her cousin Howard Gore, whose widowed mother (the sister of Willa's paternal grandfather) lived in Back Creek Valley outside Winchester, Virginia. Apparently on the first two occasions she came also to collect material for her work as a journalist, because during or immediately after each visit she did some writing in this line that focused on events in Washington. Moreover, just a few years before her first trip, when she left Nebraska for the first of several magazine jobs in Pittsburgh, she wrote Mariel Gere that she regarded herself as "a terribly superficial person" and needed to see more of the world (quoted in O'Brien, 223-24). She was still in her early 20s and recently graduated from the University of Nebraska. Her time in Washington, therefore, like her more extended time in Pittsburgh, was designed to expand her horizons, to make her more mature and worldlywise — a yearning that amounted to a lifelong passion for this woman who never stopped travelling, moving, growing.

The first visit to Washington occurred in early May 1898, when Howard Gore, a mathematics (geodesy) professor at Columbian University (now George Washington University) [fig. 1], was preparing to join the Wellman Polar Expedition as a representative of the National Geographic Society, and being feted in a round of farewell parties hosted by his friends. Ca-

ther's biographer James Woodress suggests this first visit was "more dazzling than [Cather] could have expected" because she was on hand to meet a good many representatives of official Washington, including several members of the diplomatic corps (135). However, it seems to me likely she timed her visit to coincide with the festivities honoring her cousin, knowing the occasion would provide opportunities for her to meet, and write about, such people as the

Norwegian ambassador and the chargé d'affaires of the Turkish embassy, among others. Gore's wife was the daughter of a former Norwegian minister to the U.S. (as well as a cousin of the King of Sweden) and provided an important entrée into Washington's diplomatic community; a lively woman of unusual talent, who sang the songs of Grieg and acted out lines from Ibsen, she quickly became a favorite of Cather's (Woodress, 135). At the very least it is



Columbian University Law School and University Building, 1883-1911
— Courtesy of George Washington University

clear that Cather, on this initial trip, was also looking for more material to write about on the subject of the race for the North Pole. She had composed one piece on the famous Norwegian arctic explorer and statesman Fridtjof Nansen, in late 1897, even before she had ever come to Washington; and according to a letter of June 7, 1898 (composed not long after leaving the Federal City), she had "spent two weeks in Washington, D.C., writing up the Wellman polar expedition

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for the Associated Press," a piece that for some reason was never published.¹

Cather's second trip was much longer, lasting almost three months during the winter of 1900-01, and provided a wide range of social, diplomatic, and artistic topics for her to write about for publications back in Pittsburgh and Lincoln. It also, presumably, provided most of the dark, even repellent impressions of Washington that would later find their way into her fiction, particularly the Tom Outland section of *The Professor's House*. Again she visited her cousin Howard Gore, but this time she also worked for him, translating government documents and otherwise helping to produce two volumes of a report he was working on for the U.S. Commission to the Paris Exposition of 1900 (Woodress, 147-48). Evidently she intended to stay for a while.

I will come back to look more closely at Cather's journalism from this period, in part because it contrasts so sharply with the better known fictional portrait of Washington from *The Professor's House* and elsewhere. But, first, I should mention the third visit Cather made to the city, many years later, in May 1917, during the writing of *My Ántonia*, a trip that yielded no obvious journalistic or literary output. It is worth pointing out, however, that this was just one month after Congress provided the President with the declaration of war he needed to commit the United States to the Allied cause in World War I. No doubt the sudden wartime activity in the city entered into Cather's conception of the wartime spirit in *One of Ours* (1922) and, in a modest way, into her portrayal of the War Department which features briefly, if grimly, in that novel, when Claude's mother is notified through the telegraph office that her son is dead.

What is surprising about Cather's less well-known journalistic writings about Washington, particularly in contrast to the portrait found in *The Professor's House*, is just how eager and appreciative of the city they are. When teaching this novel, I sometimes pull out an old line about Cather never being able to land a job writing advertising copy for the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, but if one were to read her journalistic writings alone, one would conclude just the opposite. This is important for what it tells us about Willa Cather's complexity and slipperiness as a writer of fiction, and it can provide a useful starting point for thinking about how we ought to read her rendering of the nation's capital in *The Professor's House* and of the modern world as well, or of the modern nation-state that Washington had come to stand for.

During her three months in Washington in the winter of 1900-01, on the occasion of her second visit, Cather published a total of twenty-five pieces (some identical or nearly identical) in two journals, *The Index*

to *Pittsburgh Life* and the *Nebraska State Journal*. Continuing the extensive reviewing work she had done as a college student and in Pittsburgh, she wrote artistic pieces on "Joe Jefferson, the Painter"; the Dutch painter Hubert Vos's "racial [Asian] studies" at the Corcoran Gallery; theatre reviews of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Arthur Wing Pinero's popular *The Gay Lord Quex*; reviews of stage performances by Maude Adams and Sarah Bernhardt; a review of a recital by the vocalist Teresa Carreno; and a portrait of the nature writer, Ernest Seton-Thompson — pieces that are only incidentally, if at all, about Washington, D.C. But she also composed essays or columns featuring the local scene. There is a piece on Christmas in



Shoreham Hotel, 1913

— Courtesy of George Washington University

Washington (which delights in the mild weather and the quiet of the city when Congress is not in session, and attempts to inventory the avalanche of gifts the President receives from around the world at this holiday time); another on the popular Chinese minister to the United States, Mr. Wu T'ing-fang; and a third on "Literature in the Capital," focusing on the poet, Helen Hay, and the celebrated Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, whose little red house in the neighborhood of Georgetown constituted one of Washington's few famous "literary landmarks." Finally she wrote a piece on the North Pole "mania" that periodically returned to Washington, in this case featuring Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, the latest explorer to try his hand at conquering the Arctic Circle. Of these latter pieces, the most interesting are the ones containing details about the cultural life of the city, then still a rather sleepy, provincial Southern town despite its show of sophistication. They are all included, though not all printed in full, in *The World and the Parish*, Volume Two.

Some of Cather's most interesting, upbeat comments about Washington, however, are not included in this collection. One article in particular is worth looking at, at least briefly. Published under the title "Winter

Sketches in the Capital" in *The Index of Pittsburgh Life* and date lined February 7, 1901 (it appeared a week later in the *Nebraska State Journal* under the title, "The Charm of Washington"), it suggests that the city is double, and inhabited by two distinct populations, not counting the flocks of tourists. For Cather, as for others, Washington was at one level a cosmopolitan city of quiet beauty, one which proved indifferent to the typically "crude and superficial sightseers" who thronged to it. Its inhabitants may have lacked the noisy civic pride found among the citizens of Pittsburgh and Chicago, but this was because of "the absolutely temporary character of its population." Like certain "holy cities of the Orient," she explained, Washington is "filled with pilgrims come to conjure the gods or to thank them." These latter-day, secular pilgrims, Cather says, are almost universally young, successful, and (it would seem) male — Congressmen, government experts, military officers, and scientists, whom the government employs by the hundreds. And being "absorbed in . . . their own careers," they are simply residents, not citizens, of the city. It is such as these, chiefly, that Tom Outland encounters when he comes to Washington from the West in search of expert government assistance to explain the history of the mysterious cliffdwellers he had begun to uncover there and to take over the job of preserving their archaeological remains.

However, there is also an indigenous population, an educated group made up of "students, men of letters, and a few artists," Cather says, who live in Washington "solely for the beauty of the city" and the "Continental freedom of the social life" to be enjoyed there. (Although she doesn't say so, her cousin Howard Gore was such a person.) Official Washington, with its public buildings and generous parks, is always open to the visitor, but the provincial visitor is "so likely to miss the peculiar atmosphere of the city, so much more subtle and elusive than that of any other American city," even as he or she is apt to miss "the social life . . . which moves as quietly as a pendulum [sic] in a vacuum." Rather than offer up a revealing insider's view of the city, however, the poet-novelist in Cather takes over and offers an extended exemplum by reference to a series of souvenirs — vases, candelabras, clocks and the like — that anyone might see on display in the White House, each with its own history but "valuable to only those who know their associations, and which escape the comprehension, if not the eyes, of the throngs of people who troop through the executive mansion" ("Winter Sketches," 8-9). Distilled in these brief comments about this collection of bric-a-brac is to be found a theory of art, a theory of the novel, which is also a theory of life. For Cather, life no less than art is the product of the slow accretion of associations or memories, of small firsthand experiences over time. Come and live in this remarkable city, she seems to say; only then can you really know or understand and appreciate it. (Ironically, Cather herself was little more than a tourist when she wrote this.)

Cather preserved this divided view of the city some two decades later when she came to write *The Professor's House* (1925), though the one side predominates and the other pokes through only occasionally. Tom of course comes to the city as more than a tourist. Though he spends his first week (a "wonderfully happy" week) just taking in the sights, he has work to do conjuring the gods (203). He is a pilgrim, and without being aware of it, he comes to deal, for the most part, with other pilgrims — Congressmen, government administrators, scientists — who themselves have come to Washington to conjure the gods, but typically in service mostly to themselves. What he finds are people like his own congressman, who, too busy to do the job right the first time, gives him "bad advice" about whom to see in his search for an authority on the cliffdwelling Indians (203); the Secretary to the Director of the Smithsonian, who will not even meet with Tom, or take the initiative to set up an appointment with his boss, until Tom arranges to buy the Secretary an expensive lunch at the Shoreham Hotel² [fig. 2]; or Dr. Ripley, the Smithsonian's expert on prehistoric Indian remains, who seems more interested in getting appointed to a jury or congress at an upcoming International Exposition in Europe than he does in arranging to see first-hand the priceless artifacts in Tom's archaeological dig out West. While none of these figures is entirely unsympathetically drawn, it is clear Tom is barking up the wrong tree in seeking their assistance. They are not predisposed to serve him unless he can somehow serve them in return.

In fact, Tom's whole notion of Washington, a notion popular in Cather's day and before, and in our own time as well, seems naive and misguided. For him, as for his still more innocent friend Roddy Blake, or even the sage Father Duchesne, Washington was a kind of Emerald City, where all their wishes would be met. All they had to do, according to Father Duchesne, was to send one of them to Washington to inform the Director of the Smithsonian Institution of their find and he would send out an archaeologist to interpret the mystery of the ancient cliffdwellers' life for them. In Roddy's hopeful view, all their expenses would be paid for by the Government, and even their losses — the broken crockery and such — would be taken care of by "Uncle Sam," that ultimate Sugar Daddy whom even Roddy refers to with a "smile." And when Tom dismisses Roddy's naive belief that he would be received in Washington "by ambassadors," Tom admits, evasively, that he himself might have believed so, too (198-201).

Not everyone Tom encounters in Washington, however, is a pilgrim or a person "on the make," looking for a shortcut to success and happiness. There is another set of people (indeed, another side even to pilgrims like Dr. Ripley) who are interested in living for something beyond themselves, who are determined to do their jobs and serve others. These

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include, most importantly, the young stenographer, Virginia Ward, from Virginia (no Washingtonian!)³ who befriends Tom and tries to steer him right, gives him good advice about arranging to meet the Secretary over lunch as a way of getting his attention ("People here will do almost anything for a good lunch," she says, in one of the funniest — and still truest! — lines in all of Cather. [206]) They include also Virginia's widowed mother (the two of them invite him to their home rather than to a restaurant, and not for lunch but for dinner!), as well as Virginia's young friend, the Frenchman who works for the French Embassy and seems to show a genuine interest in Tom's samples (though he could have an ulterior motive, given that the International Exposition he and the others want to attend is scheduled for Europe and Tom's artifacts might thus provide an opportunity for him to travel home). And they seem to include an interestingly named Dr. Fox, as well, a colleague of Dr. Ripley's at the Smithsonian, who shows a keen interest in Tom's artifacts.

Cather's conception of Washington in Tom Outland's story is more than sociological, however; it is also artistic or symbolic, and as such it is related to her conception of the mysterious cliff dwellers. In fact, as David Harrell has pointed out in a fine book on Cather's appropriation of the Mesa Verde materials, even many of the apparently factual or historical details in the book — the portrayal of Dr. Ripley, for example — have been altered, presumably for artistic purposes (102-03; 115-19). For one brief moment when Tom Outland, having just arrived in Washington, casts his eyes on the Capitol Building and sees the white dome, he has what he describes as "a very religious feeling" (203). While certainly this moment is ironized and meant to expose Tom's idealism and innocent chauvinism, it also points to a profound and unexpected connection with the religious feeling Tom experienced when he first saw the cliff dwellings of Blue Mesa. That powerful feeling, Cather suggests, is possible almost anywhere — even amid the stately structures of the American capital. What it requires, as she had said in *My Ántonia*, is the sense of being "dissolved into something complete and great" (14), a feeling of connection to a larger world where people work toward common ends, a world defined by *communitas*.

As articulated by Father Duchesne, though clearly these are sentiments shared by Tom Outland, there are two haunting questions about the cliff dwellers, questions which Cather, in her typically indirect way, means to ask about the people who dwell in Washington as well, and by extension about those who live in the nation at large. The first of these questions is, simply, what did these ancient people live for? (What does any people live for?) Whatever it was, Tom and Roddy agree that these people "hadn't built their town in a hurry. Everything proved their patience and

deliberation," from the cedar joists that had been rubbed smooth with sand to the careful frescoing of the interiors (190). In Father Duchesne's view (a view based on twenty years of experience living and working among their descendants in a variety of pueblos), it involved a desire for "more than food and shelter"; it involved "an appreciation for comfort" and, more still, "a distinct feeling for design," as evidenced particularly in the grouping of the buildings (197). "I see [these people] here," he hypothesizes, "isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead, protecting the children, doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and sentiment for this stronghold where they were at once so safe and so comfortable . . ." (198).

The second question is presumably even more pressing, if not downright urgent, and may bear some cause-and-effect relation to the first: Why had the natives ceased? (196) In so far as Cather was concerned about the larger question of our national destiny (and how can we conclude otherwise than that she was?), what she has to say about Washington has both immediate and longterm import. Of course the answers are not so simple; at least Cather was not explicit about them. But they seem to have to do with the absence of a true sense of community, of shared values and goals and of care for the next generations, in the emerging world of modern America, where individual striving and social and material success above all else were encouraged and rewarded.

As is true with a good many of her other works, *The Professor's House* shows Willa Cather to be engaged in a quarrel with the modern world — its values and aspirations, its materialism and conformity, its lack of spiritual courage and heart. Though not a truly nostalgic writer or one opposed to the modern world per se, Cather certainly was critical of much of what she saw emerging in her own time, and she attempted, often subtly and indirectly, to expose what she saw, by contrasting it with a starker, surer, time-tested culture of an earlier time, another place. For Cather, at least in this novel, Washington represented the modern world — its grasping, self-aggrandizing ways; its small-mindedness; its class-consciousness and social-climbing. Despite its beautiful setting and the several kind souls he encounters in the city, Tom finds it immensely depressing to the spirit. Boarding, while in Washington, with the young couple, the Bixbys, who seem concerned only with appearances, money, and making social and business connections, Tom says he was never so depressed or experienced such "lowspiritedness" as when he saw young Bixby and "all the hundreds of clerks come pouring out of" the War Department and adjacent buildings [fig. 3] at the end of the work day. "Their lives seemed to me so petty, so slavish." More than anything, it is this image of "hundreds of little, black-coated men pouring out of white buildings" at sunset that finally drives Tom back



State, War, and Navy Building, 1871-Present.

— Courtesy of George Washington University

to Blue Mesa, after almost three months in the nation's capital, eager to "live a free life and breathe free air" (209-13).

Ironically, of course, as Cather is quick to show, there is no escaping such slavery, just as there is no air anywhere that is quite so free as Tom imagines on the Mesa. When he gets off the train out West, Tom discovers that Roddy has foolishly sold their ancient artifacts and that the locals are angry at all of them for disturbing what is not theirs ("people are always like that when money changes hands," Bill Hook, the liveryman, tells him [214]). In his anger at Blake for selling his priceless, newfound heritage, Tom accuses him of being a traitor "like Dreyfus" (219) and then manufactures or manipulates the truth to serve his sense of outrage (at one point even admitting he lied to Blake), and so bullies and berates his old partner as to force him to run off, permanently destroying their friendship. It is a dreadful finale, from which neither man ever recovers. Tom soon feels considerable guilt for treating Roddy so badly, but despite all his sincere efforts, he can never locate him again; and Roddy, for his part, never returns.

Still, while living on the Mesa during the rest of that summer, Tom claims that he felt a powerful "filial piety" for their old place up there and that now he had his "happiness unalloyed."⁴

Every morning, when the sun's rays first hit the mesa top, while the rest of the world was in shadow, I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything. Nothing tired me. Up there alone, a close neighbour to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way. And at night, when I watched it drop down behind the edge of the plain below me, I used to feel that I couldn't have borne another hour of that consuming light, that I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep. (227)

That a perpetual pilgrim like Tom Outland could still find a sense of wholeness, and holiness — if only temporarily and despite his losses — somewhere in the world in this century seems important for Cather to establish, both in its own right and for what it tells us about Godfrey St. Peter, the central character of *The Professor's House* who so loves and idolizes young Tom. That Washington, the modern American "city of pilgrims," was not one of those places — despite its potential for Tom early in his visit, and despite the country's obvious need — is equally important, both in its own right and for what it tells us of Cather's distress about the modern world and her apprehensions about her country's future.

NOTES

¹ Curtin, II, 832. See chapter titled "Washington Correspondent," 792-835.

² The old Shoreham Hotel was located at 15th and H Streets, NW, just across from the Columbian University building where Cather's cousin taught math.

³ I wish to thank my colleague, Ann Romines, for calling my attention to the significance of Virginia's name.

⁴ That this is the real thing seems to be signaled by the fact that Tom "had read of filial piety in the Latin poets," and adds, "I knew that was what I felt for this place" (227).

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Topics: New Developments in Cather Studies
The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition

Fear of a Queer Prairie: Figures of the Body and/as the Nation in Willa Cather's Early Fiction

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In my forthcoming book, *Willa Cather: Queering America*, I use the notion of the "queer," specifically as it emerges in Cather's letters to and about Louise Pound in the 1890s, as the starting point for a re-assessment of her whole career. The aim of the study is not to reduce her fiction to covert sexual autobiography but to examine complex patterns of resistance and capitulation to the discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and nation that dominated U.S. culture during the period in which she lived and wrote. By attending to the interplay of oppositionality and anxiety about deviance that animates her fiction, I offer a sense of what it meant that America "queered" Cather in labeling her love for women "unnatural" and that she "queered" "America" in laying bare the operations of an eroticized and racialized nationalism that was central to the social and economic transformation that occurred in the U.S. at the turn into the twentieth century. In this brief paper, I put my queer model to work in a reading of *O Pioneers!* as a way of getting at puzzles and contradictions in the text that are otherwise obscured.

In the letters to and about Louise Pound, Cather figures the queer body as marked and restless.¹ It is bruised, wounded, shaking, driving. It subjects itself to regimes of indolence and hard work in a battle to discipline itself, to get into what Cather calls fit shape. In sleep, it touches (or "drives") itself. Awake, it ultimately refashions itself so as to appear neither queer nor Bohemian anymore. Long after Cather grew out her hair and claimed a place in the broad daylight of the unqueer, her fiction remained preoccupied with bodily matters of health and illness, vitality and weakness, hygiene and filth, naturalness and unnaturalness — and with the constellation of sexual, racial, and ethnic anxieties that undergirded such concerns in Progressive Era America. In short stories and novels, particularly in the period from *The Troll Garden* (1905) through *One of Ours* (1922), Cather rises to the challenge of "getting the body into writing," as Peter Brooks puts it in his illuminating study of the body in modern narrative (9). As in the Pound letters, the bodies in Cather's fiction are thoroughly semiotized, relentlessly scrutinized, and radically ambiguous — "queer" in some instances because they are signifiers of perverse desires, in some because they are markers of racial or ethnic difference (whether that difference is coded as superiority or abnormality), and in others because they are physically "extraordinary" (icons either of power and autonomy or of "bodily vulnerability," as Rosemarie Garland Thomson has put it in her ground-breaking work on representations of disability in American culture).² From the nervous, "twanging" body of the young aesthete in "Paul's Case" (*CS* 173) to the "stalwart, brown" body of the nearly toothless,

middle-aged Antonia (331) to the powerfully elastic bodies of the singers Eden Bower and Thea Kronborg, Cather's bodies sizzle with contradictory significations, as she pushes representation to its limits in probing her own and her culture's eroticized and racialized nationalism. Her bodies both interrogate and aim to satisfy America's hunger for authoritative, appealing images of itself, and they assess the cost, to individuals and social groups, of deviating from these increasingly pervasive normative images. In writing the body, Cather's fears of the queer, which are always also an attraction to that loathsome, lovely figure, are writ large and in a specifically American mode.³

In the years just before and after the turn into the twentieth century, the pace of the process of national self-imaging accelerated greatly, spurred on by advances in the technologies of mass communication and the development of lowcost, high-quality popular magazines like *McClure's*, which employed Willa Cather from 1906 to 1915.⁴ Cather enters into this emphatically gendered and highly contentious process of image production and consumption with the sharp eye of a journalist and the ironic distance of someone who lived and worked in the rising media capital of the U.S. for years without ever seeming to relinquish her sense of being a Nebraskan rather than a New Yorker. Criticism has tended to describe Cather's entries, particularly from her early fiction, in the contest to image the nation as celebratory — unironic iterations of "the heroic myth of national destiny" (Carlin 7), revisionist and feminist only in that they (sometimes, sort of) place women at the center of pioneer stories as actors and not merely as passive emblems.⁵ Readings that emphasize Cather's brave revision of "America's story" (O'Brien, *EV* 74) privilege the "good girls" of the early novels — Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia (as exemplars of a woman-centered, humane revision of the national myth) — and discount or problematize the "bad guys" — Bartley Alexander and Claude Wheeler (as suckers for or victims of an unreconstructed version of the myth of progress, conquest, and destiny).⁶ My aim in what follows is to offer a less bifurcated — though necessarily condensed — view of the early fiction, using the notion of queer bodies and/as national bodies to explore Cather's ongoing entanglements in political and literary discourses of personhood, in "representation as both a political and a semiotic or literary system" (Sanchez-Eppler 5).

Exemplary or abject, revelatory or duplicitous, the looked-at body in Cather's fiction is, I propose, a "queer" body because, as the object of a gaze that is either punitive or possessive, it is made ec-centric — off-centered in the sense of not fully belonging to the person who inhabits it. Queer bodies may be male or female and many shades of "white" or non-"white", for

"America" is not always a Girl — nor a Great White Girl — in Cather's corporealizations of the nation. Such "queerness" may or may not be related to the sexualities of individual characters and may or may not be marked as "queer" in the text. Paul, for example, with his lifelong dread of "the shadowed corner" and his "champagne friendship" with a boy from Yale (CS 183, 186), has struck many readers as homosexual, but the word "queer" is never attached to him. On the other hand, Ivar, the Norwegian hammockmaker and religious mystic of *O Pioneers!*, is described by the narrator as "queerly shaped" and called "queer, certainly" by his protector, Alexandra (36, 100). His queerness is bodily but not explicitly sexual, an attribute arising from his "bandy legs" being "completely misfitted to his broad, thick body and heavy shoulders" (90), though important evidence associates Ivar with a shame that seems sexual: his obsessive cleanliness, his desire to live far from other people so as to be subjected to "fewer temptations" (34), and his going bare-footed as a means of allowing "for the indulgence of the body." As Ivar explains to one of Alexandra's maids, Signa:

From my youth up I have had a strong, rebellious body, and have been subject to every kind of temptation. Even in age my temptations are prolonged. It was necessary to make some allowances; and the feet, as I understand it, are free members. There is no divine prohibition for them in the Ten Commandments. . . . I indulge them without harm to any one, even to trampling in filth when my desires are low. They are quickly cleaned again. (278)

Where Paul is a sensualist who becomes a thief in order to bankroll the indulgence of his rebellious body's every desire, Ivar is a sensualist who relentlessly polices his body for signs of vulnerability to temptation and scrutinizes the Ten Commandments in order to locate a zone of permissible indulgence. Ivar's explanation to Signa is a brief but revealing developmental narrative, tracing his movement from "youth up" to "age" and framed entirely in terms of his relationship to subjectivating norms and constraints. Ivar's is a story of subjugation, prohibition, and limited resistance or subversion, although elsewhere in the text, he is figured as an Old World rebel against New World conformity, whose difference is valued by Alexandra as a resistance to homogeneity and feared by others, who view Ivar as pathological and "disgraceful" (101). In the end, though, Ivar reveals that his "difference" stems from his brutal subjugation to the religio-juridical discourses of proper and improper bodies. Called queer and crazy by his neighbors and the narrator, Ivar is terrorized by the specter of the queerness within himself, driven to "tramp[e] in filth when my desires are low" and then compulsively clean his "free members" again.

How does *O Pioneers!* finally assess the status of the "queer" and the problems of embodiment represented not only in Ivar but in the text's generalized fascination with bodily types, stories, and significa-

tions? Ivar's queerness — his bodily difference and his apparent deviation from socially constructed notions of the normal — clearly masks a deeper sameness — i.e., his self-loathing is fueled by the same rage for order and conformity that also fuels Lou's persecution of him — but to be queer in this instance means to be vulnerable to the medical and juridical authorities that have established themselves in the recently domesticated prairie town of Hanover, and that vulnerability requires Ivar to seek Alexandra's protection.

With his misfit, disorderly body and his scrupulous conscience, Ivar is the ideal servant of the order that holds him in thrall, greeting the abject Alexandra, when he finds her soaking wet in the graveyard, with a horrified, "Gud! You are enough to frighten us, mistress. You look like a drowned woman. How could you do such a thing!" (280). He takes her home where the loyal Signa gives the mistress a footbath — particularly appropriate, in view of what Ivar has recently told her about feet — and puts her to bed. More importantly, Ivar's rescue sets up the three great puzzles of the novel's conclusion: Alexandra's waking vision of a male figure in a white cloak whose shoulders "seemed as strong as the foundations of the world" (283); her visit to Frank Shabata, imprisoned for murdering his wife Marie and Alexandra's brother Emil, which concludes with her declaring her intention to get him pardoned for his crimes; and the revelation, in the novel's closing paragraphs, that she and Carl Linstrum plan to marry. Each of these odd moves is in keeping with Ivar's and the community's preoccupation with maintaining bodily and social order: Alexandra's vision is triggered by her longing to be freed from the weight and demands of "her own body" (282); the killings of Emil and Marie seem just, or at least explicable, punishment for their violations of the institution of marriage; she and Carl are "safe" to marry because they are "friends" and therefore won't "suffer like — those young ones" (308) from the disasters wrought by excessive desires.

The strange turns in the ending and the crucial role that Ivar plays in it suggest to me that Cather's engagement with the sexologists and racial suicidists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is challenging, as C. Susan Wiesenthal has contended in her reading of *O Pioneers!*, but also deeply conflicted, as I hope this discussion has begun to demonstrate. Beyond Ivar, *O Pioneers!* is obsessed with bodies and the ways in which they matter, the ways in which they signify desire, disorder, power, pain, deviance, horror, glory, and nation. We glean from these images both the "corporeal utopianism" Michael Moon has described as the heart of Walt Whitman's challenge to the nineteenth century's demonization of nonprocreative sexualities (253)⁷ as well as a pronounced corporeal dystopianism — a tendency toward erotophobia, homophobia, and general ambivalence toward the condition of embodiment. These competing

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(Continued)

impulses push and pull at one another, making the "vast checker-board" (75) of Cather's settled prairie a space of greater instability and tension than is usually recognized.

For the most part, the narrator of *O Pioneers!* ignores the complications that inevitably arise when the body is brought into signification and blithely operates, as an observer of human beings, with a faith in bodily types derived from the positivism of the nineteenth century and the nativism of the twentieth, relying quietly but systematically on physical appearance as a means of judging and classifying individuals.⁸ Steeped though it is in allusions to classical myth and British and American Romanticism,⁹ the text abounds in bodily diversity and documents the conditions and characters of each type as carefully as Frank Norris's *McTeague*, which Cather praised in an 1899 review as "realism of the most uncompromising kind," noting approvingly that "his characters are . . . types before they are individuals."¹⁰ Governed by the twin principles of realism and organic form, Cather's prairie might be usefully compared to the dioramas mounted by taxidermist Carl Akeley in the American Museum of Natural History's African Hall. As Donna Haraway has said of Akeley's scrupulously detailed and life-like efforts to create a "peephole into the jungle" (qtd. in "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" 242), Cather's immigrants and pioneers seem at times to be specimens selected on the basis of their typicality and placed into habitat groups to tell a true story of "natural history."¹¹ In creating her own "peephole into the [prairie]," Cather includes in her gallery of physical types: *abject* bodies; *idealized* bodies; *monumental* bodies; *criminal* bodies; *ethnic* bodies; *weak* bodies.

The most elaborate of the bodily moments in *O Pioneers!* is the tableau of the *dead* bodies of Emil and Marie, which Ivar comes upon in the orchard just as the sun is rising. The tableau, to which the narrative compulsively returns, is crucial, of course, because it so beautifully demonstrates the convergence of Cather's semiotics of the body and her somatizations of story in an extended description that is at once highly aestheticized and brutally scientific. It also demonstrates something important about the gender asymmetries of representations of death, but I'm most interested here in Alexandra's "awe" when she reaches and immediately reads the bodies: "There was something about those two lying in the grass, something in the way Marie had settled her cheek on Emil's shoulder that told her everything" (285). But the "something" that clarifies "everything" is quickly banished, as the lovers' bodies are disentangled and buried in the Norwegian and the Catholic graveyards¹² and order systematically restored, a restoration signaled in Alexandra feeling herself "immune from evil tidings" (299) after she has visited Frank in prison. Like all "immune" systems, particularly as they were con-

structed in turn-of-the-century biomedical discourses, Alexandra's is bolstered by expulsion of elements perceived to be alien and threatening to it,¹³ a move that is crucial to reestablishing (reconsolidating, reharmonizing) Alexandra's sense of individuality and to restoring the vision of nation signified by the "gleaming white body" (206) of the farmer heroine. In this regard, it is worth noting that both Emil and Marie are called "queer" in the course of the novel — he because he frightens the girls who watch him "wonderingly" and assiduously at dances, she because Alexandra judges her face to look "foreign." As individuals, their "queerness" designates (perceived) sexual ambiguity in his case ("Are you stuck up, Emil," asks his friend Amédée at one point, "or is anything the matter with you? I never did know a boy twenty-two years old before that didn't have no girl. You wanna be a priest, maybe?" [160-1]) and ethnic otherness in hers. Together, the deviance that requires their expulsion from the prairie arises not only out of their transgressions against marriage but also their violations of a code that defines safe sex as intercourse with one's own (ethnic) kind. That Alexandra subscribes to and actively enforces this code is made clear in her comments on the all-Swedish wedding of Signa and the grumpy Nelse. After the wedding celebration, as the couple sets off with each leading one of the milk cows Alexandra had given them as a present, she declares, "Those two will get on . . . They are not going to take any chances. They will feel safer with those cows in their own stable." When Marie complains about the match, saying she would have preferred Signa to marry a more congenial Bohemian boy who had shown an interest in her the previous winter, Alexandra remarks, "I believe there is a good deal of the cow in most Swedish girls. You high-strung Bohemians can't understand us. We're a terribly practical people, and I guess we think a cross man makes a good manager" (228-9).

Swedish "cow"-girls and Bohemian dolls, cross men as good "managers" — Alexandra's smug pronouncements are contravened by the particularities of her own case (e.g., her plans to marry a kind, narrow-chested man who is not a manager at all but a passive partner in a mining venture in the Klondike) and by the text's blurring of precisely the boundaries and categories Alexandra seeks to maintain. In the end, though, the narrative scale of *O Pioneers!* is tilted in Alexandra's favor, as she clearly stands at the pinnacle of the novel's bodily and ideological hierarchy — healthy, wealthy, and "immune" from further attack by "queers" in her family or community. The narrative finally cannot escape the logic of the systems of representation (semiotic and political) that its proliferating figures of the body have served to interrogate, and so we are left with the "gleaming white body" of the un-queer entrepreneur who recognizes that a "good manager" is necessary to the successful operation of any business. Far from showing Cather's rejection of putatively "masculine" values and cultural activities, Alexandra's

triumph is the apotheosis of Progressive Era values of systemization and efficiency in matters of business and discipline in matters of the body, values that converge in her remark to Carl that "I think, myself, it is more pleasant to do business with people who are clean and healthy-looking" (132).¹⁴

Alexandra's bolstered immunity and her commitments to health and hygiene make possible a movement into transcendence that clarifies the body politics of *O Pioneers!* and situates them within U.S. social and literary history. From this standpoint, the mysticism evinced in Alexandra's concluding paeans to the abiding nature of the land and the temporality of human claims upon it are a massive yet predictable denial of her life's work, which has at every point involved expanding her holdings in land, using the law to protect her claims to them, and seeking ways to maximize their profitability. "Suppose I do will my land to [my brother's children]," she says to Carl, "what difference will that make? . . . I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while" (307-8). Only those who are secure in their titles can assert that titles don't matter, but Alexandra's question, "What *difference* will that make?", registers a desire to make invisible (or at least irrelevant) the economic system and the regulatory practices that have mediated her relationship to the land and to erase the struggles over "difference" that have marked "her" prairie as a site of U.S. history. Both Alexandra and the narrator seek to turn her real possessions into imaginary ones, claiming for her the pure, unassailable title of "love" and "understand[ing]" instead of (but actually in addition to) the shifting, contestable titles worked out in the marketplace and in courts of law, where natural rights arguments about property and ownership have been pivotal to the processes through which the United States constitutes subjects and citizens.¹⁵ The gesture aims to secure for Alexandra the transcendent, disembodied subjectivity of liberal individualism, a figure whose literal and symbolic ownership of the prairie is beyond dispute, even as she agrees with Carl that she "belong[s] to the land" (307). Alexandra is an author as well as an owner, having usurped the role played by Marie in the orchard and revised the tale written in the blood of the dying woman into "the old story" written "with the best we have" (307). The queers are gone (unless, like Ivar, they have made themselves useful as zealous servants of an anti-queer order), and Alexandra extolls the virtues of a timeless "land" whose nationhood she erases and — capably, dazzlingly — signifies.

My goal here has been to read *O Pioneers!* — so genial and familiar a text — in an anti-mystical, anti-essentialist way that disrupts the coziness of Cather's second "first" novel by attending to the anxieties that underlie her portrait of a powerful, autonomous woman. Viewed through the lens of gender alone, Alexandra may indeed seem worth celebrating, supply-

ing as she does a salubrious alternative to the Isabel Archers, Edna Pontelliers, and Lily Barts who live and die or resign themselves to death-in-life in American fiction with such grim regularity. Alexandra's triumphant personhood is considerably more vexing, however, when viewed along the axes of ethnicity and sexuality as an allegory of nation-building predicated on the repudiation or containment of the "queer" and emblemized in skin so smooth and white it is said to possess "the freshness of the snow itself" (88). Such disruptions are necessary in order to demonstrate Cather's entanglement in her own historical moment and to suggest the limitations of feminist critical models which, because of their particular investments in identity, insist upon drawing clear and stable boundaries between "male" and "female" and read female characters as if they were real women. Alexandra interests me not because she is an exceptional girl whose developmental plot concludes satisfactorily but because she is a semiotic field where important cultural work occurs. Having generated a model for reading — queering, as it were — Cather's early fiction, we could proceed to place *O Pioneers!* in dialogue with what comes before and after it. Such a survey would be guided by several questions: Who occupies the space of the queer in these texts, and how do they fare? How do queer and un-queer bodies signify, both in themselves and in relation to one another? What vision of nation is ratified or repressed in images of the queer and the un-queer? How do the texts negotiate the tangled issues of ownership, authorship, citizenship, and authority? But, alas, time and space do not at the moment afford such lengthy excursions across Cather's prairie. That journey will have to wait for another day.

NOTES

¹ The letters to which I allude here include Cather to Louise Pound, 15 June 1892 and 29 June 1893, Louise Pound Papers, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, and Cather to Mariel Gere, 1 June 1893, 1 August 1893, 16 June 1894, 4 August 1896, and 25 April 1897, Willa Cather Historical Center, Red Cloud, Nebraska. I discuss these letters in detail in *Willa Cather: Queering America*. Suffice it to say that in these crucial documents Cather uses the word "queer" six times and that it is clearly linked to the acute anxieties she experienced falling in love with a woman in the very moment that female same-sex affection was being redescribed as pathological rather than innocently romantic.

² In addition to Thomson, my discussion here draws upon more general studies of the politics of the body in the U.S. and turn-of-the-century discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. See especially Bederman, D'Emilio and Freedman, and Sanchez-Eppler.

³ For a provocative discussion of contemporary contestations of national identity and national sexuality, see Berlant and Freeman (esp. 193-99). They argue that Queer Nation's parodic tactics of crossing borders and occupying spaces in order to "simulate 'the national' with a camp inflection" operate "precisely in the American mode" (196). Though Cather is by no means a Queer Nationalist in the contem-

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porary sense and not a parodist in the literary sense, she does in her contestations of identity operate in what strikes me as a specifically, though probably not uniquely, "American mode."

⁴ Cather worked on the magazine on a full-time basis only through October 1911, when she gave up her position as managing editor and took a leave of absence to work on *Alexander's Bridge*. She returned on a half-time basis in 1913 to fulfill a number of commitments to her mentor, founding editor S. S. McClure, including ghostwriting his autobiography. See Woodress 248-59.

⁵ Deborah Carlin provides a useful overview of how Cather's perceived celebration of the national myth has earned her a place in "some versions of an American literary canon" but skewed Cather studies toward the first half of her oeuvre (7). I would add that that already narrow focus also privileges the so-called "pioneer novels" (*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*) and devalues the crucial body of short fiction from this period as well as the novels (*Alexander's Bridge* and *One of Ours*) with male protagonists whose stories involve leaving the prairie rather than "taming" it.

⁶ Such a pattern of reading Cather's early fiction is apparent, for example, in O'Brien (*The Emerging Voice* 74, 387-93 and "Combat Envy and Survivor Guilt") as well as in Ryan, Fetterley, and Ammons.

⁷ Cather's "corporeal utopianism" was probably inherited directly and self-consciously from Whitman, an inheritance she acknowledges in the title of her novel, borrowed from his poem, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" I'm less convinced than O'Brien (*The Emerging Voice* 440) that Cather really critiques the manly pioneer ethos declaimed in this thumping marching song, which calls upon "Western youths" and the "youthful sinewy races" to "take up the task eternal" of conquest, expansion, and settlement (11. 9, 7, 15).

⁸ My discussion here has benefited from Brooks's discussion of the "talking bodies" that emerged with the rise of the positivist sciences and popular pseudo-sciences derived from them in the nineteenth century. See *Body Work* 221-256.

⁹ For explorations of Cather's relationship to such traditions in *O Pioneers!*, see Donovan 104-9; Woodress 242-8; and Rosowski 45-61.

¹⁰ The review originally appeared in the *Lincoln Courier*, 7 April 1900: 3. It is reprinted in Curtin, vol. 2: 746-9.

¹¹ I borrow from Haraway's delightful essay fully aware that the analogy I am making between Akeley's dioramas and Cather's novel will strike some readers as strained, if not willfully perverse. I risk taxing the reader's patience in order to call attention to the importance of realism, naturalism, and natural history to the project of *O Pioneers!*. Ultimately, this move will serve to complicate the text's and Cather's supposed "nostalgia."

¹² We know that Emil is buried in the Norwegian graveyard because Alexandra goes there the day she gets caught in the rain. We can assume that Marie is buried in the Catholic graveyard, though no mention is made of it in the text. Much earlier in the story, Emil and Marie discuss the ethnic and religious politics of the local graveyards while he is mowing the Bergson family plot. See 79-80.

¹³ For a wide-ranging discussion of the ways in which immune system discourse has figured into bodily and global politics throughout the twentieth century, see Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," esp. 204-9 and

217-221. Haraway notes that the marked bodies of "woman, the colonized or enslaved, and the worker" have been deployed to generate "accounts of rational citizenship, bourgeois family life, and prophylaxis against sexual pollution and inefficiency, such as prostitution, criminality, or race suicide" (207), which, I am arguing, is precisely what happens in *O Pioneers!* in the marking of queer bodies as impure.

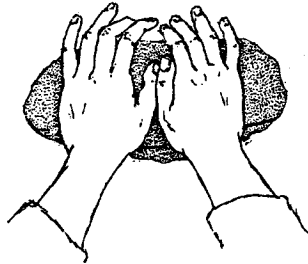
¹⁴ Both O'Brien and Ammons read *O Pioneers!* as a rejection of masculine values, and Ammons also associates those values with Progressivism.

¹⁵ For more on this point, see especially the introduction and first chapter of Priscilla Waid's *Constituting Americans*.

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Chatting with Willa Cather While Kneading Bread

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Until recently, I have always been quite certain I did not want to meet the formidable Willa Cather. I would probably stammer something like, "You are a frightening woman. Why do you write in such a beautiful style about so many strong, clever, unromantic crones and handsome, sensitive, ineffective men?" She would probably reply, "I cannot suffer fools!" and stamp out of the room.

After reading other people's memories of her as a person, however, I feel quite different. I can imagine Miss Cather, as they usually call her, striding into the "great" room at our house, sitting comfortably on a sturdy oak dining room chair, turning her gaze from my place in the kitchen to the view of the valley north of us. I would continue kneading the dark Bavarian bread, feeling comfortable with the calmness of this blue-eyed, solid sort of woman who appeared to absorb the fieldstone, open beams, unwarped loom, finches at the feeder, hawks circling high over the valley. We might talk about breads we have known, the various colors the different trees shade the woods, duck habitats, the beauty of the plains, the mountains, Provence. It would be a comfortable sort of talk to the rhythm of the kneading.

I would have recognized her as soon as she appeared, struck by the same "flashing blue eyes" that impressed George Swetnam (3), a colleague on the *Pittsburgh Leader*, eyes maybe a touch "obstinate," as her friend Elizabeth Sergeant (92) observed. Her hairstyle and manner of dressing would identify her, too. As an adolescent, she wore her hair "bobbed off," in the words of Mrs. Harvey Newbranch (nee Evaline Rolofson), a classmate at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (Fleishman). Mable Lindly, another classmate, recalls, twenty-four years after Cather graduated, that

She was very masculine in her manner of dressing . . . from the time she first came here to school. It was just personal eccentricity, though, for she dressed as she did everything else, more with regard to what she wanted to do than with respect to the thing or what other girls did. (Wyman)

Mrs. Newbranch recalls that Cather came back from summer vacation one year with "hands calloused and chapped" from driving a lumber wagon, clearly, from Mrs. Newbranch's tone, not the fashion.

Louise Pound, a fellow student at UN-L and later the first woman president of the Modern Language Association and professor at UN-L for many years, compared Cather's eccentricities with those of other students:

Most girls would have been afraid of appearing conspicuous, being the only one to affect that style, but Willa had no fear of that. Of course, those were the days of originality when students were not so ultra-organized, before the red tape of a large institution had cut off independence. (Wyman)

As Cather progressed through the university, she let her hair grow and wore more schoolgirl-like skirts and bodices. Later, in Pittsburgh, as a young career woman, first working in journalism, then in teaching, riding her bicycle and catching rides on the street cars, she wore "skirts much too short" and "mannish looking shirtwaists," according to Swetnam (3). The students' comments on her dress are less judgmental, however: "She affected mannish dress — 'rainy-day' skirts were fashionable at the time — and with them she wore severely tailored shirtwaists with stiff cuffs, and collars with four-in-hand ties," reported one student (Hutchison 264).

Fred Otte, a student who became a longtime friend, compares her quite favorably with the other teachers as he recalls her sitting in her first assembly:

In a neat brown suit, wearing a crisp, white shirtwaist with Peter Pan collar and cuffs, this one looked trim, smart and tidy . . . Her lightly tanned complexion was fresh and clear, with the slight flush of peaches ripened in the sun and wind. Her hands were brown and strong, almost masculine. (2)

Yes, I muse, she fits well into our corner of the world. She could help stack a load of hay.

Yehudi Menuhin's recollection of her from the perspective of a young man in a family which be-

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came close friends of Cather's late in her life underscores similarities between the reports of her as a younger and an older woman. His recollection of "her mannish figure and country tweediness, her let's-let-it-on-the-table manners and unconcealed blue eyes, her rosy skin and energetic demeanor. . . ." (128) matches the descriptions of her as remembered by her college friends, her colleagues in journalism, her students, and her later professional acquaintances.

As Cather achieved more independence in her lifestyle and in her chosen profession, her dress and manner became more elaborate but still practical. Phyllis Martin Hutchinson recalls,

when I was living in the city, I attended one of her Friday afternoon teas at 5 Bank Street. I was surprised to see, instead of the tailored teacher I remembered, a very charming and delightfully feminine person who was most friendly and gracious as she introduced me to the other guests. (266)

It's not a surprise that June Provines of the *Chicago Daily News* reports that in 1932 when Cather gave a talk she wore both "maroon velvet" and "sturdy shoes," suitable for the rainy day (13).

Mary Ellen Chase, a well-known writer and professor of English at Smith College who knew Cather in Grand Manan, describes a striking looking middle-aged Cather:

At fifty Willa Cather was a handsome woman, perhaps even beautiful. Of only average height and without doubt overweight, she had certain arresting features which one never forgot. Her complexion was clear and smooth, not like Dresden china, that tiresome comparison, but rather like the outside of any well-washed plate just off a white colour, perhaps like cream. Her face was startling, in its absence of lines. Her mouth was generous and good-humoured. Her eyes were her most memorable feature, long rather than round eyes and of a clear blue, neither dark nor light. She always looked directly at one with a flattering expression of deep-set interest, which, I am sure, was a mannerism rather than any sign of genuine concern. (511)

This attitude of attentive listening, often noticed by Cather's acquaintances, was usually interpreted to imply genuine interest, perhaps not in the person, but in the subjects that might be discussed. Alice Edwards, a fellow guest at Shattuck Inn, in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, reports that Cather was always interested in talking with her husband, Nielson Edwards, about his hunting trips and the animals he saw (Yates 18).

Cather's voice was memorable, too. Her distinctive "husky, rather boyish voice that came in little gusts," as Marion King, a librarian acquaintance of later years, described it, had a "western flavor" (Sergeant 91). The voice was

bluff, [an] almost boyish address . . . modified by a little catch at the beginning of a sentence that might be shyness or just eager zest of life restrained by

thought — as the river is caught in the weight of the mountain. (Sergeant 94)

As an adult, one of her students said, "even yet I hear her voice when I read her books" (Woolcott 36).

Cather's vigor undoubtedly brought energy to the "cheerless and dun-colored" "halls and classrooms" of "The Academic High School" (Otte 1). Otte, who continued his relationship with her until she died, said she walked "with a youthful spring to her step; the seams of her hose . . . perfectly straight . . . asking many questions and talking with interesting enthusiasm." Otte credits Cather with teaching him "the art of easy conversation" (2). Years later, but still with youthful enthusiasm, he reflects on Cather's intensity:

those days in old-time Pittsburgh when comforts were few, work hours long, money too scarce, prospects baffling and uncertain — those were the days they now call 'frustrating,' but Willa Cather was born with spark, and nothing, but nothing could extinguish it. (6)

Cather's intelligence and energy carried far beyond her appearance.

Cather was known at the University of Nebraska for being quite outspoken, orally and in print:

Ms Cather wrote telling portraits of her professors and leading lights generally [including] Roscoe Pound, using material gained when a guest in the Pound household. The breach of etiquette [sic] Mother Pound and Sister Olivia found unforgivable. ("Modern Coed")

The portrait in question has been republished recently,¹ so many more people can read it and draw their own conclusions. It is sophomoric but certainly the young man in it is clearly drawn. Having been advisor for a college newspaper for fifteen years, I chuckled when I read the satiric sketch. It is the sort of thing that would cause an uproar from the subject's friends and administrators. On the other hand, its tone recalls the tone of political newspapers of the colonies and nineteenth-century America, and of the *Spectator* papers in England which provided the finest examples of satires for American journalists. The article not only catches the air of a particular bright young man who comes home full of himself, but it characterizes many others who act, at least at a certain time in youth, with pompous arrogance. It doesn't appear that any of the material necessarily came from the Pound household, unless Roscoe was admonished about his behavior at home in front of Cather. Cather herself, of course, must have been as insufferable as Roscoe. Since Cather was notoriously well-read, an outspoken person about her opinions, and a critic of others' opinions, her participation in class might have irritated more than one classmate or teacher.

Cather had strong likes and dislikes in people as in everything else. One of her former high school students reports that

Willa Cather had little patience with the stupid or careless pupil. Personality was all important to her. She made it clear that even a child is not interesting per se, but only if he has an interesting personality.

Her own personality could not be ignored. She was greatly admired by some of her students, and just as heartily disliked by others. (Hutchison 265)

In *Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years*, James Shively presents one particular negative letter from undergraduate acquaintance E. C. Ames, who disparaged Cather's writing and claimed that as far as he knew, "Willa Cather had no friends, and wanted none" (Shively 135). Such an opinion has to be weighed, however, not only against Mariel Gere's public rebuttal to the letter, but also against a record which shows that such a respectable newsman and citizen as Will Owen Jones hired Cather to write criticism for the Lincoln *Journal* while she was still a student, and Louise Pound, Roscoe Pound's sister and no light-weight intellect herself, speaks of Cather as a model for later students ("Modern Coed"). Many must have been of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's opinion:

When she graduated it was the general conviction of those who knew her that she was the most brilliant student the university had ever had, and was destined for more striking success than any other member of her class.

This is not a perception that would have pleased all the ambitious or self-confident young men at the university.

The "brilliant student" spent many years before, during, and after college in an apprenticeship for her vocation as a novelist, reading seriously, studying art, and "writing, writing, writing" (Seibel 200) — copy (and filler) for her father's newspaper², university essays, drama criticism, satire, short stories, plays (as an undergraduate), copy for the "National Stockman and Farmer," stories and how-to articles for the homemaker, stories for children, poems, muckraker articles, and finally novels, all the while searching for the right genre and tone, the right balance of work and reflection, the right way to balance the heavy demands she put on herself professionally and personally.

Cather made her own living in a time when that was unusual for women in the professional world, and she learned to play the journalistic game. Mildred Bennett reports a telling anecdote she heard from Gere:

Mariel also told me of a visit she and Willa made to Brownville to do an article on the town. They were guests of Senator Tipton, who paid for their hotel. The people hoped that an article in the *Journal* would help rejuvenate the place. Mariel acted as photographer on the trip. In one of the churches Willa threw hymnals on the floor and generally messed up the place to make a more dramatic plot and article. Mariel was much embarrassed and felt they were taking hospitality under false pretenses. (6)

Cather must have felt the news about the town would be more effective if its plight appeared memorable. Certainly she knew more people would pick up the paper and read it.

Sensationalism was used to sell newspapers and magazines to a growing population. Thomas Beer, a

writer and critic who knew Cather personally, describes this time well:

The decade of muck, the calamitous years from 1900-1910, represent the filmiest period in modern literary history, as far as the United States have a literary history. Theodore Roosevelt, spiritually, reigned and under his favor the adoration of journalism came to an amazing height. Everything from the Standard Oil Company to the sexual nature of mankind was being tabulated and reformed (24)

Sensational news, however, had its serious purpose, too: to educate readers and to reveal political and financial abuses of the public trust. Cather became increasingly involved in this world when she moved to New York City to work for S. S. McClure, the dean of muckraking.

Cather's first big assignment for *McClure's Magazine* was a daunting one — to complete an article begun by Georgine Milmine on Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. The church has, over the years, been keenly critical of representations of Eddy's life and work, but Adela St. Johns's remark about Cather's work on the series of *McClure's* articles must be one of the harshest criticisms. St. Johns calls Cather "a horrid, harsh repellent woman and a lousy unscrupulous reporter . . ." (128), and claims that she "found Willa Cather had stirred with grim fancy the most vicious and inaccurate of all the attacks on Mrs. Eddy" (129). At the same time, however, St. Johns admits that Cather is "a fine, maybe the finest novelist" in America (128). The truth about Mrs. Eddy probably lies somewhere between Cather's and St. Johns's opinions. In his understated but honest way, Seibel seems a better judge of the extent of Cather's journalistic truthfulness.¹

Willa's Nebraska conscience became less troublesome. She learned Salvetti's axiom that "man is credulous because he is naturally sincere," and the Psalmist's hasty remark that "all men are liars." . . . I would not libel Willa's journalistic status by any insinuation that she was immune to all temptation to improvise. (201)

And so he leaves the topic.

Witter Bynner, who worked with Cather on *McClure's Magazine* and later met her in other circles, such as the Mabel Dodge Luhan one in New Mexico, gives a mixed report on Cather which suggests the two-sided picture of her reputation. After reading the biographies by E. K. Brown and Edith Lewis, he remarks that the young Willa Cather was "more calculating and ruthless" and yet "more intelligent and interesting" than either had made her. In fact, he continued, Willa Cather's "life could not possibly [have] become as dry as those two biographers were making it. . . ." (331-32). "Where was the gusto, the joy, the warmth, the great joining with the will of spring?" (251-52). At the same time, however, he dampens his own enthusiasm with the comment that her "childlike smile was set, as by a jeweler, in an elderly, too authorita-

(Continued on page 38)

CHATting WITH CATHER

(Continued)

tive face and that the elder would never let it go into a laugh, or on the other hand feel it graven with tragic vision of magnificent darkness" (337). Bynner, a moderately successful poet, critiques Cather's work and life thoughtfully but appears finally ambivalent about Cather.

As she grew older, had less to prove to the world, more writing she wanted to do, and less energy than a thirty-year-old, Cather made for herself a life that would support her writing and allow her to maintain the responsibilities she felt toward her family and old friends. She "lived comfortably but not lavishly" and sent many thoughtful gifts to others rather than indulge her own "extravagances" (Butcher 367). Undeniably, her work came first.

Eleanor Austermann, who ran Shattuck Inn after her parents, reported that although Cather had friends in town and nearby Peterborough and often went to tea when she was not working, she "saved herself for her work, and she was a demon for work" (Yates 18). Fisher defends Cather's habits:

I understand a legend is going the rounds which presents Willa Cather as a pale victim sacrificed to art . . . [one might] as well sympathize with a fish for being in water instead of gasping in the dust . . . as sympathize with Willa Cather for what she hasn't been doing while she has been writing.

One might argue that partisans would naturally protect Cather's reputation; nevertheless, Fisher's accounts of her extended first-hand experience with Cather appear quite credible.

As Cather grew older, she suffered devastating losses among her family and friends, and was ill at times herself. But even as

the outside world became increasingly obscure for her . . . indoors life burned bright, with parties and birthday luncheons, excursions to the Metropolitan Opera, baskets of flowers and orange trees arriving in snowstorms, and always books and walks in Central Park. (Menuhin 129)

A life is made up not only of its first or last few years or of what is reported in the literary circles. A life is well lived by someone who knows herself and can integrate the things important to her satisfactorily in the life she has built.

I've often thought children are better judges of character than critics, and I was delighted to learn that Seibel's daughter was quite fond of her friend "Wee-you" (Seibel 198), and Professor Wicher's son Jackie at Breadloaf "would pipe across the dining room" so all could hear him clearly, "Cather!" (Birtwell 8).

Another admirable characteristic in my judgment is the ability to rise cheerfully and competently to domestic emergencies. Cather was visiting Fremstad at Little Walthalla when

The cook left; the plumbing ceased to function; and madame's mood was joyless and grim. Miss Cather

lent me a cheerful hand in the successive emergencies, mopped up my tears, and exhorted madame to a higher heart. Presently, through her efforts, the sun came out and the clouds rolled away, and when she departed — doubtless with secret relief — she left at least one staunch disciple behind. (Cushing 243)

I also admire someone who remembers her family and friends, who writes marvelous letters (Butcher 356) and keeps up a "vast correspondence," writing "notes to people for little things — a small favor shown her, a call made, a time of illness" (Yates 19), a woman who visits old friends of her own and of her mother when she returns home. Cather took Annie Pavelka (Antonia) and the children to the movies to see "A Lost Lady," sent gifts regularly to Mrs. Charlotte Lambrecht, a woman she met the first winter she moved to Nebraska, and visited Miss Mollie Ferris, her mother's best friend (P.I.W. 12).

Cather had, as Sergeant said, "character . . . if character means certain old-fashioned virtues like faith, grit, determination and unremitting labor" (Yates 19). To these virtues, I would add friendship, loyalty, and faith. I am unsure what Viola Roseboro' meant when she described Cather "as having a heart like a great anthracite furnace" (King 209), but my heart understands the feeling of friendship called up by Carrie Miner Sherwood's words on her 100th birthday:

it's hard to tell what I liked best about Willie. She was always good-natured and very free with information. She occasionally asked my advice, and we discussed her characters in the books she was writing quite often. We'd sit in the swing on the big porch for hours without stopping. We talked mostly about people. She loved people. But she also had a way of brushing people off — not verbally, emotionally I guess." (Allan)

Fortunately, I have plenty of emotional support.

Now that the bread has set to rise, Cather and I will take our iced tea out to the swing on the big porch. Perhaps we will chat about some of the farm families who live in the valley. I feel much more comfortable with her here than I did in the graduate library. She was not a scholar but a courageous woman — and most of all — a writer to be remembered.

NOTES

¹ In Mildred Bennett. "Friends of Willa Cather." *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* 41.1 (1997): 5-7.

² *The Red Cloud Republican* was established September 14, 1888, by the Red Cloud Publishing Company (*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Adams Clay Webster and Nuckolls Counties Nebraska*. Chicago: Goodspeed, 1890, 558). The newspaper subsequently came into the hands of Charles Cather who ran it for a time, apparently in concert with other Red Cloud businessmen of similar political views and with help from his daughter Willa.

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— Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago

Camelot, Back Creek and Sweet Water: Arthurian Archetypes and Southern Sensibility in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*

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The Arthurian tradition represents one of the longest-standing literary and cultural interests in Western history. Based on sketchy details of the life of a sixth-century British monarch, the "matter" of Arthur was created in the twelfth century, ignored during the Enlightenment, resuscitated by the Romantics, elaborated in the course of the nineteenth century, and, surprisingly enough, carried into its heyday in the twentieth century. The longevity of this story, its widespread popularity, and the many variations it has spawned suggest that the myth has always performed important cultural work; each age uses the myth to speak to its own particular concerns. I wish here to establish Cather's relationship to the Arthurian tradition, both in terms of general ideology and as manifest in a particular work, *A Lost Lady*. By means of illustration, I will also explore the connections between *A Lost Lady* and the fourteenth-century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK).¹ Although Arthurian elements appear in other Cather works, *A Lost Lady*

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stands out because it bears this influence on many levels, and it makes important contributions, changing and commenting on the very tradition it draws upon.

A Lost Lady reflects Willa Cather's sustained interest in courtly love and the medieval romance, as Cather scholars have already documented in detail.¹ It also reveals the lifelong influence of her girlhood experiences in Virginia upon her subsequent literary endeavors. Arguably, the social structure of the South bears the closest resemblance to the feudal structure of medieval Britain. Cather's memories of her early years near Winchester seem to uphold this model, for, as Sharon O'Brien reports, "she connected the hierarchies in Virginia's 'old conservative society' with the patrilineal inheritance of land" (12). While *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* deals most explicitly with Southern culture as Cather might have experienced it, important elements of Cather's Virginia roots also appear in transplanted form in *A Lost Lady's Sweet Water*. Despite moves in time and space, even the children of *Sweet Water* possess the knowledge that "a fortunate and privileged class was an axiomatic fact in the social order" (LL 12-13) and that "some people . . . [were] better than others" (LL 14). Cather evidently shared the elitism implicit in a belief in aristocracy. Further, as Patricia Lee Yongue has cogently argued, Cather's persistent (if veiled) desire to emulate her mother's Southern aristocratic demeanor permeates her writings. Yongue notes elements of Virginia Cather, Mary Boak Cather, and Willa Cather herself in the character of Marian Forrester (44-45). Like many writers in the Arthurian tradition (from the *Gawain*-poet to Alfred Lord Tennyson), Cather exhibits a strain of cultural conservatism in her work. Observing that in some ways Cather was "deeply conservative" (226), Sharon O'Brien links Cather's growing respect for the traditional, aristocratic lady as "[a] figure [who] resembled her own mother" (226). Thus, to the extent that *A Lost Lady* can be read as an Arthurian novel, it can also be viewed as a Southern one, in sensibility if not in setting.

Viewing Cather's work through the lens of the Arthurian tradition provides a fuller picture of her artistic aims and accomplishments. Unlike in mythological texts which simply substitute contemporary characters and settings for earlier ones, *A Lost Lady* provides more than a mere updating of the myth. Rather, Cather's work is mythographic, sharing significant elements with those of her medieval predecessors in genre, tone, structure, imagery, characterization, and theme — while achieving a style and a message completely her own. In effect, by reviving the Arthurian tradition in her writing, Cather accomplishes the feat she attributes to Annie Field's house, namely the ability to create "a place where the past lived on — where it was protected and cherished, had sanctuary from the noisy push of the present" (NUF 61). And since her

novel is connected to her own Southern past, she effectively vivifies and honors that part of herself along with the past of the Arthurian legend. She also benefits from the insight that prompts her to comment about Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* that "one of the advantages of making a new story out of an old one which is a very part of the readers' consciousness . . . [is that] the course of destiny is already known and fixed for us What we most love is not bizarre invention, but to have the old story brought home to us closer than ever before, enriched by all that the right man could draw from it and, by sympathetic insight, put into it" (NUF 119). By telling the familiar tale of the old pioneer left behind by progress, the beautiful young wife who goes astray, and the coming of age of an idealistic young man in a world that seems to have lost its ideals, Cather creates a novel in which even its disillusioned protagonist can find what Joseph Urgo terms "mythic significance" (78).

Cather's relationship to the medieval/romantic tradition throughout her intellectual and professional development significantly informs the way she uses it in *A Lost Lady*. Sharon O'Brien notes that the young Cather enjoyed reading romantic/heroic tales, while the journalist of the 1890s expressed admiration for the adventure-romances of the nineteenth century (152). Even then, the genre was on its way out, unable realistically to keep alive the belief in individual power in the face of a fast-paced industrialized, urbanized, materialistic, capitalistic world. *A Lost Lady*, the novel most intimately bound up with Cather's personal world breaking in two, provides a trenchant exploration of the search for heroism and stability in an increasingly disturbing and baffling world. Joseph Urgo hypothesizes that "*A Lost Lady* might have been an epic, a historical novel of a thousand pages, had Cather been a writer with the sensibilities of Tolstoy or Dickens" (74-5), but Cather had Southern and romantic roots, and *A Lost Lady* contains distinct elements of a Southern romance. While the epic tells the audience what it already knows, the romance portrays the testing of a hero who — like the author, in this case — grows and changes over time.

It would be reductive to try to assert exact, one-to-one correspondences between specific Catherian and Arthurian characters and plots, particularly because no Cather character of any depth fits neatly into a discrete category and no Cather plot is as simple as it might seem. It is perhaps more interesting and informative to examine how Cather blends and transforms the traits and experiences of traditional Arthurian figures in her novel about modern Americans. Marian Forrester, characterized by Merrill Skaggs as "the 'maid Marian' of a band of railroad magnates and robber barons" (50), also plays Guinevere, gracious and beautiful hostess of her regal husband's idyllic castle. Various aspects of the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle are also manifest in *A Lost Lady*. Marian's adulterous entanglement with the virile Frank Ellinger (and her later indiscretions with Ivy Peters, the walking phallic

symbol) suggests the adulterous relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot, while Niel's growing realization that his affection for Marian actually constituted a displaced affection for her husband echoes a homo-emotional bond between Lancelot and Arthur.³ Further, Ivy's evident pleasure in the decline of the Captain himself and his persistent disrespect for the world the Captain built suggest a parallel with Mordred, Arthur's traitorous son. Although not the Captain's biological child, Ivy supplants him physically (buying his property), sexually (sleeping with his wife), and spiritually (replacing his sense of honor with materialism and a Machiavellian attitude toward advancement). Ivy usurps the Captain's figurative throne, and his sexual conquest of Marian represents an achievement that Mordred strives for, if never attains, with Guinevere.

In addition to providing recognizable Arthurian situations, *A Lost Lady* utilizes several of the modular elements integral to the Grail Myth (as outlined and explained in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*). If not a complete waste land, Sweet Water has already passed its peak and begun its descent into greyness by the time Niel comes of age, and the fortunes of the Forresters parallel this downward shift: "the town of Sweet Water was changing. Its future no longer looked bright The Forresters now had fewer visitors" (LL 24). Furthermore, Captain Forrester shares important traits with the Fisher King (e.g. illness, old age, and impotence), while Niel appears as the innocent, young quester (a Gawain or a Percival). Both Gawain and Percival traditionally appear as healer-figures, and Niel, we note, postpones his career to nurse the Captain. If Niel is the White Knight of the novel, Ivy Peters emerges early on as a force of darkness. Niel's opposite in temperament and personality, Ivy represents the type of unscrupulous leader who will rule the wasted land in a more ruthless age to come. Marian, at times Grail Maiden and at times temptress, helps young knights (particularly Niel, but later the other young men of Sweet Water, as well) to grow into knowledge and adulthood, providing "a civilized house to come to, and a woman to give . . . a few hints" (LL 133).

This house, the secluded "Forrester place, as every one called it" (LL 4), lies "nearly a mile east of town" (LL 4) and requires visitors to cross two creeks in order to reach it. It has a magical aura about it, an ordinary house transformed into a Grail Castle by "the people who lived there [who] made it seem much larger and finer than it was" (LL 4). Framed by ritual and tinged with secrecy, the captain's dinner parties seem analogous to the Solemn Feasts of the Grail Castle. Each time Captain Forrester pronounces "'Happy Days!' . . . with such gravity and high courtesy[,] it seemed a solemn moment, seemed to knock at the door of Fate; behind which all days, happy and otherwise, were hidden" (LL 41). The Forresters have no Mysterious Feeding Vessel, though "nobody could lay bare the bones of a brace of duck or

a twenty-pound turkey more deftly" (LL 38) than the captain.

In the face of such pomp and circumstance, Niel feels betrayed by Marian's sexual indiscretions. Joseph Urgo suggests that "the captain confirms Niel's need to believe in the heroic significance of his origins, but the captain's wife is an affront to it" (76). Niel wants Marian as an idealistic embodiment of an unchanging tradition, but she refuses to relegate herself to the pedestal/prison Niel proposes. As Merrill Skaggs explains, "[Marian is] a lady who chooses consciously to be a sex object" (48). Although Marian's behavior causes Niel no small amount of consternation and disillusionment, Marian nevertheless fulfills her role as Grail Maiden. The sometimes painful questions she elicits from him paradoxically facilitate his attainment of maturity, eventually leading him to the object of his quest: "Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said . . . was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? Was that their secret?" (LL 72); "Where did she put [her exquisiteness] away?" (LL 84). These and similar attempts to find absolute explanations for human behavior ultimately give way to what Susan Rosowski calls "an acknowledgment of the truth of his subjective experience" (121). Marian helps Niel to find himself.

In spite of its resonance in Christian legend, the Grail Myth is essentially a fertility myth. Its central theme of rejuvenation — an old king (whose infirmities are bound up with the woes of the wasted land) who must die and be replaced by a younger, more vigorous one — is intimately bound up with the cycles of nature. This theme permeates Cather's novel, while images of fertility recur as framing patterns. "Incremental repetition" of tree and flower imagery, for example, allows the reader to experience the symbolic effect of Mrs. Forrester across the novel (Rosowski 122-124). Along similar lines, water acts as an important indicator of the health of the land and its inhabitants. The beautiful stream Captain Forrester chooses to leave intact near his house has a life-giving or nourishing quality; it represents the triumph of aesthetic "fanc[y]" (LL 5) over business savvy. The flooding of these waters brings Niel to a clearer understanding of Marian, consistent with the insight brought by the Grail Myth's freeing of the waters. Finally, the absence of water (when Ivy drains the marsh) announces the advent of a spiritual waste land. Ivy does not act irrationally: "any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields" (LL 5). He does, however, act maliciously. A desire to hurt the captain and undermine his values motivates Ivy at least as much as good agricultural sense. Thus, by appropriating and utilizing fertile land, Ivy actually perpetrates a destruction of life.

The deceptively simple *A Lost Lady* shares its status as Grail Myth, romance, realistic narrative and fairy tale with *SGGK*, the highly sophisticated poem

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many consider the finest romance in the English language. Structurally, both works begin as a story within a story and incorporate characters who are means as opposed to ends. The narrator of *SGGK* does not begin his story proper until the third stanza, while Cather's narrator starts the story of Niel and the Forresters in the second chapter. Furthermore, the *Gawain*-poet tells Gawain's story not primarily to glorify the man himself, but to explore deeper questions about the nature of chivalry, courage and truth. By the end of the poem, we discover that even the Green Knight is more of a pawn than an autonomous character "Morgan the Fay . . . is the presiding genius of the story . . . [and] the Green Knight is in many ways simply her tool" (Wilhelm 157). By the same token, Cather uses the character of Niel as a peephole by which she can recreate the experience of a Marian Forrester (Rosowski 115). And Marian's significance does not lie chiefly in her status as a character. Rather, as Susan Rosowski explains, "[Cather] wrote about the experience of the thing and not the thing itself, the effect of Mrs. Forrester and not the character" (116). Also on a structural level, both works feature a movement from individual specificity to group feeling. The final act in *SGGK* shows the other members of the Round Table adopting Gawain's green sash as a group symbol, while *A Lost Lady* closes with Niel's discovery that his peers (as represented by Ed Elliot) shared his admiration for Marian Forrester.

Looking at the authors' attitude toward their material, the backward-looking, nostalgic tone that characterizes Cather's opening paragraphs echoes the *Gawain*-poet's conservative rearward glance at the ideals of Camelot. Indeed, Cather paints Sweet Water as a kind of fallen Camelot, now just "one of those grey towns" (LL 3), but once home to the most "pleasant house" around and magical "people who . . . made it seem much larger and finer than it was" (LL 4). The critique inherent in both works suggests the tragic portrait of a dream unfulfilled, a world in which symbolic ideals fall short and a utopia crumbles because of flaws inherent in its design: Niel realizes that "the Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defense, who could conquer but could not hold" (LL 89). In Sweet Water, as in Camelot, larger-than-life characters prove all too fallible, while the epic dichotomies of good and evil blend in a romantic depiction of humanity. The *Gawain*-poet sets Gawain up as perfect — chivalrous, humble, trustworthy, honest — in order to show his flaws, his inability to uphold those impossibly high standards. In Merrill Skaggs' reading, Cather asks "what happens to the perfect Forresters after their dreams disintegrate? What happens to Marian Forrester after her world breaks in two — in the telling, at least, in 1922 or

thereabout" (61). In other words, what happens when the Captain becomes old, flabby, and disabled and his wife no longer bothers to keep up appearances? What happens after Camelot disintegrates, after the "happily ever after" of the fairy tale? Cather also explores the effect on Niel when his construction of Marian as perfect comes into contact with adult realities. Marian does not meet Niel's idealistic criterion, yet her story (like Gawain's) has a happy ending: "[she] fell dramatically, publicly, privately, terribly, and repeatedly, and still rose to dance again" (Skaggs 61).

Common motifs — the rise of the individual, the deflation of the idea of monarchy, and the portrayal of the hollowness of a chivalry already on the wane — further suggest that the respective time periods of the *Gawain*-poet and Cather required similar cultural work. In the realm of genre, both the medieval poem and the novel arguably fall into the category of *bildungsroman* or *bildungsromance*; both tell of a young man's coming of age. At the same time, both contain elements of the subversive "anti-romance," expressing admiration for a high style of life while questioning the society's fundamental values. Neither the *Gawain*-poet nor Cather writes a Horatio Alger story offering an unqualified endorsement of the system and those who adhere to it. Furthermore, both authors use a realistic mode, but include magical elements (e.g. the Green Knight's ability to regenerate his hacked head and Gawain's successful search for the Green Chapel, along with Captain Forrester's flowers that grow year-round and Marian's "power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself" [LL 147]). In both cases, the hero fares poorly when placed in a realistic setting and forced to accommodate stripped-down, unromanticized facts of life. Gawain fails to keep his word by truthfully relaying each day's activities to the Green Knight, and Niel cannot maintain his relationship with the Forresters in the way that he wishes. Ultimately, however, Gawain and Niel persevere through difficulties, and their respective journeys prove rewarding.

The quest and the test figure prominently in both structure and thematic development in the two works, as does the tension between truth and illusion. In both, the male knight embarks on a quest and finds a part of himself, developing and changing in the course of the story. In Jungian terms, this is a quest of libido (the desiring self) for a deliverance from a reality that simultaneously contains that reality. The knight learns about women and about the female side of himself (anima), and the text records the maturation of the desiring individual self. This fall into self-awareness, epiphany, and awakening occurs as part of the hero's quest to discover his manhood, but the initiation is intellectual rather than sexual. Gawain's trial period occurs when he leaves the safe, familiar ground of Camelot and Arthur's court to spend a full year wandering through inhospitable lands in search of the Green Chapel. His experiences in the Green Knight's house ensure that an older, wiser, and chastised Gawain returns to Arthur. *A Lost Lady* records Niel's

teenage and young adult years in Sweet Water, from our introduction to the "handsome boy of twelve" (LL 8) to his college-bound departure from the Forrester place "for the last time" (LL 145). Within this period, Niel comes to know the Forresters in all their fallible humanity, through prosperous seasons and seasons of hardship. He learns more, perhaps, than he really wanted to know about these heroes of his boyhood, and he judges Marian harshly for not living up to his naive conceptions. Niel's journey does not properly conclude until he spends years living elsewhere and is finally able to "think of [Marian] without chagrin" (LL 146). Physical and emotional distance from Sweet Water gives Niel the necessary psychological maturity to permit a recoding of his past experiences with greater insight and honesty: "eventually, after [Marian] had drifted out of his ken, when he did not know if Daniel Forrester's widow were living or dead, Daniel Forrester's wife returned to him, a bright, impersonal memory" (LL 146-7). For both Gawain and Niel, the hardships of the test eventually yield up the object of the quest.

And yet the male quester's coming of age is only one aspect of these texts. Both Cather and the *Gawain-poet* are equally concerned with more broadly-based cultural critique. For example, both works show the importance of saving face within a shame-oriented society. Gawain bases his behavior with the Green Knight and his wife on the chivalric code (as opposed to any self-generated or internalized moral code), while Niel is deeply concerned with keeping up appearances — from the cleanliness of his father's house, to the orderliness of his uncle's office, to the conduct of the Captain's wife. Courtly love and life-giving sexual energy (along with their antitheses, the Madonna/whore dichotomy and the *femme fatale*) permeate both texts, suggesting a common central tension between Nature and Civilization. Along these lines, the greenery of *SGGK*, itself suggestive of fertility, finds varied expression in both Captain Forrester ("an old tree walking" [LL 97]) and "Poison Ivy" (LL 13) Peters. James Wilhelm argues that "the dominant symbol of the green sash [in *SGGK*] must be viewed as a token of Gawain's humble acceptance of his all-too-human flaw of wanting to survive at any price" (157). Arguably, this is precisely Marian's damning feature in Niel's eyes: "It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself . . . and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms" (LL 145). Like Gawain, Niel tries to avoid admitting his mistakes, retreating to misogyny in the face of his own shortcomings.

The male protagonists might blame their failings on easy targets, but the authors of these works seem to want their readers to realize more than these characters do. The *Gawain-poet* establishes the requisite distance between himself and his subject matter to allow for laughter and critical analysis. In a similar manner, the gap between Cather's narrator and her

protagonist creates an ironic commentary on the idealistic, Arthurian world view Niel espouses; Niel's judgments are not Cather's own. Joseph Urgo drives this point home by explaining that "Niel is being battered around by Cather, who applies to his naivete the sharp instruments of ideological vivisection" (80). Thus the so-called heroes of both works do not (and in fact, cannot) have our unmitigated admiration. In Cather's case, an ironic tone also creates a gendered critique. Through Niel, a would-be Lancelot and a chastened Gawain, Cather shows the limitations of male constructions of femininity. Marian refuses to fit Niel's mold, and it is Niel who receives the author's (and ostensibly the audience's) condemnation. Since the Arthurian hero is typically male and most of the authors who have historically made use of the myth have been male as well, it would seem that Cather's depiction of Niel's utter inability to comprehend the richness of a Marian Forrester constitutes an important (and perhaps unprecedented) adaptation of this centuries-old legend.

The Arthurian tradition exists as an unbroken literary chain dating from 600 C.E. and dispersing itself to every place where the English language has been introduced. These myths function as a repository for values and appeal to certain symbolic Jungian archetypes embedded in Western culture. Hence, every age has arguably embodied its deepest concerns in the Arthurian myth. *A Lost Lady* — Cather's "mid-life crisis" novel — combines the half-nostalgic, half-critical backward glance of a romance like *SGGK* with a resolute acceptance of a linear progression as relentless as the trains that carry her characters across the country and back to Sweet Water again. Locating herself firmly within the Arthurian tradition (and displaying her own Southern foundations), Cather both echoes and transforms the work of her predecessors, creating a novel with specific and transcendent relevance.

Cather's use of Arthurian elements shows an intimate knowledge of the tradition, and the similarities between her novels and the medieval romance is not accidental. Viewing Cather's work through this lens is an interesting exercise, but it is also a critical imperative if we wish to more fully appreciate the depth of her intentions and the magnitude of her accomplishments.

NOTES

¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is unique but in many ways typical of the medieval romance in theme, characterization, and style. Thus, without attempting to prove a definitive line of influence, we can say that *SGGK* can serve to mirror certain important romance elements in *A Lost Lady*.

² Susan Rosowski subtitles her chapter on *One of Ours*, "An American Arthurian Legend" (*The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*). Both Susan Rosowski and Merrill Skaggs (*After the World Broke in Two: the Later Novels of Willa Cather*) describe Cather's use of romanticism and courtly love in their discussions of *A Lost Lady*.

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³ Although the homo-emotional bond between Arthur and Lancelot might not be universally acknowledged, it is not unusual for the notion of a "love triangle" to be applied in every direction. Writers such as T. H. White find a strong Arthur-Lancelot relationship implicit in Malory. In his portrayal, the boy Lancelot "think[s] of King Arthur with all his might. He was in love with him" (315). Once Lancelot has begun his adulterous relationship with the queen he nevertheless asserts, "He was my first friend, and I love him" (541).

⁴ Weston identifies these elements as the Waste Land, the Fisher King, the Hidden Castle with Solemn Feast, the Mysterious Feeding Vessel, and the Bleeding Lance and Cup.

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Elsa Nettels of The College of William and Mary will be compiling the annual survey of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton scholarship for the next volume of *American Literary Scholarship*. If you have publications that should be included in her survey, please send copies to Professor Nettels at 211 Indian Springs Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185.

This is the first in a series of brief reflections on the state of Cather studies. We hope it encourages more. Let us hear from you.

— The Editors

Against Allegory: Re-imagining Cather's Modernism

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"I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. I invoke Thoreau's phrase so as to acknowledge the suggestive rather than prescriptive quality of this brief essay. Perhaps in the mild polemic that follows I am simply promoting what interests me at the expense of what engages others who write about Cather's fiction. Still, I think there is a significant and specifiable gap, no less evident in emerging work on Cather than in more traditional criticism, between the way her fiction behaves and the way Cather scholarship has imagined and described that behavior. Though this critical tradition has been and continues to be a rich and informative enterprise, I think some basic, descriptive work remains undone. We have, strangely for a scholarly community apt to apologize for being old fashioned, seen and said very little about the aesthetic experience the books deliver: what's distinctively beautiful, moving, surprising in the experience of reading that Cather's fiction creates. And because we have failed to attend sufficiently to that *aesthetic* experience, we have not articulated what is striking and historically significant about her *intellectual* enterprise.¹ I hope, in what follows, to sketch out a way of thinking about Cather's modernism — about, that is, the relation between her artistic practice and her cultural moment — that might make it possible to understand her enterprise in a different and, I think, more accurate way. I will begin by describing what I take to be a central problem with prevailing approaches to Cather's work; then I will offer a solution to it.

Wallace Stevens, in a letter to a friend, remarked of Cather that "we have nothing better than she is. She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality" (quoted in Woodress, 487). What is that "quality"? For me, the central and continually surprising experience of reading Cather is a kind of witnessing: one is present, through the acts of investment and identification reading creates, at moments of meaning's emergence: a story, an experience of the landscape, a character's acts of affirmation or doubt. While such moments may well take place at points of crisis in a character's life, their significance and interest to us is notably unbound by their location in an overarching narrative. Rather, Cather's fiction

tends both to depict and to yield not conclusions about experience but stances toward it, meaning-ways, acts of valuing. Another way to say this: Cather's work is distinguished in part by what, as readers practiced in the interpretation of more intensely thematic fiction, we feel it to *refrain* from, by what it neglects to espouse — the moral plot line the dots of which it fails to connect, the form of judgment we come to feel as not worth applying.

Insofar as this description of the experience of reading her fiction strikes practiced readers of Cather and Cather criticism as both accurate and unusual, it points to the scholarly habit I think we should break: we have produced an allegorical criticism of an essentially anti-allegorical writer; we have insisted upon thematic readings of a writer who aspires to the creation of meanings without themes. Let me provide some instances, drawn from different approaches to the fiction, of what I mean.

Analyses of Cather's characters have largely been derived from the identity allegories borrowed from the conventions of Victorian fiction or sponsored by psychoanalysis. We thus find ourselves invited to think that the central question of *My Ántonia* is whether or not Jim Burden matures successfully, or to construe the key issue of *The Professor's House* as St. Peter's narcissism. Such allegorical treatments of Cather's characters ask us to exercise precisely the kind of narrowed-down judgments the books themselves are engaged in making obsolete. And they obscure what may be the most distinctive quality of Cather's characterization: the opportunities for untrammelled interestedness created for the reader by her tendency to present character as a particular strategy of response or tactic of expression rather than a teleology.

It perhaps goes without saying that geographical approaches to the fiction operate allegorically; indeed, the location of a submerged or displaced narrative of origin is their very point, whether the scholar is, as in the old days, locating the real-life sources of characters or incidents in a text, or tracking — as translated into spatial description, plot logic, or characterization — the oblique articulation of a desire that dare not speak its name.² Or think of another recent strain in Cather criticism: the already tedious calculation of Cather's implication in/resistance to the many noxious, hierarchical social narratives espoused within early twentieth-century American culture. This approach to Cather's work, too, has an allegorical quality, as it measures her plots and characters, whether admiringly or accusingly, against an earnest, anachronistic narrative of correct thought and righteous feeling. I do not mean to suggest — ridiculously — that such work be abandoned, but to emphasize how frequently, across a range of critical approaches, the "interesting" is located outside or "beneath" the experience of reading.

My third instance of this allegorizing habit, perhaps more surprising given the realist assumptions that would seem to underpin it, is the contextualizing or "historical" criticism now emerging as a powerful

approach to Cather's fiction. The best of the work I am thinking of — excellent recent books by Joseph Uργο and Guy Reynolds, Walter Benn Michaels' stunning and disturbing essays on Cather and the history of cultural identity, the exciting work one glimpses emerging from recent dissertations — is often extraordinarily interesting, but, despite its grounding in historical process, no less allegorical than the approaches it is replacing. Here history supplies the level of abstract truth — "migratory consciousness," the "incorporation of America," say — to which characters and actions can only correspond. In some of these accounts — not the best of them — reading Cather comes to seem a little like reading Spenser, except the shields are emblazoned with a more up-to-date heraldry: "commodity fetishism," or "orientalism," or "imperialism" instead of the Protestantism's Red Cross. It seems symptomatic to me that I often find myself, at the end of a chapter or essay, grateful to have learned so much about American culture but quite detached from the book under discussion. This newer work seems nearly to erase aesthetic experience from its definition of the historically interesting. No less than the other interpretive strategies I have mentioned, this picture of Cather's fiction leaves us without a compelling sense of why — at a given historical moment, for I take emotions to be no less historically shaped than other elements of ideology — one might be *moved* to write such works, or be *moved* by reading them.

I will now suggest what seems to me a productive direction or goal for a criticism interested in articulating both the distinctive "quality" of Cather's art and providing a historically cogent account of what gave — and gives — that art its power. My suggestion is quite simple: it might be useful to find a way to contextualize Cather's fiction that makes the experience of reading the work an object of study, that does not simply ask what elements of the text might reflect or correspond to this or that development in early twentieth-century history. Rather than re-allegorizing Cather's fiction, we might consider the historical meaning of the very resistance to allegory one experiences within her books. That is, we might ask what is revealing about her tendency to render meaning as local rather than teleological, to foreground the way a character takes in experience, or to interrogate the conditions through which meaning is produced. We might ask, I'm suggesting, how the distinctive ways that Cather's texts distribute feeling and interest might be historically important.

I am not proposing, then, that we discover Cather as a priestess of high modernism, setting aesthetic experience off in some high-rent district beyond history, but that we imagine the enterprise of "historicalizing" or "contextualizing" somewhat differently. Here, finally, is a sketch of one way this might be done. In an indispensable essay, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," the intellectual historian Daniel Joseph Singal argues that, though some of its key

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AGAINST ALLEGORY

(Continued)

elements are indeed manifest in high art experimentation, American modernism is best understood as a broadly based "culture," shaped by its rejection or revision of the American Victorian culture that preceded it. For Singal, the production of absolute and morally charged dichotomies — paradigmatically, the distinction between the civilized and the savage — is the hallmark of this Victorian cultural dispensation, and an emergent modernist culture is characterized, in ways that range from cabaret dancing to William James's philosophy, by the breaking down and reintegration of such oppositions. Singal identifies as the most powerful expression of this new culture not "The Waste Land" but Franz Boaz's new anthropology, with its enormously influential deconstruction of the civilized/savage dichotomy (and its attendant attack on the narrative of racial superiority attached to that dichotomy). Moreover, with its identification of the way cultures make meanings as an object of study, this anthropological modernism also offers an exhilarating expansion — think of the stunning range of Cather's fictional subjects — of the realm of the "interesting."

Now, one might modify Singal's analysis slightly and propose that American Victorian culture was not only a dichotomizing culture but a hyper-thematic and resolutely allegorical one — that its moralizing dichotomies and disciplinary ethos found expression in a set of highly cathected plots, both public and private: the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race; the achievement of self-control. Such a view of the affective and intellectual history of the earlier twentieth century might, in turn, suggest a way to describe the historical force of Cather's fiction that makes room for the qualities of feeling and energy I have been invoking — that indeed sees in those very qualities Cather's intense participation in modernism's cultural renovation. *My Ántonia*, with its attachment to storytelling and its detachment from authorized maturity, could thus be seen as demonstrating the possibility that a life's intensest meanings might swing free of the cautionary allegories we imagine to provide them. Novels like *Shadows on the Rock* or *Death Comes for the Archbishop* would emerge as more anthropological than historical, offering — like field work — access to the meanings of different cultures (and by comparison, demystifying one's own); or we might observe that they provoke quite stunning acts of imaginative identification; think how curious it is to find oneself — as a secular, twentieth-century reader — moved by Cécile's house-keeping or Bishop Latour's death. *The Professor's House* could look like a characteristically modernist revision of Victorian moral allegory, representing not the working out of a particular ethical truth, or scenario of character development, or political conflict — but depicting (with ethical, psychological, or political meanings that might be quite profound) the conditions under which, in a particular place and time and by

particularly situated and individuated people, meanings were found or lost.

Seen in this way, the cultural work and the affective force of Cather's fiction would seem to be allied, not mutually irrelevant. Her work is modernist not because it figures forth or mirrors particular historical developments — though of course it refers to them — but because it gives us new ways to feel, new subjects of interest, new forms of attention: because it depicts and constructs for us forms of responsiveness distinctly different from those — vigilantly interpretive, resolutely judgmental, grandly narrative — sponsored by Victorian fiction. In Cather's novels and stories, then, we might continue to read the allegory of a history we already know — or we might begin to know an affective history most fully accessible as fiction.

ENDNOTES

¹ In emphasizing the aesthetic dimension of Cather's modernism, I am following in the footsteps of an essay I greatly admire, Phyllis Rose's "Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather." My account of Cather's fiction, however, is quite different from hers.

² Scholars working from the perspective of queer theory have produced recent essays that illustrate this allegorical mode of criticism with particular brilliance and intensity: note the attention to the hidden life of names in the essays by Sedgwick, Butler, and Goldberg.

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— Photo by J. Murphy

Willa Cather's New York: The Drew University Colloquium

Amy Ahearn, University of Nebraska
John Jacobs, Shenandoah University

Some 120 participants in the 1998 Willa Cather Colloquium explored the history and the culture of Willa Cather's New York during a week-long conference, June 20 through June 27, at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, thirty miles from Manhattan. Conference Moderator and Drew University Professor of Humanities Merrill Maguire Skaggs opened the Colloquium by acknowledging the work of Angela Conrad and Karen Marquis, both graduate students at Drew. Conrad and Marquis envisioned this conference two years ago and through persistent efforts and diligent labor assured its success.

According to Conrad and Marquis, they especially wanted to focus on New York City as an important, though sometimes overlooked, stimulus to Cather's writing. Additionally, they wanted to share their enthusiasm for Drew's small but effective graduate English program, its faculty and students.

On Saturday, June 20, early comers were treated to a picnic courtesy of Drew University. Sunday's sessions (June 21) began with a plenary shared by Eliot Graff and Renee Volak. In "Post-Cather Manhattan: An Aria for the New York Area," Graff provided a succinct "how to" guide for those uninitiated to New York City. Graff surveyed transportation, restaurants, libraries, museum exhibits, tourist attractions, and survival strategies. His aria set the tone for the conference, as participants had the opportunity to visit New York four times during the week. While Graff focused on the current culture of New York, Renee Volak drew upon the city's rich cultural history for her presentation, "Opera in Cather's New York." A professional soprano, Volak explained how opera developed in the United States, specifically in New York at the turn of the century. Her presentation explored the economic, class, and national issues entwined in the development of the Metropolitan Opera House, the location for the careers of Lillian Nordica, Lilli Lehmann, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, and Olive Fremstad, singers Cather admired and reviewed in her articles. Volak ended by playing a sample of Fremstad's singing, allowing participants to hear the voice that inspired Cather's creation of Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*.

In the second plenary session. Jo Ann Middleton and Joseph Urgo connected Cather's writing and life to her interests in medicine and political journalism, respectively. In "Cather and Modern Medicine," Middleton asserted that Cather's early love for medicine was not a mere phase she outgrew but the beginning of a lifelong interest in modern medical practices. Cather equated doctors with opera singers and writers — each of whom has, as she said, the remarkable ability to enter the skin of another person. Drawing from her own work within the medical humanities, Middleton noted that doctors appreciate the accuracy with which Cather depicts medical caregivers and their patients. Her memorable characters include Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*, the apothecary Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock*, Dr. Burleigh in "Neighbour Rosicky," and Rachel Blake, a character drawn from her grandmother-nurse, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In "Willa Cather's Political Apprenticeship at *McClure's Magazine*," Joseph Urgo examined the modern aesthetic of the monthly journal that Cather edited between 1906 and 1911. Urgo explained the ways in which Cather's short stories and poems published in this magazine can be read in conjunction with the overtly political articles appearing in the same issues. Focusing on "Alexander's Masquerade" in particular, he described how this story resonates with the themes found in another article: "The Passing of a Great Railroad Dynasty." This article details the economic demise of the Gould family, in the end blaming the moral character flaws of the Goulds for the collapse of their vast railway. Noting that the story of the Goulds parallels the story of Bartley Alexander,

(Continued on page 48)



Catherites at the Metropolitan Museum of Art viewed one of Saint-Gaudens's models for the *Diana on the old Madison Square Garden*.

— Photo by T. Bintrim

CATHER'S NEW YORK

(Continued)

Urgo concluded that Cather's writing during her *McClure's* period was deeply engaged in the political and social agenda of the magazine.

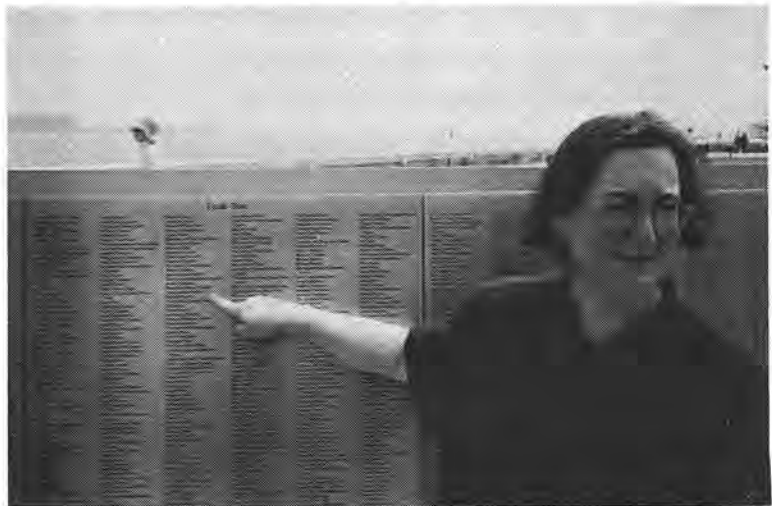
In the first of a series of extra-campus events, participants ventured out of the lecture hall and into the concert hall Sunday evening, taking in the premiere of "Jim Burden's Memory Book," a musical and dramatic arrangement by David W. Conrad performed at the beautiful home of the Joanne Morrissey family.

The next morning (Monday, June 22), conferees ventured out again, this time for a day in Greenwich Village. Participants took in Cather-related points of interest during a walking tour developed by Isabella Caruso. The tour culminated in a plenary session held at Grace Church, during which John J. Murphy and Cynthia Griffin Wolff spoke on the cultural and artistic landscape of New York during Cather's years in the city. In the presentation "From Cornfield to Apple Orchard: Why Willa Cather Stayed in New York," Murphy recounted the artistic and intellectual climate which permeated the city in the early part of this century. New York acted

as a magnet, drawing dramatic and operatic performers and conductors of international reputation, as well as a younger generation of journalist-writers and visual artists. Murphy spoke specifically about the art housed in the Metropolitan Museum during Cather's career and in Cather's favorite church, the Church of the Ascension, which still displays the stained glass windows of John La Farge and the relief sculpture of Augustus Saint Gaudens, suggesting connections to Cather's fiction. In "Moral Vision and the Naked Lady," Cynthia Griffin Wolff discussed Cather's writing in relationship to the French avant-garde movement that made its debut in New York in the Armory Show of 1913. With references to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Wolff explained how the basic tenets of Cubism translate into a written medium. Cubists questioned the fraud of an objectively "realistic" perspective which depicts subjects as static, unchanging objects. So, too, does Cather's writing disrupt the romantic illusion of fixed perspectives. As Wolff observed, readers often like to establish a fixed view of Myra Henshawe and Sapphira Colbert, thereby eliminating the moral ambiguity that embodies each character. Yet Cather's writing frustrates such static, reductive readings.

Participants enjoyed a tour of Grace Church following the plenary session. After returning to Drew campus, they were invited to an informal evening session in which Susan Rosowski, Ann Romines, John Murphy, Sharon O'Brien, Marilee Lindemann, and Janet Sharistanian spoke about their experiences editing Cather's work.

Tuesday morning's plenary session (June 23) featured Laura Winters and Sharon O'Brien, whose presentations focused upon issues of exclusion and deviancy. In "Outside the Door: Exclusion as Opportunity for Adventure in the Fiction of Willa Cather,"



Cather Board member Nancy Picchi points out Anna Sadilek Pavelka's name on the memorial at Ellis Island.

— Photo by J. Murphy

Winters provided a postmodernist reading of Cather's writing. Drawing from contemporary works including Christopher Coe's *Such Times*, David Leavitt's *The*

Page Turner, Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, and Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Winters examined the dual nature of exclusion: characters positioned outside of the center may be impoverished; at the same time, their exclusion can be filled with hope and possibility as they work to create an alternative paradise. Claude Wheeler, she said, finds illumination only after he is locked out of his nuptial berth, and Godfrey St. Peter finds escape through his lake and his attic study; these are their locations for power and freedom. Sharon O'Brien continued the theme of exclusion in "Willa Cather: Writing the Later Life," a presentation which addressed psychological depression in Cather's writing and life. Drawing from her personal experiences with depression, O'Brien discussed the psychological state of Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*. St. Peter at age fifty-two has already achieved his success; the next movement of his life, he realizes, is toward death. O'Brien noted that Cather avoids the typically American recovery narrative in the professor's story. Instead, Cather allows St. Peter to live with his depression, indicating that the professor would live without delight and without passion, but that he would live nonetheless.

The second plenary session on Tuesday included Philip Gerber and Merrill Maguire Skaggs, who spoke about Cather's contemporaries. In "Crossing the Missouri," Philip Gerber spoke of Cather's second crossing of the Missouri; not her move to Nebraska but her move east to Pittsburgh and then to New York. Cather's eastern movement was not unique: Cather and her contemporary Theodore Dreiser were members of a young generation of journalists who moved to New York to establish writing careers. As were many members of their generation, Cather and Dreiser were influenced by the modern scientific movement as well as by the naturalistic school of writing. It is not surprising that the themes of their fiction overlap, said Gerber, especially in their fictional autobiographies *The Song of the Lark* and *The Genius*, both published in 1915. Merrill Maguire Skaggs addressed a wider circle of Cather's contemporaries in "The Early Cather Years and the Road to Cos Cob." Skaggs's research has uncovered Cather's connection to the Cos Cob artist colony. Having discovered a postcard written by Cather to the Cos Cob residents as well as a drawing from the colony which resembles Cather, Skaggs speculated as to the writer's involvement with this artistic and intellectual circle. Noting that *McClure's Magazine* writers frequented Cos Cob in the 1890s and early 1900s, Skaggs suggested that Cather's contacts with these writers may have helped her become "noticed" by S. S. McClure and eventually hired to the magazine's staff. The Cos Cob colony establishes a background for Cather's early poetry and short story writing.



Karen and Bruce Baker share an enthusiastic moment with Father Steve Ryan in New York Harbor.

— Photo by J. Murphy

Tuesday's sessions ended with an opportunity for participants to enjoy the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival's performance of *Cyrano De Bergerac*.

While Cather gatherings always produce light, it is becoming almost equally predictable that they will produce heat. Quebec, Winchester and now New York all seem to swelter in 90+ degree weather when Catherites gather. But the heat did not dull enthusiasm for a visit to Liberty State Park (New Jersey) on Ellis Island, Wednesday, June 24. Conferees explored the magnificently restored processing center and numerous displays of photographs and artifacts that immigrants brought with them. A film and an interpretive tour guided by a National Park Service Ranger added details and perspectives on the most massive of human migrations through Ellis Island in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After lunch on Ellis Island, conferees were transported to Manhattan, variously to explore world-famous museums, shops, and architectural landmarks.

Thursday's (June 25's) plenary session was shared by Susan Rosowski and Ann Romines. In "Thea Kronborg, a Distinguished Provincial in New York; or Willa Cather's Cultural Geography of Humor," Rosowski extended her Bergsonian analysis of Cather's comedy — applied to *O Pioneers!* at the Winchester Seminar — to *Song of the Lark*. Rosowski examined the roles of comic laughter as a sign of humiliation when directed at social outcasts, such as the vengeful tramp, or as an expression of élan — the vital life force — when generated by beloved social misfits, such as Tillie Kronborg. Ultimately, *Song of the Lark* is about comedy, not merely the comedic, insofar as Thea realizes her élan in the regenerative form of her art, her music. Ann Romines' presentation on "Sapphira and the City" explored the thematic tensions created by allusions to city life in Cather's critique of antebellum pastoral in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Sapphira rejects city life and its ethos but is unable

(Continued on page 50)

CATHER'S NEW YORK (Continued)

to realize the pastoral ideal on her Back Creek property. Rachel — a fictionalization of Cather's Grandmother Rachel Boak — reached maturity as a wife, mother and widow in Washington. Rachel transported the values of her city experience to Back Creek, as well as a sense of the potential for tragedy inherent in city life. Finally, Nancy flees Back Creek a frightened innocent and returns some twenty-five years later a self-possessed sophisticate — the embodiment of the best possibilities of city life. Thus, the city, with all of its perils and promises, is always in the background of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, if not always in the forefront of the narrative.

On Thursday evening, a very coolly composed Emily Murphy stepped energetically through an Irish Dance Program she prepared for the Cather Colloquium. Some conferees then enjoyed the American Playhouse production of *O Pioneers!*

Friday's (June 26's) busy schedule began with a plenary session featuring Bruce Baker and Demaree Peck. Baker ("From #5 Bank Street: Selected New York Letters"), drawing upon letters held in Red Cloud, sketched Cather's views (in her own words) on a potpourri of topics, as seen from Bank Street and her other New York City residences. Peck's "Setting the Stage in New York: Willa Cather's Appropriation of the City" examined, among other topics, the city as metaphor for the imaginative state of the novel and Thea Kronborg's selective appropriation of the elements of city life vital to her art. In the shadow of the Statue of Liberty (animated by the speaker), Thea's story repudiates Liberty's invitation to the "tired" and "poor" and validates, Peck argued, a "natural contempt of strength for weakness."

With box lunches in hand, conferees toured Cather Manhattan sites by bus early Friday afternoon. Later, they visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they were introduced to artists and works important to Cather, including paintings by Puvis de Chavannes which helped to inspire the composition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. A banquet dinner, in the Great Hall of Drew's Bowne Building, closed with a special presentation of "Cather's Opera" by soprano Cynthia Springsteen and pianist John Balme. On Saturday (June 27), a post-colloquium tour of the Metropolitan Opera House concluded the week's festivities.

In addition, throughout the week, participants presented almost sixty papers in group sessions. These lively, suggestive sessions probed many facets of Cather's New York (and other) connections, confirming the range and importance of the Colloquium's topic. By the week's end, although they were obviously exhausted, both Conrad and Marquis were pleased with the scholarly harvest of the conference and gratified by the camaraderie developed by the many conference activities they had orchestrated with such skill. It was, indeed, "something splendid."

New Items

From the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

❖ GOOD THINGS HAPPENING IN RED CLOUD —

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial has recently received word that it is the recipient of a \$200,000 Challenge Grant from the Peter Kiewit Foundation, Omaha, Nebraska. These funds are to be used toward the renovation/restoration of the 1885 Opera House. Money raised to

date can be used toward the match with the remaining funds to be developed by the end of 1999. In the last six months, the WCPM has been awarded a total of \$350,000 in grants for the Opera House project. In September, the Red Cloud Chamber of Commerce sponsored a dance to benefit the Opera House and Webster County Community Hospital. Both institutions will receive nearly \$3,000. A WCPM member has donated his collection of first edition Cather and early first edition books about Willa Cather to the WCPM for silent auction. The gift is worth in excess of \$3,000. A detailed list of these books and the base bidding price will be published in a later edition of the newsletter. Money raised from the sale of these books is to go to the Opera House renovation. Raising the additional money to meet the Challenge Grant by the end of 1999 will require the participation of us all.

❖ THE WCPM WAS AWARDED two other grants

this summer: a \$4,850 tourism grant from the Department of Economic Development to produce a brochure for the Cather, Neihardt, Sandoz, and Aldrich sites, and a \$10,000 Greenspace Grant from the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum to landscape the one-quarter block area at Grace Episcopal Church. This space will be called the "Willa Cather Memorial Garden" and will feature native plants as well as plants found in Cather's novels and short stories. Plans are well underway and planting may begin in the spring of 1999.



Jane Hood joins WCPM Board of Governors. As long-time Executive Director of the Nebraska Humanities Council, Jane has expertise in bringing together groups for collaborative programming and outreach.

— Photo by S. Rosowski

❖ **WE ARE PLEASED** to announce the addition of two new board members: Ann Billesbach, former curator at the Willa Cather Historical Center and current Reference Librarian at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and Darrel Lloyd, Professor of English at Hastings College. Both have been important to the work of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial for several years and are excellent additions to our Board of Governors.

❖ **THE HISTORIC STREET LIGHTS** are finally in place in Red Cloud. They are beautiful and you will be surprised and pleased when



WCPM Officers and Staff:

Bruce Baker, Secretary; Pat Phillips, Executive Director of Sites/Management; Betty Kort, incoming President; David Garwood, past President; and Gary Meyer, Treasurer. — Photo by S. Rosowski

WILLA CATHER
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you visit us again. The old mercury-vapor street lights will be gone and so will the overhead wires.

❖ **IF POSSIBLE**, try to attend the WCPM's celebration of Willa Cather's 125th birthday on Sunday, December 6. A Tour of Cather Homes will begin at 2:00 p.m. Houses opened for the tour will include the Harling House, the Cather Childhood Home, Mary Miner Creighton's home, and Jessica Cather Auld's home. At this time, it is also probable that the Cather's second home will be opened for the tour. Admission to the Tour of Homes, which is sponsored by the Republican Valley Arts Council and the WCPM, is \$5.00. At 5:00 p.m., the St. Juliana Choir will present a special concert of Jesuit Christmas music at Grace Episcopal Church. Birthday cake will be served following the concert. On Monday, December 7, a special mass will be said at Grace Episcopal for Willa Cather. The Rev. Dr. Charles Peek will officiate. Please call if you need more information.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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Willa Cather Newsletter welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to Ann Romines, Merrill Skaggs, or John Swift. News items should be sent to Bruce Baker. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

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- 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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Essays on: Early Fiction, Cather's Washington, Cather's Modernism, and *A Lost Lady*

Also, WCPM News, and Chatting with Cather



Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

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