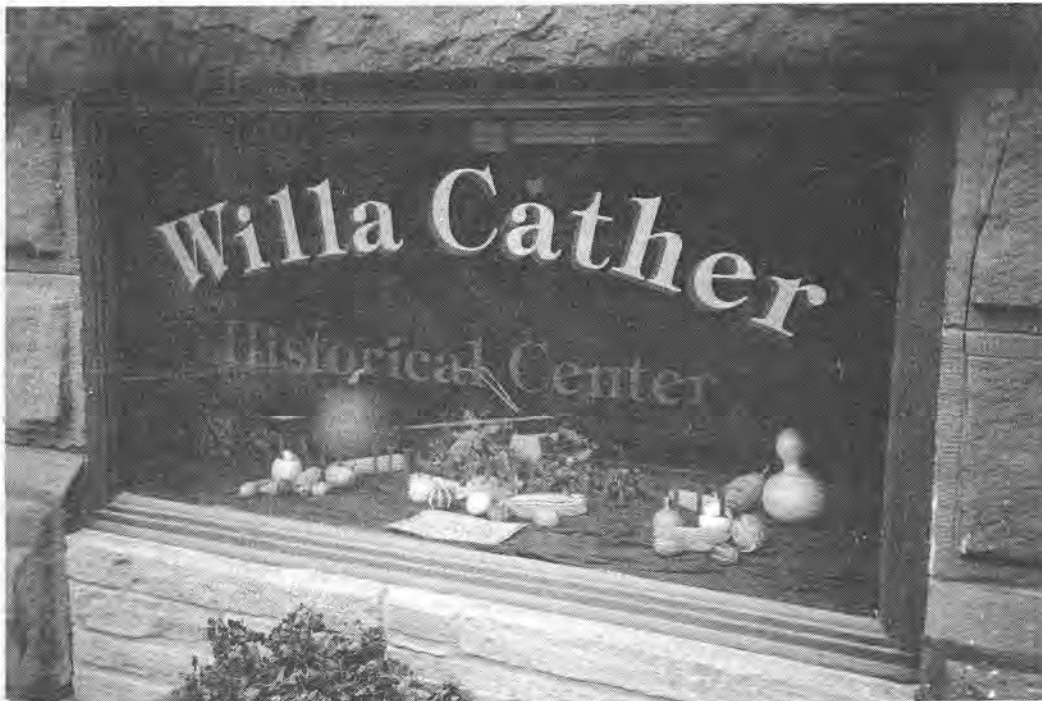


Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

The Willa Cather Society

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326 N. Webster Street
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
Telephone (402) 746-2653



*Newly lettered and seasonally decorated window
of the Cather Museum (Garber Bank Building), Red Cloud, Nebraska.*

— Photo Courtesy of Pat Phillips

The Allusive World of *The Song of the Lark*

Carrie Lowry La Seur
Oxford University

In his Nobel lecture, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn declares that literature “becomes the living memory of nations . . . literature, along with language, preserves the nation’s soul.”¹ His words address something vital in Willa Cather’s work: she records and struggles with a living memory that relates closely to the American notion of self and soul. In novels like *The Song of the Lark* (1915), she struggles with personal conflicts that remain unresolved. The process is intimate in one respect, but seen from a different perspective it

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A Crucial Decade Revisited: A Report from “Cather’s Pittsburgh”

Ellen Foster and Tim Bintrim
Duquesne University
Co-ordinators, “Cather’s Pittsburgh and
Pittsburgh’s Cather”

Held September 6, 7, and 8, 1996, “Cather’s Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh’s Cather” brought more than ninety persons from all over the United States to Duquesne University to commemorate the centennial of Willa Cather’s arrival in Pittsburgh. Among these were Patricia Phillips, Director of the WCPM, and five members of the WCPM Board of Governors: Bruce

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THE ALLUSIVE WORLD (Continued)

increases our understanding of Cather's broader views on the character of American life. Through a close reading of literary and musical allusion in *The Song of the Lark*, this essay will explore the imaginative historical context from which Cather drew material for this novel, and close with reflection on its resonance in the personal and public spheres of Cather's life.

Cather scholars have long been aware that Willa Cather uses her erudition as an integral part of the text rather than as ornament. Careful analysis of allusion in *The Song of the Lark* can take the text to a different level and suggest new layers of meaning. The novel lends insight to Cather's ideas about art, her art in particular, more than any other work in the Cather canon. In writing it she revealed more of herself than her readers usually see, and quite possibly more than she intended us to see. This third novel comes three years after the exciting success of *O Pioneers!* (1912), at a time when Cather was very aware of her artistic calling, and is more autobiographical and detailed than her other novels. The amount of detail eventually embarrassed her: she cut the manuscript for later editions, critical of the style and perhaps also afraid of revealing herself too much. So the strength of allusion and its direct relevance to the novel's theme of artistic emergence provide us with insight into Cather's carefully guarded inner life as an artist.

The trimmed version retains the long speeches, heavy metaphor, and open longing for the sublime that communicate a sense of the driven, tortured artist. The scene in which the diva, Thea Kronborg, tries to explain her artistic torment to her old friend, Dr. Archie, implies a cipher for Cather's life:

"There's so much that I want to tell you, and it's hard to explain. My life is full of jealousies and disappointments, you know. You get to hating people who do contemptible work and still get on just as well as you do. There are many disappointments in my profession, and bitter, bitter contempts! If you love the good thing vitally, enough to give up for it all that one must give up, then you must hate the cheap thing just as hard. I tell you, there is such a thing as creative hate! A contempt that drives you through fire, makes you risk everything and lose everything, makes you a long sight better than you ever knew you could be How can I get much satisfaction out of the enthusiasm of a house that likes her atrociously bad performance at the same time it pretends to like mine? If they like her, then they ought to hiss me off the stage. We stand for things that are irreconcilable, absolutely. You can't try to do things right and not despise the people who do them wrong. How can I be indifferent? If that doesn't matter, then nothing matters You see, Doctor Archie, what one really strives for in art is not the sort of thing you are likely to find when you drop in for a performance at the opera. What one strives for is so far away, so beautiful — that there's nothing one can say about it."²

The passage points to attempts to express the sublime in *The Song of the Lark*. It is not the first monologue

along these lines, nor does Cather appear to believe that "what one strives for" cannot be expressed. It is simply difficult to write down. In other scenes the sublime finds representation in land or music but never words. Ironically, Cather can only gesture to the sublime in less explicit expressions. We can see, hear, smell, even taste it, but never say or write it. "There's nothing one can say about it," Cather admits, but she metaphorizes land, music or both at once to communicate.

These two forms, land and music, become an enduring motif in *The Song of the Lark* and create a paradox. By comparing the sublime nature of wild, untouched land with that of "civilized" classical music, Cather juxtaposes the American West and East.³ This comparison is classically pastoral, but in this case it carries a transforming emotional charge. Clashes between the pastoral and Western civilization dominate *The Song of the Lark*, drawing the reader into a dichotomy between wilderness and urbanity that recalls the body/soul split of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Cather presents her dilemma as both philosophical and deeply personal, and invites a search for deeper meaning in the text. For example, her evident disdain for the cruelties of frontier life in "A Wagner Matinée" and "The Sculptor's Funeral" creates a startling contradiction in an author known for romanticizing the plains and their people. The West appears a wasteland: emotions run high in these stories, see-sawing between love and hate. No one is sure which side Cather takes, how much of her is a sophisticate and how much a transplanted plains woman, because Cather herself isn't sure.

The stories often frustrate analysis on these grounds because Cather is incapable of damning the plains without offering redemption and proving herself a creature of both worlds, East and West. She criticizes harshly, but in a new language native to the American frontier. The similes and metaphors of "Matinée" are taken from nature, not city life: violin bows drive "like the pelting streaks of rain in a summer shower," and the deserted stage at the end is "empty as a winter cornfield." Even as Cather chastises it, the young American West gains a voice through hers. Perhaps the West deforms and kills, but the mutinous subtext of these stories implies that the frontier possesses magic. Cather doesn't have complete faith in the goodness of the West, but her pursuit of its ill-defined 'spirit' contributes to a literature characterized by uniquely American thought, voice, and identity.

But even for pioneers, no literature appears out of nowhere. The debt to other writers, thinkers and artists is evident throughout the novel, in references to Byron, Marlowe, and Ovid, as well as various composers. We come across Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* in the first pages of *The Song of the Lark*, in the hands of Thea as a sick child, where its themes of exile, search, and achievement foreshadow the struggles of her life (13). *Childe Harold* introduces the anguish of artistic endeavor by highlighting the first burden:

**Willa Cather Sessions
American Literature
Association
May 22-26, 1997
Baltimore, Maryland**

1. *Willa Cather's Modernism: New Perspectives*. Session Chair, Joanne Middleton, 318 Hillside Place, South Orange, New Jersey 07079.

If you have questions, write or e-mail: jmiddlet@drew.edu

2. *Willa Cather d. 1947: Fifty Years of Reading a Writer's Life*. (Changing readings of Cather's career in the half-century since her death.) Session Chair, Ann Romines, 770 Rome Hall, Department of English, George Washington University, Washington, D.C. 20052.

If you have questions, write or e-mail: annrom@gwis2.circ.gwu.edu

These sessions are sponsored by the Willa Cather Society (Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Education Foundation).

leaving home. The name of the poem does not appear, so that only an elite minority of the readership will make the connection and identify Thea with the adventurer. Direct reference to *Childe Harold* here would create a thick allegory for Thea's engagement, but Cather works more carefully than that. We can know Thea as a child with a storybook, or discover her in the first stages of an epic, risky venture. Throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Cather gives the reader the choice of remaining on the surface of a Cinderella story or descending into its anguished depths.

The connection to Marlowe is particularly telling in the context of the search for human potential. Young Thea brings a passage to her Moonstone piano teacher, Mr. Wunsch (Mr. *Wish*), saying that it is "out of a book Doctor Archie gave me to read. It's all English but that. Did you ever see it before?" The passage comes from Ovid, but the book in which it is quoted can be none other than Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. At the end of the play, Faustus cries out this line to plead for more time before his damnation: "*Lente currite, lente carrite, noctis equi.*" The novel's translation reads, "Go slowly, go slowly, ye steeds of the night."⁴ Cather would have realized that this phrase comes from Ovid's *Amores*, and her reference gains texture as part of a larger theme: in *Amores* a

lover pleads with Aurora, the dawn, to slow the steeds of the night so that day will be postponed. This lover is not satisfied with the cosmos as it is: he pushes beyond safety and reason to another reality by demanding more from the divine. But in Cather's construct, Ovid's pleading lover and Cather's brilliant young artist seeking the divine find themselves keeping the bad metaphorical company of Faustus.⁵ And the steeds of the night have other sinister connections: they belong to the chaste Greco-Roman moon goddess and imply a barren, predatory existence.

The first Faustian link comes in the inscription to *The Song of the Lark* from Nicolaus Lenau's *Don Juan*: "It was a wond'rous lovely storm that drove me!" The inscription's oxymoronic "lovely storm" hints at the novel's contradictions. And Lenau happens to be the author of another version of the Faust myth, published in 1858, German (like Goethe's classic and like the Kohlers, Wunsch, and Wagner's operas). The connection between Faust's fatal ambition and an impassioned kunstlerroman like *The Song of the Lark* illuminates Cather's darker thoughts on art. Rather than echoing Thea's vague allusions to danger, risk and 'losing one's soul' in great endeavor, Faustus bluntly spells out the fall of proud humanity. We have turned to the darker side of Cinderella's triumph, where the reader wonders what price is paid for success and what becomes of frustrated ambition.

The anti-hero of *Dr. Faustus* struggles against human and divine restrictions just like any artist who longs to be immortalized. Faustus' potent intellect represents the force of talent and ambition struggling against external limitations. His opening speech says as much:

O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisan?
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
A sound magician is a mighty god;
Here, Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity.
(ll. 82-92)

Faustus wants to know his fullest power, but the desire makes him vulnerable to Mephistopheles' manipulation; he gives himself up to a greater power and this abdication damns him. The weight of societal expectations is also responsible for Faustus' defeat in this literature: Marlowe is constrained by his readership to control his rebel and reassert the moral of the Faust legend. Faustus' triumph would be scandalous; the implications are too grave. He calls out "*O lente, lente currite noctis equi!*" — but the heavens will slow no more for him than they would for Ovid's lover.

He is ultimately and fatally mortal, bound by time, and his attempt at divinity must fail. Faustus and the artist who would leave behind an immortal memory

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THE ALLUSIVE WORLD

(Continued)

or work of art are cohorts in the same crime of ambition. Faustus' words describe the mortal artist's aspiration and torment:

God forbade it indeed, but Faustus hath done it:
for vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years hath
Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity. I writ them a
bill with mine own blood: the date is expired, the
time will come, and he will fetch me.

(ll. 1446-50)

The artist might not strike such an overt deal with the devil but is conscious of demanding more from life and from her/himself than humans are normally allowed. Young Thea does not perceive danger; she is intent on achieving the sublime and possessing the music that entralls her. As we read in the lengthy first quotation of this essay, Thea knows that she wants something her audience cannot comprehend. And through the pleading of Ovid's lover and Marlowe's condemned Faustus we can step into her artistic torments and recognize the price to be paid for transcending mortality and grasping the sublime, even temporarily. Only in that dark corner of consciousness will Cather admit her own blind terror of what she will become if and when she realizes her highest aspirations.

Ovid, Marlowe, and Cather challenge restrictions placed on human existence, yet remain aware of the penalties. Ovid's lover challenges nature, Faustus challenges God, and Thea Kronborg challenges the unreachable sublimity of music by attempting to become its ideal vessel and so to possess it. As her Chicago piano teacher, Andor Harsanyi, tells her: "Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and much longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring into the world yourself" (153). Her metamorphosis and challenge rewrite those of the lover and Faustus, and in this way she claims their power and assumes their risks.

Music is the source of Thea's power and risk. Musical references in *Song* carry on themes of aspiration and anxiety. They also suggest compelling energy moving between Eastern and Western North America. The first piece of music treated in detail is Dvorak's Symphony in E minor, *From the New World*, whose Mohawk melody Dvorak learned while traveling with the tribe in Ohio. Cather describes it with metaphors of the plains; images of land express the transcendent and dramatize Thea's yearning for the sublime. In this scene, she hears a symphony orchestra for the first time:

The first theme had scarcely been given out when her mind became clear; instant composure fell upon her, and with it came the power of concentration. This was music she could understand, music from the New World indeed! Strange how, as the first movement went on, it brought back to her that high tableland above Laramie; the grassgrown wagon-trails, the far-away peaks of the snowy range, the

wind and the eagles, that old man and the first telegraph message.

When the first movement ended, Thea's hands and feet were cold as ice. She was too much excited to know anything except that she wanted something desperately, and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that. Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old, that had dreamed something despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall. (174)

Emphasis on the obsessed soul strongly recalls Faust. Thea is outside of space and time here, in a spirit world where she is one with "the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands." The soul is endangered and uncertain, another element of the sublime. Once again, she experiences the contradictions of her situation, with a soul new and old, despairing and glorious. The paradox is constant; it will appear again. The inspiration of this *new world* symphony adds another ironic twist: the music is that of Dvorak's native Czechoslovakia more than anything else, and he meant it as a message home.

But it is the epic music of Richard Wagner that takes center stage in the musical performances of *Song*. After Cather repeatedly refers to Thea's Wagnerian roles, Thea sings Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* in her final scene of triumph. Intriguingly, the storyline of the opera is not complementary to Thea's moment of revelation, in which "the closed roads opened, the gates dropped" (398). Instead, *Die Walküre* pairs greatest joy with war, death, and punishment for betraying a divine will. The Volsung pair, Siegmund and Sieglinde, are an incestuous couple whose glory is short-lived. After their brilliant scene of recognition, commentary stops in *Song*. Were it to continue, the price of such exaltation would be clear in Siegmund's death and Sieglinde's despair. The presence of this opera as the novel's penultimate moment should put an exclamation point to themes of conflict and struggle with the divine, yet Cather chooses not to play out the allegory of Sieglinde. We are not permitted to see Thea's character meet the punishment waiting for her in the moment of triumph. Faustian implications abound in Thea's life, but by failing to tell the story of *Die Walküre* Cather leaves them unresolved. She refuses to make Thea a tragic heroine and willfully, even unbelievably, gives her a happy ending.

Allusion surrounding Thea tells a radically different story of peril and loss. We have seen how references to Byron, Ovid, and Marlowe shadow Thea's character with the suggestion that her ambition can only lead to ruin. By the time *Die Walküre* appears, the scene is set for a showdown between Thea's vaulting

ambition and the limitations of human achievement. Every allusion has led us to believe that Thea's triumphant march toward possession of the sublime must end in devastation. Nothing has stood in her way; like Faustus she has allowed no person or event to inhibit her ambition. Like Ovid's lover she has cried out against life's inevitable. So we wait for the laugh of Mephistopheles and the arrival of Aurora to put an end to Thea's notions of grandeur. We want her to triumph, but the classical model is in place; Western civilization dictates that the individual cannot succeed against the weight of nature and tradition. Cather has laid the foundations. We are prepared for the tragic resolution of an eternal conflict between human yearning and limitations. Yes, this is a Cinderella story, but Cinderella is a fairy tale and Cather steeps *The Song of the Lark* in the darkest artistic allegory. The outcome seems clear. Suddenly, the path swerves. After this build-up, Thea's triumph is abrupt and astonishing. If we have taken note of Cather's musical and literary references, this makes no sense. Disregarding the novel's subtext, the reader can accept the ending as Thea's reward for a life of hard work and earnest ambition. Thea has come through a complex development and wrestled with self-doubt and painful sacrifice; we may assume that she has paid the dues for success. In the context of her "fairy tale" rise to fame, this is a reasonable conclusion. But this is not Cather's context. She knows the operas, poetry, and myths to which she has referred and consciously defies their moral.

We can only ask why. Consider, first of all, that in the company of the lover, Faustus, and Sieglinde, Thea becomes dangerously transgressive. In the classical context, as an artist, as a woman, and as an American, Thea presents a challenging new paradigm. Her triumph and the way she achieves it contradict some of the most cherished assumptions of European tradition. In the distant past, Greco-Roman mythology taught that humans would be punished for attempts to be godlike, and for centuries European society functioned according to strict class structures that prevented most people from altering their station in life. Women in particular were expected to perform certain duties unquestioningly. Cather's literary and musical allusions necessarily rely on this cultural background, but she does not allow it to determine the fate of her heroine. In a brief, unreflective scene of transcendence, Thea reaches the sublime. Perhaps 'there's nothing one can say about it'; more likely one doesn't want to say anything because there is too much to say.

For it is an ambiguous victory over tradition. Having suggested the parallel between Faustus and Thea, Cather never resolves it. The possibility of a downfall remains just that: possibility. We never witness Thea in conflict with her own success or means of acquiring it. Being troubled by sacrifice is not the same as actively engaging the existential dilemma of what an artist becomes by achieving

success and leaving the formative crucible of unrewarded effort. In the supreme moment when the "gates drop," there is little thoughtfulness in Thea, only a grim satisfaction that her devotion has earned the prize. Any expected ambiguity, soul-searching, or simple wonder at the heights she has reached is curiously missing from Thea's portrayal as the novel closes. She has grown very distant from the bright child who interrogated Dr. Archie, read eagerly, and cherished a dream of greatness.

Something lacks from Thea's last scene. Cather chooses to side with the willful woman who embodies an all-American ideal instead of granting victory to the harsh standards of history that brought down Faustus and Sieglinde. Thea is a new sort of heroine who challenges all convention and wins. Like her young nation she lives by different rules and laughs at the restrictions of her European heritage, and in this she is magnificently creative. But her absolute liberty fails to convince absolutely. Thea has not dealt with the demons of tradition, only ignored them. She is frustrated that her audience does not understand her ideals, but she sings for them nonetheless, in a very traditional genre. As the text nears its end we know her less as a weak, fallible human and more as the exalted diva she has become; the real frustrations of her life are hidden from the reader. We wait outside the stage door, denied access to Thea's bitterness and fear. Like her friends, the reader no longer knows her.

The singing of *Die Walküre* is less a triumph than a defiant stand in Thea's Faustian struggle. Years of work have transformed her into something other than what she was, and she stands at a crossroads, realizing that she has left behind the anticipation and eagerness of youth. She has learned her craft and achieved success, just as Cather had done with *O Pioneers!*, and should the text continue any further Thea would surely begin to contemplate the price. She might reflect on what parts of herself she has lost along her journey, and what unwanted elements she has gained. The sacrifices and compromises might begin to seem rather, in a word, Faustian. Thea wanted something so desperately that she was willing to do anything for it, and we leave her just as she takes possession of that greedily sought prize. If we were permitted a longer audience with her, and if Cather were willing and able to work out the sinister implications of her allusive subtext, we might discover the reality behind the fairy tale of artistic triumph.

NOTES

¹Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Nobel Lecture on Literature*, tr. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 20.

²Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (New York: Signet Classics, 1991 [1915]), 383.

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THE ALLUSIVE WORLD (Continued)

³Except where specified otherwise, use of "West" and "East" here will refer to geographical regions of North America. "Western civilization", of course, retains its larger implications.

⁴The Latin and the translation vary between Cather, Marlowe, and Ovid. The Cather versions are quoted here.

⁵Ovid, *Amores*, book 1, 13:40. *The Song of the Lark*, 24.



Group Photo: Taken at Clayton, The Henry Clay Frick estate on Sunday, September 8, 1996. Left to right: Susan Hannah, Herman and Jeanne Selvaggio, Nancy Picchi, tour guide (back to camera), Mary Lou Zoelle, Beth and Tim Bintrim, John Anders, Pat Phillips, unidentified.

— Photo by Ellen Foster

A CRUCIAL DECADE REVISITED: (Continued)

Baker, Don E. Connors, Mellanee Kvasnicka, Nancy Picchi, and Susan Rosowski, all of whom had encouraged us from last January, when a call from Pat Phillips suggested that the centennial should be observed in Pittsburgh in 1996, to the weekend itself. The aim of the weekend? To understand better the decade that Cather spent in Pittsburgh, working as a magazine editor, journalist, critic, teacher, and writer. Even though Hurricane Fran tried her best to dampen our enthusiasm, it just wasn't possible, not with the opportunity to immerse ourselves in "Cather's Pittsburgh," to glimpse turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh through music, discussions of the people and places so important to Cather, and readings of Cather's works, and to have, even for a few moments, that era evoked for us.

The opening session, "People and Places in Cather's Pittsburgh," set the tone for the weekend as Susan Rosowski shared her first impressions of Pittsburgh. Scholarly presentations on turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh and the Carnegie Institute from David Demarest of Carnegie-Mellon University and Elisabeth

Roark of Chatham College followed, and also remarks from Mr. Robert Mertz, long-time and current owner of the McClung home, Cather's residence from 1901 to 1906, and Mr. A. Reed Schroeder, a descendant of the Slack family, friends and neighbors to Ethelbert Nevin's family.

Given this fine beginning, we were well-prepared for what were perhaps the most evocative moments of the weekend, experienced during "An Evening at Vineacre," the performance by Dear Friends, the only musical ensemble in the United States devoted exclusively to the performance of 19th-century American music. Kate Young sang, in the French language that Cather loved, Ethelbert Nevin's "La Lune Blanche," a musical composition that Nevin "dedicated to W. C.," to the accompaniment of piano, cello, and flute. The evening's music and readings of Cather's poetry and prose carried us back in time to the parlor at the Nevins' Sewickley estate, hearing, as Cather did on so many Sundays, the famous Sewickley composer's popular music.¹

With jaunty red carnations pinned to our raincoats, reminding us of the fictional Paul's travels between the Carnegie Music Hall and Schenley Hotel, we began Saturday morning with a pilgrimage first to Squirrel Hill's Murrayhill Avenue to see the exterior of the McClung home. When Mr. Robert Mertz invited us into his backyard (where Cather entertained select high school students at tea almost a hundred years ago!), the trip to Pittsburgh was made all the more worthwhile. In Oakland, some ten minutes from Squirrel Hill by bus, Marian Cooke of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation guided us through the former Schenley Hotel (now the University of Pittsburgh's Student Union) and along Forbes Avenue to the Carnegie Museum of Art, just a few blocks away. A spectacular view overlooking Oakland (and specifically the Carnegie Museum complex) was the highlight of this tour, along with a visit to the ballroom and ornate first-floor lounges that Cather surely visited. At the Carnegie, we found several of the paintings Cather reviewed for her newspaper work during the early Carnegie International Art Exhibitions and visited the Music Hall, scene of so many of the performances she reviewed as well as of the Sunday afternoon organ recitals Cather attended during her years in Pittsburgh.

That afternoon (now finally out of the rain), Jay Keenan and Carol Ferguson, well-known Pittsburgh actors, presented dramatic readings of two of Cather's short stories: "The Professor's Commencement" (1902) and an adaptation by Helen Cather Southwick of "Double Birthday" (1929). We can't add any higher

During the planning of "Cather's Pittsburgh," Patricia Barquero, Professor in the Modern Language School at the University of Costa Rica, contacted us via e-mail with requests for information — books, criticism, etc. on Willa Cather. She is writing her thesis on Cather's short stories but is having difficulty since only three books are available in the libraries available to her: Mildred Bennett's *The World of Willa Cather*, Jamie Ambrose's *Writing at the Frontier*, and a collection of Cather's short stories (we do not know which one). While Barquero is working without the help of a substantial body of criticism, she does not want to abandon Cather as her topic. She has asked for criticism on the short stories or any of Cather's other works, especially from a feminist perspective. As we know from experience that Cather's readers and scholars are the most generous group around, we presume that some WCPM members will want to send information or even extra copies of Cather's works to Patricia Barquero.

Patricia Barquero may be reached via e-mail at ogarbantz@cariari.ucr.ac.cr or by mail:

75 mts. Oeste de Plaza de Deportes
Los Angeles de Santo Domingo de
Heredia
Costa Rica, Central America

Sincerely,
Ellen Foster, Department of English,
Duquesne University, Co-ordinator, with Tim
Bintrim, "Cather's Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh's
Cather"

praise than the remarks made by Mr. Herman Selvaggio, father of WCPM Board member, Nancy Picchi — that Keenan and Ferguson's performance rivalled that given by Eva Marie Saint and Jeffrey Hayden this past April when they performed "On the Divide" — in the Carnegie Music Hall — for the International Poetry Forum.

Having seen — and heard — for ourselves quite a bit of "Cather's Pittsburgh," we settled down Saturday afternoon to a fine collection of scholarly papers and presentations on such diverse topics as "Pittsburgh Experiences in the Later Fiction," "Intersections with World Literature," "Art and Industrialism: The Tension of Cather's Pittsburgh," and "At Work and Among Friends: The Pittsburgh Legacy." To round out our understanding of "Cather's Pittsburgh," that evening Dr. Michael P. Weber, Provost and Academic Vice-President of Duquesne University, presented his keynote

address, "Carnegie, Cather, Frick, and Dobrachek: Pittsburgh in the Age of the Robber Barons," incorporating more than 120 slides into a cogent and instructive portrait of Pittsburgh at the turn-of-the-century, from the grim scenes of immigrant housing near the steel mills to the arcades, theaters, and other entertainment centers of the day. This address was so thoroughly enjoyed that Dr. Weber (like Jay Keenan and Carol Ferguson before him) should expect to be called to Nebraska to reprise his presentation.



Duquesne University Provost Michael P. Weber with coordinators Tim Bintrim and Ellen Foster at the reception following Dr. Weber's Keynote Address to "Cather's Pittsburgh."

— Photo by Jeanne Shaffer

On Sunday morning participants took the floor during an open discussion prior to Bruce Baker's paper concerning Cather's letters from Pittsburgh and a panel discussion on "The Future of Cather Studies." Although Sue Rosowski was injured in a fall on Saturday afternoon, Sharon Hoover of Alfred University, working this fall at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, shared Rosowski's latest work, an article projecting areas of inquiry in Cather studies, by providing the entire audience with copies of this work at Rosowski's request. This act of generosity — sharing so much with so many — is characteristic of Sue Rosowski; it is also — as so many of our colleagues have since mentioned to us — characteristic of all of "Cather's Pittsburgh" participants. (An additional note here: Sue Rosowski



At Keynote Reception (left to right): Karen Baker, Patricia Weber, Bruce Baker, Evelyn Haller, Don Conners, John Flannigan.

— Photos by Jeanne Shaffer

has made a full recovery; she is home in Nebraska taking care of her formidable responsibilities at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.)

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Jeanne Shaffer (center) welcomes Mellanee Kvasnicka (left) and Susan Rosowski (right) to "Cather's Pittsburgh."

— Photo by Tim Bintrim

A CRUCIAL DECADE REVISITED: (Continued)

Many of us finished the weekend with a visit to the home of one of Pittsburgh's industrial elite, the Henry Clay Frick estate, a well-preserved example of Victorian-era Pittsburgh now open to public tours. Who among us could not help but recall Cather's pointed remarks about Frick in her reports to the Nebraska newspapers? The home and grounds testified to the wealth and power of the Pittsburgh that Cather knew so well, just as the great marble expanses and gold leaf in the Carnegie Museum had the day before. We also knew, from so many discussions over the weekend, the cost of all this accumulated wealth, the price paid by generations of steel workers, often immigrants to this land. That Cather had been witness to all this, from the perspective of a young, middle-class, working woman, gave us new insight into the transformative powers of Pittsburgh on a young writer.

Through the generosity of Mrs. Jeanne A. Shaffer, Pittsburgh resident, Duquesne alumna and Cather's most active supporter in Pittsburgh, evidence of this transformation was on display at Duquesne University's Gumberg Library. "Cather's Pittsburgh" participants were fortunate to have available two display cases full of Mrs. Shaffer's own fine collection of Catheriana (first editions of several works, photos, and more) as well as items loaned by Mr. and Mrs. A. Reed Schroeder of Sewickley (including the magazine in which "Uncle Valentine" was first published) and Ms. Judy Crow (a rare original edition of the *Home Monthly*).

Because the rain and fog substituted for the smoky skies that Cather would have been more familiar with, we had a chance to experience for ourselves a little of that Pittsburgh, to meet with new and old friends, and to talk about the importance of the Pittsburgh years for Cather. We hope that this meeting will spark more interest in the years spent in Pittsburgh and in Cather's work from this period: *April Twilights* and *The Troll Garden* as well as stories set in Pittsburgh, her jour-

alism and her teaching. In these ten years, as Sue Rosowski observed in the opening session of the observance weekend, Cather moved from juvenalia to mature writing. She did so in the midst of "a landscape of power," to again borrow Dr. Rosowski's words. For while Pittsburgh may have been "the City of Dreadful Dirt," Cather loved the city, its vitality and its people, for they welcomed her from Nebraska and gave her unparalleled opportunities to learn, to establish herself in two professions — journalism and teaching — to meet new friends — from celebrities to working people and aspiring artists like herself — and to write.

The understanding that we gained throughout "Cather's Pittsburgh" would not have been possible without the generous support of Dr. Michael P. Weber, Provost and Academic Vice-President of Duquesne University, whose confidence in this project led him to fund our efforts to bring Cather's readers to Pittsburgh. In addition, Mrs. Nancy S. Picchi and Mrs. Helen C. Southwick gave generous private contributions to support "Cather's Pittsburgh"; the Duquesne University Department of English also contributed funding. In closing, we can only reiterate the great pleasure it gave both of us to bring "Cather's Pittsburgh" to Pittsburgh. We hope that plans can be made to hold an International Seminar in Pittsburgh in the future, for, as we found again and again throughout the planning of "Cather's Pittsburgh," there is still much to explore and experience in Pittsburgh that will help us understand Cather's growth and development as a writer. We could only begin that process in the span of a weekend, but we hope that "Cather's Pittsburgh" provided a foundation for a fuller understanding of the Pittsburgh years.



Lucia Woods Lindley, Bruce Baker, Mellanee Kvasnicka, Nancy Chinn, and Sharon Hoover (left to right) consider "The Future of Cather Studies" in Pittsburgh.

— Photo by Tim Bintrim

NOTES

¹This performance was recorded and is now available on cassette tape for \$10 each, plus \$1.75 shipping and handling (plus \$1 for each additional tape ordered). To order your copy, send your name, address and check to the WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, NE 68970.

Also, a fine compact disc recording of Ethelbert and brother Arthur Nevin's piano music, "From Edgeworth Hills,"

performed by Edgeworth native Donna Amato, is for sale through the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143; enclose your address and check for \$18.00, including tax and shipping.

Willa Cather in Pittsburgh

Jeanne Shaffer
Pittsburgh

PART ONE

Fourteen year old Wallace T. Dodds, a freshman at Pittsburgh's Central High School in 1901, pleased his young teacher mightily when she sent him to the blackboard with the assignment to write a letter of application for a first job after graduation. He received for his effort the rarity of her total approval — 100%.

Wallace T. Dodds, M.D. pleased me even more when, by Catherian chance, I was to discover that the glow of that accomplishment still warmed his memory sixty-one years later. It surfaced in answer to a short letter dated February 21, 1962 from Dr. Kathleen D. Byrne who was gathering material for a projected book about Willa Cather's decade in Pittsburgh — 1896-1906. This letter requested any information he might send her concerning Willa Cather during those years.

On February 24, 1962 — he had only received Mrs. Byrne's letter a day or two before — Dr. Dodds typed an answer on the back of her letter to have a record of both. This personal record found its circuitous way to me when *The International Poetry Forum* in Pittsburgh, now celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, engaged Eva Marie Saint and Jeffrey Hayden to present "On the Divide" — a concert reading of some early Cather work. When called to serve on the committee, as a Catherphile I was able to give the happy information that this would be a memorable evening indeed as 1996 was the centennial of Cather's arrival in Pittsburgh.

In order to build the audience Cather deserved for this special occasion, I sent out numerous invitations to friends and acquaintances and enclosed short notes on the significance of the evening. One of these went to Agnes Dodds Kinard, member of the bar, leader in the cultural life of this city, writer of the history of two of Pittsburgh's major cultural institutions, the Pittsburgh Symphony and the Carnegie, both now celebrating centennial years. I indicated this was another important centennial for her to celebrate.

When Mrs. Kinard responded to the note, she wrote that she "had been laboring through the family archives" and thought I might be interested in the two items enclosed. One was an early newspaper clipping about Willa Cather as a journalist. The other to my great delight was the following letter from her uncle, Dr. Dodds, to Mrs. Byrne. Until she received my note, Mrs. Kinard had never known of my interest in Cather,

and I had never considered a possible connection between her and the Dr. Dodds mentioned in a footnote in *Chrysalis Willa Cather in Pittsburgh 1896-1906*. Coals on my head! His address at the time of Mrs. Byrne's letter was within walking distance of my home.

Assuredly, before typing the final copy to send Dr. Byrne, Dodds checked and corrected the information he had doubts about, made the small corrections in book titles, and added the few titles he had omitted. A hand written note above this letter states "My answer 3/6/62."

February 24th, 1962

Dear Mrs. Byrne: —

It pleases me so much to give you this information about Miss Willa Cather, a genteel lady I remember long and pleasantly.

Her classroom in the old Pittsburgh Central High School was on the fourth floor, south-west corner, overlooking the Penna R. R. station. My seat was the fourth in the second row; she taught Literature and I like to remember the day she sent me to the blackboard and asked me to write a letter to any company for my first job after graduation. My mark that month was 100%.

She was born in Winchester, Virginia about 1875 or it may have been in Nebraska. Her teaching career began about 1901 and she was teaching in Central High School at least in that year as 1904 is the year of my graduation. She came to Central from the Allegheny High or it may have been vice versa.

Not tall, round, chubby face, dark hair, natural pink cheeks, voice gentle and low she was one of my favorite teachers and in retrospect perhaps I was her "pet," although that never occurred to me till recently.

Teaching literature was a natural step to writing novels and poetry, as in 1904 was published a collection of poems "April Twilights". While here she was the dramatic critic of *The Pittsburgh Daily Leader*. (A little bit of trivia — Its editor was Mr. Alexander Moore, owner, diplomat, financier — husband of Lillian Russell — whose appendix I helped remove in 1913 . . . they were married in the Hotel Henry about 1915).

Perhaps she went to New York about 1906 as in that year she became a staff member of McClure's Magazine.

Not knowing the dates it may help you that at various times she wrote a collection of stories entitled "Troll Garden"; Alexander's Bridge; O Pioneers; Song of the Lark; My Antonia; My Mortal Enemy; Nor Under Forty; One of Ours; Shadows on the Rock; A Lost Lady; Death Comes for the Archbishop; Lady Gayhart [sic].

Suggestive of my attachment . . . while returning on H.M.S. *Mauretania* in 1925 after a zestful trip through Africa, I wrote her a letter of her former pupil's adventure and not having her address I sent it to McClure's Magazine, but received no reply.

Alas: Alas . . . On April 24th, 1947 this highly estimable lady went on a long, long journey.

Respectfully and sincerely,

Wallace T. Dodds

(Continued on Page 66)

CATHER IN PITTSBURGH (Continued)

When I shared this letter with Helen Cather Southwick (the daughter of Cather's younger brother James), we both regretted that he had not thought to send his letter to Cather's publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Cather had left *McClure's* in 1912, and in the years that followed there had been many staff changes. By 1925 no one there would have known her address. It was unfortunate none of the staff thought to forward her mail to her publisher, where it would have been certain to reach her. To verify this Helen Southwick sent me a Pittsburgh related note her aunt received from the renowned conductor Walter Damrosch. It was a printed card stating "Walter Damrosch is deeply grateful for your lovely remembrance on his eightieth birthday." On this he had handwritten "Dear Willa Cather, such a lovely page you have given for 'My Book.' Of course, I remember Pittsburgh and its dusky Exhibition Hall! That was the beginning and now Pittsburgh has a fine Symphony Orchestra of its own."

Affectionately, Walter Damrosch

He added the postscript — "Margaret and I adore your books."

The envelope was addressed to Willa Cather, %Alfred A. Knopf, New York City. Nothing more — but within days of the postmark it had reached the publisher and been forwarded to her in a second envelope.

Willa Cather had her own heroes. The card from Walter Damrosch had never been thrown away.

Helen Southwick added her own postscript on the matter of Dr. Dodds's letter: "I know Aunt Willa would have been delighted to get the letter and would have answered promptly."

I think we are all left to wish that pupil and teacher had been able to be in touch again. It was a loss for them both. Undoubtedly, she would have been pleased to be remembered by a star pupil, and hear of his adventures. He was denied a response which would have meant so much coming as it did from "this highly estimable lady." "Alas, Alas," indeed.

PART TWO

The occasion prompting the receipt of this letter also brought some other surprises.

When *The International Poetry Forum* scheduled Eva Marie Saint and Jeffrey Hayden to present "On the Divide," this city by reason of Cather's decade here had unique offerings to give them.

There was a special excitement because the program would be given in the Carnegie Music Hall. With Cather's love of music and admiration for great artists, the hall was mecca for her. Beginning with her arrival in Pittsburgh, this was a place she loved and visited often to attend Pittsburgh Symphony concerts and hear recitals. There could have been no hesitation when she was offered the job of Music Critic for

the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader* in September, 1897. She used this splendid Carnegie Hall setting in two short stories, "A Gold Slipper" and "Paul's Case," the best known of all her shorter works. During the course of the evening, Catherphiles had to have experienced a special thrill in reflecting that Cather herself often sat among the audiences here enjoying and reporting on so many memorable events. Now it was her turn — she was the celebrated star of the evening. Tonight the applause was for her!

Saint and Hayden opened their concert reading with the insightful and charming short story "The Sentimentality of William Tavener." Written in Pittsburgh, this story appeared on May 12, 1900 in a magazine published here called *The Library*. A weekly selling for five cents a copy, it was started with a legacy of twenty thousand dollars and lasted for twenty-six issues. Cather contributed to fifteen of them.

I had hoped to have the bound volume of *The Library's* twenty-six issues — opened to "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" — in a display prepared for the main branch of the Carnegie Library, located in the same building as the Music Hall. Saint and Hayden's special affection for the Tavener story suggested having a look at its first appearance, and receiving a photo copy of the story showing its single black and white illustration would be a welcome memento of their visit to Pittsburgh. What I had overlooked is that the Carnegie is a Public Library with its holdings intended for the use of all. The bound volume could not be put on display because it had suffered not only from much handling but from serious environmental pollution over the course of ninety-six years. A check of rare book rooms in local university libraries as well as their opposite numbers in other parts of the state came up empty handed. Unfortunately, a microfilm of the story was of such poor quality it was not usable. I resigned myself to disappointment.

Very soon after these disturbing discoveries, I made a call to Gertrude Ferguson, a good friend and fellow Catherphile who lives in Shawnee, Kansas. The call was to check on her and her family's well being. Before we hung up, acting on the premise that a disappointment shared might hurt half as much, she heard all about my frustration concerning the unavailability of William Tavener. In response, she told about one of her trips to visit family in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. During the visit, she had come to Pittsburgh — this was some time in the 1980's — to check out Cather items in the Pennsylvania Room at the Carnegie Library. She recalled making photo copies of several things but could not remember exactly what or where they were, but she'd look them up and get back to me.

Four days later, returning from an errand, I found a long flat package marked Priority Mail on my doorstep. Even before I saw her name, I recognized Gertrude's handwriting, and I could feel my pulse pick

up speed. Did I dare hope something in it might be what I was looking for, or in any case something suitable for the display I was putting together at the Carnegie Library?

My fingers had hard work opening the package it was so well wrapped. Once opened and contents removed, I picked up page after page all in fine condition. First there were articles of *The Library Magazine* — "The Critic at The Carnegie" and "Four Singers," then the cover of the very first issue of the magazine, dated March 10, 1900, the cover of the issue containing the Tavener story, dated May 12, 1900, and then the most fervently wanted; incredibly there it was — a fine copy of "The Sentimentality of William Tavener." Ecstatic, I reached for the phone.

A copy of the story and the cover were made soon after to go into the folder for Saint and Hayden.

Of the cover, a later comment.

Another surprise unique to Pittsburgh for Saint and Hayden was in the display at the Carnegie Library. Ethelbert Nevin, the Pittsburgh composer, a much admired friend of Cather, had dedicated his composition "La Lune Blanche" to Willa Cather in February, 1900. A copy of the sheet music was on loan to us from the Nevin Collection at the University of Pittsburgh.

To my knowledge, it is not known that Willa Cather was ever serenaded with this lovely, ethereal piece of music based on a poem by Paul Verlaine. But Eva Marie Saint had that pleasure at the reception in the Great Hall of Architecture following her performance in the Music Hall that evening. A traditional string quartet played it for her — twice.

Now back to the May 12, 1900 *Library Magazine* containing the first appearance of "The Sentimentality of William Tavener."

The cover art featured a dramatic black and white drawing of the monumental entrance of the Alexander III Bridge over the River Seine. Undoubtedly, Cather would have kept a copy of every *Library Magazine* in which she had an article. The cover of the May 12, 1900 issue depicting a scene in France would make a strong impression, as she was a committed Francophile.

Years later when she wrote her first novel, did this connection with her past resonate in her memory giving her not only the name of her protagonist, but the title of the book as well? I submit it did.

News Items from the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

— Photo by Robert Graning

Have you noticed the date change for the annual Willa Cather Spring Conference? This year the Board of Governors has moved the Conference date up one week to April 25 and 26. Willa Cather died quietly in New York City on April 24, 1947, and during two church services (a candle-light service at St. Juliana Catholic Church Friday evening and another liturgy Saturday morning at Grace Episcopal) we will honor her memory. Check your calendar now and put the conference date on your calendar.

The 42nd Annual Conference will feature *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, published in 1927, seventy years ago. Also noteworthy is the fact that Mildred Bennett's edition of *Early Stories* was published forty years ago, in 1957. Even though it is currently out-of-print, it was the first collection of the early stories with commentary.

Of special interest will be the Saturday "Passing Show," which will include a formal presentation with slides by John Murphy (Brigham Young University). This will be especially illuminating because Professor Murphy has just completed the introduction and historical notes for the scholarly edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (forthcoming from University of Nebraska Press). His research took him not only to the Southwest but to France as well. He has discovered connections of which we've been previously unaware.

Dr. Marilyn Arnold (Dean Emeritus of the Graduate School at Brigham Young University) and Ph.D. candidate Steve Shively (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) will informally discuss the book and invite participation from the audience. Susan Rosowski (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) will lead what promises to be a good and friendly discussion of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Friday will offer open house at the various properties and an afternoon paper session for those wishing to try out some of their thoughts about the conference book or other thoughts on Willa Cather's works. Papers for the Friday session should be addressed to Dr. Susanne George, Department of English, University of Nebraska-Kearney, Kearney, Nebraska 68849. The papers should be about fifteen minutes in length.

(Continued on page 68)

NEW FROM WCPM DIRECTOR

(Continued)

◆ Our most exciting new is the new Cather materials that have found their way to the Cather Archives in Red Cloud. Copies of some new letters written to Cather's Aunt Franc during the 1910-1917 period are among the artifacts primarily concerned with the George Cather/G. P. Cather family. Included in these materials are diaries and address books, a farm account book from 1867-1875, Smith family lists and history, a daybook of Virginia farm life spanning twenty years, more than ninety family letters, and much genealogical research. My list only touches upon the contents of four boxes of acquired treasures.

◆ *Cather Studies 3* (UNP) is out now and is available from our bookstore. Authors of the essays are Guy Reynolds (his essay is on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*), Terence Martin, Mary Jane Humphrey, John J. Murphy, Ann Romines, Merrill Maguire Skaggs, Marilyn Arnold, Paula Woolley, Michael Leddy, Ann Moseley, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Sharon Hoover, Elizabeth Ammons, and Asad Al-Ghalith. Robert Thacker talks about four "new" letters to Annie Fields that are at the Huntington Library. The cloth edition is edited by Susan J. Rosowski and retails for \$45.00. Demaree Peck argues in her new book, *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Susquehanna University Press), "that Cather's fiction is significant because it performs an important psychological work for its audience." Sally Peltier Harvey's book, *Redefining the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), Guy Reynold's *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (St. Martin's Press), and Philip Gerber's revised *Willa Cather* (Twayne Publishers) are also available now from our bookstore.

◆ The third Prairie Institute is scheduled for June 9-13, 1997 in Red Cloud. The theme for this year's Institute is "Lost and Found: The Evolution of Prairie Pathways." This course is offered for graduate or undergraduate credit from the University of Nebraska-Kearney. The Institute precedes the Seventh International Seminar, June 21-28 in Winchester, Virginia. Please write or call the WCPM for more information on both of these.

◆ The Opera Omaha's "Cather Sampler Symposium," which was to be in Red Cloud for December, has been rescheduled to mid-May. Please call for information about this too. At time of publication, a definite date has not been agreed upon.

◆ Willa Cather's birthday was celebrated again this year with a special mass at the Grace Episcopal Church (Charles Peek officiated) the day before her birthday and with a Christmas Tea/Open House on Sunday afternoon, December 8. Several women from local clubs provided refreshments and greeted guests.

◆ All of us at the WCPM wish each of you a happy 1997. We hope that you will be able to enjoy some or all of the Cather events this year. Here are some to put on your calendar:

April 25, 26 — Cather Spring Conference,
Red Cloud

May 22-25 — American Literature Association,
Baltimore

June 9-13 — Prairie Institute, Red Cloud

June 21-28 — International Seminar,
Winchester, Virginia

October 15-18 — Western Literature Association,
Albuquerque

News Notes on the 1997 International Willa Cather Seminar

Interest is growing in the 1997 International Seminar, "Willa Cather's Southern Connections," which will be held in Cather's birthplace, Winchester, Virginia, June 21-28, 1997. Seminar directors, John Jacobs and Ann Romines, report a steady stream of inquiries about the event and have already begun to receive paper submissions (deadline is March 1). Recent developments in seminar plans include these:

FEE LOWERED FOR STUDENTS. At its October meeting, the WCPM Board of Governors voted to lower the seminar fee to \$200 for all current students who attend. The fee, which is \$300 for all other seminar registrants, covers all lectures, discussions, paper sessions, tours, travel and entertainment. In addition, a meals/lodging package is available; it includes seven nights at a Winchester motel and most meals and costs \$220 double and \$325 single. Most motel rooms will include two double beds, so sharing a room should be both feasible and comfortable for many seminar participants. The lowered fee makes this the most affordable of recent seminars for students and reflects the sponsors' belief that graduate and undergraduate students make and will make very important contributions to the International Cather Seminars.

GRADUATE COORDINATORS APPOINTED. Two current graduate students who have participated in previous International Seminars have agreed to serve as graduate student coordinators for the 1997 Seminar. They are Melissa Homestead of the University of Pennsylvania (e-mail mhomeste@dept.english.upenn.edu) and Anne Kaufman of the University of Maryland (e-mail kaufman@sidwell.edu). The coordinators will convene graduate student participants on the first evening of the seminar and will plan ways to make the seminar as useful as possible to graduate students. If you are a graduate student and have ideas or questions on this subject, the coordinators would be glad to receive an e-mail message from you.

WALTER BENN MICHAELS JOINS SEMINAR SPEAKERS. Professor Walter Benn Michaels of Johns Hopkins University recently agreed to address the seminar group in Washington, D.C. on June 24. Professor Michaels is the author of the recent *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* and, in 1995, of *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism*, which includes provocative discussion of several Cather texts. The topic of his talks, which will be followed by discussion, is "Race, Region, and Cather's Virginia."

Seminar posters, including a call for papers, were recently mailed. If you have questions about registration or lodging, direct them to Professor John Jacobs, Department of English, Shenandoah University, Winchester, Virginia 22601 (e-mail @su.edu). If you have questions about seminar papers or programming, direct them to Professor Ann Romines, Department of English, George Washington University, WDC 20052 (e-mail annrom@gwis2.circ.gwu.edu).

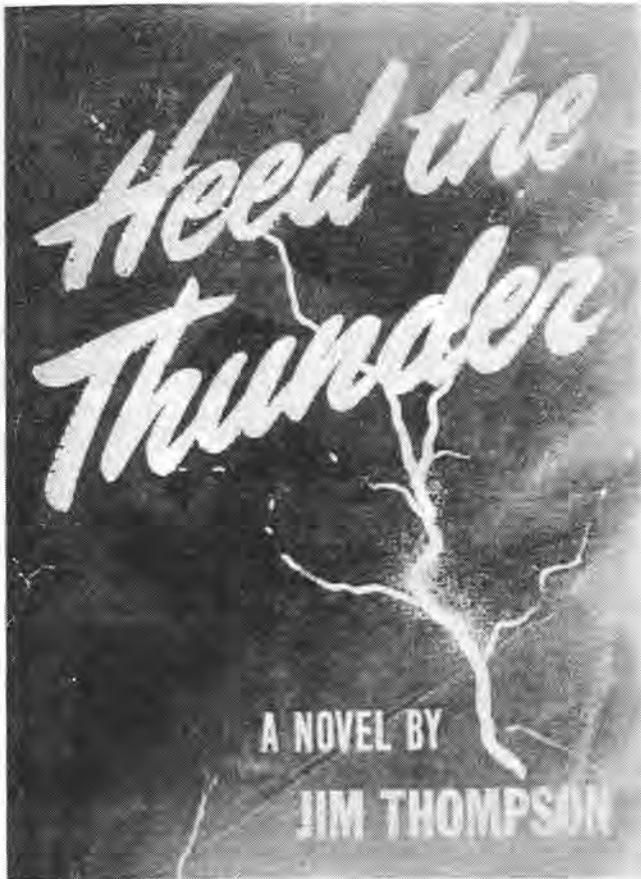
Inn at Jaffrey Demolished



Photos by Steven Lindsey and John Franklin (courtesy of Peterborough Transcript) depicting the demise of the Shattuck Inn.

The famous Shattuck Inn, Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, where Cather spent much time during her writing career, and when she worked on major novels like *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, was demolished in March 1996. *The Peterborough Transcript* reported on March 28 that at an earlier Jaffrey Selectmen's meeting Steve Lindsey complained "that the town would suffer a loss if Shattuck Inn is torn down. He said the building is part of the literary heritage of the country, and pointed out that the building had been part of Willa Cather's experience. He likened demolishing the inn to pulling down Thoreau's cabin, adding, 'We need to save more than just [Willa Cather's] tombstone.'"





Cover of Thompson's 1946 novel, which has been described as "Willa Cather steeped in rotgut — and armed with a .45."

From the Prairie to the Pulp: The Cather-Thompson Connection

Mark Madigan
Nazareth College of Rochester, New York

While Willa Cather scholarship teaches us to be anything but startled by the wide scope of Cather's influence, it is nonetheless true that Cather's name has a way of turning up in unexpected places. I, for example, must admit my surprise at finding Cather mentioned several times in *Savage Art* (1995), Robert Polito's excellent biography of Jim Thompson, author of some of America's most notorious crime fiction.

Cather and Thompson certainly make an unlikely literary couple. As is well-known, the former disdained graphic depictions of sex or violence in literature and crafted her own work accordingly. Thompson, conversely, populated his lurid novels and stories with a host of killers, con artists, and other debauched characters. When Thompson died in 1977, not one of his 29 books was still in print, but he has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance in recent years. Nearly all of his books have been republished, and several, includ-

ing *After Dark, My Sweet* (1955), *The Getaway* (1959), and *The Grifters* (1963), have been adapted into major films.

The literary careers of Cather and Thompson diverge in many ways. Nevertheless, Polito reveals that Thompson greatly admired Cather's work, particularly her essay "The Novel D meubl " and short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" Moreover, his second novel, *Heed the Thunder* (1946), bears the stamp of Cather's influence (Polito 151). Polito also notes a biographical connection: Thompson spent a significant part of his young life in Nebraska. Although born in Anadarko, Oklahoma, his youth was marked by residences of several years each in the central Nebraska town of Burwell, where his parents had grown up, and where his mother's parents maintained a home. Thompson, like Cather, attended the state university at Lincoln (1929-1931), but did not graduate due to a lack of tuition money and the onset of the Great Depression.

It was as a student at Cather's *alma mater* that Thompson was introduced to her work. His favorite English teachers, Lowry C. Wimberly, founding editor of the *Prairie Schooner*, and Russell True Prescott, associate editor of the journal, assigned Cather in their writing workshops and literature classes (Polito 151, 154). Thompson's first novel, *Now and on Earth* (1942), and *Heed the Thunder* are set in Nebraska, although he abandoned their locale and naturalistic style in his subsequent efforts in the crime genre. In *Now and on Earth*, Thompson has a character proclaim her fondness for Cather's writing. In that scene, the central protagonist is told by his sweetheart's mother: "By the way, I've a book you must take with you when you go. Dear, dear Willa! I do know you'll enjoy her. What sacrifices she must have made! What a lonely life she must have led!" (142). Furthermore, Thompson assigned Cather in his own creative writing seminar at the University of Southern California in 1949, selecting "The Novel D meubl " and "Coming, Aphrodite!" for his syllabus (Polito 321-22).

At USC, Thompson warned against over-description in literature, telling his writing students, "You don't have to describe the furniture" (Polito 321). The appeal of "The Novel D meubl " to Thompson is easy to conjecture. As a crime writer, he was charged with creating suspenseful, tightly-plotted fiction. All but his first two novels were inexpensively priced paperback originals — what is now commonly known as "pulp fiction" — marketed to an audience that expected to be entertained in a fast-paced narrative. What sets Thompson apart from more formulaic writers, though, is his skillful use of plot as scaffolding for trenchant philosophical and psychological discourse. In Thompson's best work, such as *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), *Savage Night* (1953), *The Nothing Man* (1954), and *Pop. 1280* (1964), his concerns lie much deeper than the mere description of physical surfaces that Cather criticizes in her essay.

While "The Novel D meubl " gave voice to Thompson's convictions about literary style and form,

"Coming, Aphrodite!" dramatized a different set of issues that were crucial to his situation as a writer. Apart from its formal excellence, "Coming, Aphrodite!" probably appealed to Thompson for its portrait of Don Hedger. Cather's story of the struggling artist suggests parallels to Thompson's own biography. "Coming, Aphrodite!" centers on notions of success: how it is defined and to what lengths one will go to attain it. This was one of Thompson's major concerns, for what the Greenwich Village art dealer in Cather's story says of Hedger may also be said of the crime novelist: "one can't definitely place a man who is original, erratic, and who is changing all the time" (101). To his paperback fictions Thompson brought a command of stream-of-consciousness narration, shifting points of view, double endings, and other modernist strategies that gained him the respect of careful readers and critics, but rarely more than \$2,000 per book. Dogged by bad luck and bad business deals in his writing career, Thompson accurately predicted that his work would garner widespread acclaim and financial rewards only after his death.

"The Novel D meubl " and "Coming, Aphrodite!" earned Thompson's high regard, but it is *Heed the Thunder* that shows the strongest influence of Cather. The back cover of the 1994 paperback even characterizes the novel as "Willa Cather steeped in rotgut — and armed with a .45." *Heed the Thunder* is a family saga set in Verdon, Nebraska in the period shortly before the First World War. The subject is the sprawling, scandalous Fargo clan; the style is, as crime novelist James Ellroy remarks in his introduction, a mix of social realism and soap opera "verging on horror" (vii). There are notable similarities to Cather's prairie novels, particularly *My Antonia*. Like Cather's work, *Heed the Thunder* pays homage to the land, its beauty and enduring values; affectionately evokes the pioneer era with special emphasis on its European immigrants and their struggle to gain social acceptance; and focuses on the development of a family over multiple generations.

Where Thompson parts company with Cather is in his predilection for examining a particularly sordid segment of American culture. In *Heed the Thunder*, one encounters a litany of nefarious characters and their activities. Differences notwithstanding, Thompson's novel recalls Cather's work in significant ways, and in its final paragraph acknowledges the author by way of parody:

The land. The good land, the bad land, the fair-to-middling land, the beautiful land, the ugly land, the homely land, the kind and hateful land; the land with its tall towers, its great barns, its roomy houses, its spring-pole wells, its shabby sheds, its dugouts; the land with its little villages and towns, its cities and great cities, its blacksmith shops and factories, its one-room schools and colleges; the hunky land, the Rooshan land, the German land, the Dutch and Swede land, the Protestant and Catholic and Jewish land; the American land —

the land that was slipping so surely, so swiftly, into the black abyss of the night. (297)

I have found no evidence that Cather ever read Thompson, nor reason to suspect she did, given his style and subject matter. But perhaps I should not be so bold in my assumption. After all, there is no shortage of surprises in Cather studies, as I learned upon reading *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson*.

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Report on the 1996 Western Literature Association Meeting

Susanne K. George
University of Nebraska at Kearney

The joint conference of the Western Literature Association and the Western History Association, held October 2-5, 1996, in Lincoln, Nebraska, featured a full program of speakers, individual sessions, and joint panels as well as tours to Nebraska literary and historical sites.



Simon Ortiz and Tillie Olsen become acquainted at the WLA/WHA book signing. — Photo Courtesy of S. George

The 31st Annual Conference of the WLA boasted a recordsetting 341 registrants, with 129 WLA mem-

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REPORT ON '96 WLA MEETING

(Continued)

bers enjoying the joint WLA/WHA reception at the Nebraska State Historical Society and the William Jennings Bryan home and 186 members attending the WLA banquet featuring Nebraska novelist Ron Hansen. The various tours were also popular with WLA attendees: John Neihardt and Susan LaFlesche Picotte tour to Bancroft and Walthill, 41 WLA members; Cather and Red Cloud, 47; Sandoz walking tour, 25; Poets on the Prairie, 23+; and Ghosts of Lincoln, 14+. The Cather tour, by far the most popular, filled quickly to the 47 maximum seating, and the waiting list grew daily, attesting to the interest and popularity of the Red Cloud attractions.

Thirty-two papers were accepted on Willa Cather and her works. In an effort to both highlight as well as integrate papers on Cather into other critical discussions, five sessions featured papers exclusively on Willa Cather while the other twelve papers were presented in sessions such as "Fictional Responses to the Arts," "The Literary Imagination and Historical Experience," and "Immigrants in the Early 20th Century Novel."

The five Cather sessions included "New Discoveries on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: A Report from the Cather Scholarly Edition"; "Cather: Giving Birth to Sympathy, Sensitivity, and Strength"; "Willa Cather: Prophecy, Plagiarism, and the 'Secret Web'"; "Cather and Parallel Literary Universes," and "Cather and the Visual Arts." Pat Phillips represented the WCPM at the WLA book exhibit.

The WLA conference opened with a joint WLA/WHA panel of Tillie Olsen scholars Joanne Frye, Mara Faulkner, Elizabeth Jameson, Joan Jensen, and Mary Murphy. This roundtable, moderated by Linda Pratt and attended by Tillie Olsen, discussed the historical and literary significances of the Omaha native's writings. Thursday evening, Connie Lee of the Brigit St. Brigit Theater Company performed in period costume a dramatic monologue of Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing." This presentation, declared by Olsen to be the closest to her own intentions for the story of any performance she has viewed, enraptured the audience of over 300. After the performance, President Susanne George presented Olsen with the WLA's Distinguished Achievement Award. Emotionally moved by her experiences of visiting Omaha sites and friends the previous day, by the acclaim of her work that morning in panel and paper sessions, and by the WLA award, Olsen spoke extemporaneously about her Nebraska working class origins, tying in appropriate readings from her various texts. In typical Olsen style, she signed books and conversed with attendees until late into the night.

Friday featured two WLA/WHA roundtables. The first joint panel session, chaired by Tom Lyon, discussed the past, present, and future of nature writing. Sharon Butala, Don Flores, John Janovy, Jr., Paul

CALL FOR PAPERS 32nd Annual Western Literature Association Conference OCTOBER 15-18, 1997 Albuquerque, New Mexico

The Western Literature Association welcomes papers, readings, and proposals for sessions that explore and define various traditions and influences shaping the literatures of the American West. How do new western writings relate to more traditionally canonical works? What are some of the distinctive themes or formal characteristics of the several western literary traditions? What are the historical trends in the development of these traditions?

Papers on many aspects of western literature will be presented. Session topics may include: • Literature on the borderlands, • Latino Native American literary traditions, • Nature writing and writers of the desert Southwest, • Issues of class in western literature, • Ecological approaches to western writings, • New critical perspectives on Tony Hillerman, Joy Harjo, Sabine Ulibarri, Willa Cather, Edward Abbey, Mary Austin, Nash Candelaria, John Nichols, Frank Waters, Simon Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Nina Otero-Warren.

Featured speakers include Rudolfo Anaya, Louis Owens, Denise Chavez and Kate Horsley.

Each paper or presentation is limited to fifteen minutes reading time. Submit manuscripts of no more than ten double-spaced typewritten pages and a 125-word abstract to:

Gary Scharnhorst, President-Elect, WLA,
Dept. of English, University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, NM 87131, Phone (505) 277-
6347, Fax (505) 277-5573,
e-mail: gscharn@unm.edu

Submission date for all papers and proposals: June 15, 1997.

Johnsgard, and Susan Rhoades Neel were the panelists. That afternoon, Richard Etulain chaired a roundtable discussion on the connections between history and literature that featured Mary Clearman Blew, Ron Hansen, Simon Ortiz, William Cronon, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Elliot West. A booksigning by all joint panelists, association

presidents, and presidents-elect followed the panel.

Saturday morning, a WLA/WHA panel of Native Americans, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Laura Tohe, R. David Edmunds, Donald Fixico, and Clara Sue Kidwell, spoke of the representations and misrepresentations of Native Americans in history and literature.

Although these four joint sessions, with audiences of from 300-600 WLA and WHA members, were highlights of the conference, the individual WLA sessions were also heavily attended. Presenters read 217 papers in 60 sessions on subjects ranging from "Traditions in Cowboy Literature," "Environmental Insight," and "Publishing Without Perishing" to "Views from the Native American Perspective," "The Modern American West," and "Western Films." Two other national associations, the Popular Culture Association and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, offered special sessions.

Wes Mantooh, Utah State University, received the J. Golden Taylor Award for the best graduate paper presented at the conference. His paper was entitled "The Meaning of Common Things: Folk Art Aesthetic and Narrative Style in Cather's *My Ántonia*."

The 1997 WLA Conference, "Many Wests, Many Traditions," will be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, from October 15-18 with Gary Scharnhorst presiding. Featured speakers will include Rudolfo Anaya, Louis Owens, Denise Chavez, and Kate Horsley. The submission date for all papers and proposals is June 15, 1997.

Two Tributes to Cather

Loretta Wasserman
Annapolis, Maryland

Readers of the *Newsletter* may recall that I have occasionally reported on incidental mentions of Cather in non-academic writing — the idea being that such references offer us glimpses as to how Cather is being viewed by the general reading public. This time I have two somewhat different items: one is a journalistic tribute from the past; the other, although from a current publication, is considerably more than a passing observation.

The first, from *The New Yorker* of June 19, 1948, is a wry little essay by James Thurber entitled "A Call on Mrs. Forrester," and carrying a long explanatory subtitle: "After Rereading, in my middle years, Willa Cather's 'A Lost Lady' and Henry James' 'The Ambassadors'." The piece may be known to long-time Cather fans, but I came upon it recently only by chance — three brown pages cut from the magazine and folded into a copy of *A Lost Lady* picked up in a second-hand bookshop.

Thurber begins, "I dropped off a Burlington train at Sweet Water one afternoon last fall to call on Marian

Forrester." He continues in this narrative vein, imagining a walk to the house, and confiding, "I first met Marian Forrester when I was twenty-seven, and then again when I was thirty-six. It is my vanity to believe that Mrs. Forrester had no stauncher admirer, no more studious appreciator." He acknowledges foibles and flaws, but "even in her awfulest attachment I persisted in seeing only the further flowering of a unique and privileged spirit." However, as he pauses at the footbridge (a cold rain has begun), he begins to hesitate. What if she didn't recognize him as a former admirer? And even should she meet him at the door in one of her famous, familiar postures — her black hair down her back, a brush in her hand — he might hear stirrings of a man upstairs, and the house itself, with a broken pane, would speak only of the past. The big hall closet would be full of relics — the canes of Captain Forrester, McKinley campaign buttons, a parasol, a stern notice from the bank. "It was all so different from the free, lost time of the lovely lady's 'bright occasions' that I found myself making a little involuntary gesture with my hand, like one who wipes the tarnish from a silver spoon, searching for a fine, forgotten monogram."

And if Marian should invite him in, she would insist that they have a brandy together from the bottle sitting on the stained table. Her old ways, her laughing disdain, would confuse him, and "the lost individual would be, once again, as always in this house, myself." She would gaily accuse him of being in love with someone else, and "she would get the other lady's name out of me." And if he should confess his attachment to Mme. de Vionnet, the lady of the lilacs, Marian would jealously ridicule her rival ("a woman who at the first alarm of a true embrace would telephone the gendarmes") and they would descend into wrangling, so that the end would come with him stalking to the door, only to find, on pushing through, that he has stumbled into the cluttered closet.

So Marian Forrester's longtime admirer turns at the bridge and at midnight takes the eastbound train out of Sweet Water. In February he does not even send a valentine. He plans one of these summers to bring lilacs to the house on Boulevard Malesherbes. He and Mme. de Vionnet will take a drive, hear some good music, drink some white port, and say good night at an early hour. "A man's a fool who walks in the rain, drinks too much brandy, risks his neck floundering around in an untidy closet."

It is too bad that Cather died the year before Thurber's mock confession was published. She would have been pleased, I am sure, to find one of her favorite heroines put into close competition with a heroine of her beloved Henry James, even if James's lady won. Or did she?

The second tribute I found in a book review of *Cross Channel*, a new novel by Julian Barnes, in *The New Republic* of June 24, 1996. The reviewer is James Wood, a senior editor at the magazine.

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Since Julian Barnes is one of the most sophisticated of current British novelists, I was exceedingly surprised to read Wood's first paragraph: "Two landscapes, one American and one English, from roughly the same period. The American landscape is seen by Willa Cather in *My Ántonia* (1918), and the English landscape is seen by E. M. Forster in *The Longest Journey* (1907).

Wood presents his point about Cather with excerpts from the memorable opening scenes of chapter iii, where Jim sits at his desk in his student rooms dreaming over Virgil's *Georgics*: "My window was open, and the earthy wind blowing through made me indolent. On the edge of the prairie, where the sun had gone down, the sky was turquoise blue, like a lake, with gold light throbbing in it."

What Wood calls attention to is Cather's indirection, her suggestion that the moment is fraught with a sense of imminent discovery, for the narrator, for the author (who sees the literary task as lying ahead — "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country"), and also for the novel's reader.

Wood contrasts this effect with quotations from a comparable scene in Forster, where the hero seems to consecrate the tidy landscape by pulling out a volume of Shelley from his pocket and reciting a poem.

He summarizes, "Both passages are characteristic of their authors, and of the literary traditions that produced them. Cather's land is ancient — as ancient as Virgil's soil — but anciently unknown. It is unliterary Cather's writing swerves away from the academic, away from knowledge, away from cleverness, away from the merely known. Its window is open."

Wood then goes on to discuss the book under review, which he classifies as in the Forster style, where everything is known, named, enshrined, and cozy. Only in closing does he turn to Cather again, to her "large hush, as we wait for the message-carrying air to blow through our open window."

I see this as quite a dazzling tribute to Cather, characterized here as the voice of a new — American — tradition.

And perhaps a common thread may be found in these two tributes, however different their emphases: that is the deep, radiating, emotional response that Cather's prose is able to evoke in readers, fifty years ago and now.

"The Best Years": Cather's Affirmative Nostalgia

Nicholas Birns
The New School for Social Research
New York

I

A stray reference at the beginning of Willa Cather's late story "The Best Years" directs our attention to ideas of progress, memory, and the passage of time that inform the story throughout. Evangeline Knightly, the story's introductory point-of-view character, is introduced to us in the opening paragraphs as "a charming person to meet" (367) but one likely to be judged "plain" in the eyes of the frontier Nebraska community where she had come to teach. Cather then makes an intriguing crosscultural comparison:

The standard of female beauty seems to be the same in all newly settled countries: Australia, New Zealand, the farming country along the Platte. (367)

This comparison demonstrates the nature of Cather's regionalism. As she had in so many of her previous works set on the Great Plains, Cather writes lovingly and understandingly of her own region, all the while striving for a universalism, as if to show her readers, wherever they are, that this region could well be their own as far as the essential matters of spirit are concerned.

Cather knew something of Australia and New Zealand; her essay on the New Zealand emigré short-story writer Katherine Mansfield is one of her most characteristic pronouncements on the nature of fiction, and Cather would have realized the logical homology between the American prairie and the Australian outback — both large, flat expanses quite unlike any land previously described in English language literatures. The great bond here is the idea of the peopling of a new terrain, a terrain which must be settled not only physically but culturally. At the time of the story's beginning, Nebraska is settled physically but not yet culturally; thus, in terms of female beauty, "Colour was everything; modelling was nothing" (367). Evangeline Knightly's perceived lack of obvious physical beauty is attributed more to the taste of the time and place than to any personal defect: the exigencies of early settlement demand characteristics more apparent, more easy to grasp, less "discriminating" than Miss Knightly's.

"The Best Years," Cather's late re-visitation of the Great Plains terrain of so many of her classic novels and stories, has always been seen as an intensely personal work. Biographers such as James Woodress have associated it with Cather's final meeting with her brother Roscoe at San Francisco in 1942, and the long vistas of celebratory retrospection it occasioned. Woodress describes the story as "a gift for Roscoe" (500). As such, the story possesses "a tone of elegy and exquisite regret" (501). But it is also a very affirmative story, and it unfolds the complexities of

Catherian nostalgia. Cather's nostalgia not merely laments the passing of an era but also affirms the positive values generated by the process of memory, the apprehension of what truly matters in the remembered scenes of yesterday. Cather does not seek to annul the passage of time. As opposed to a High Modernist contemporary such as T. S. Eliot, she is less interested in rebuking the present by means of an idealized past than in marking how the passage of time sets things in perspective.

II

According to Mildred Bennett, Evangeline Knightly is closely based on a real-life schoolteacher of Cather's, Evangeline King-Case (see Bennett 217). Interestingly, Cather's framing point-of-view in the story is Evangeline's, not one of the children's; thus, though, the material is autobiographical, Cather gives us a perspective slightly distanced from her own experience. Evangeline is most importantly, an outsider, and during her Nebraska sojourn and much later nostalgic visit we view the cultural change in the community from an outsider's perspective. Evangeline's New England origin (her name may even owe something to Longfellow's Acadians) is underscored by the fact that the lesson which she, as school superintendent, witnesses Lesley Ferguesson teach happens to be on geography. Lesley first conducts her class through the North Atlantic States and then jumps to the Middle West, "to bring the lesson nearer home." (370).

The presentation of this material would no doubt be substantially the same, given the system of rote memory that prevailed in the educational practices of this era. But the emotional response of the individuals in the classroom would be different. For Lesley and her students it is "home" they are now discussing, whereas for Evangeline it is a land in which she is newly and temporarily sojourning, whatever her affection for it. The curious relationship between region and individual is underscored when one of Lesley's pupils, Edward, is asked to speak of Illinois because it was his own state, i.e. his family had just emigrated to Nebraska from there. Edward, though, far from being filled with local pride, is "much frightened." He barely stammers through the first part of the definition and is all too thrilled when Lesley, not too young to have learned an old teacher's trick, attributes his performance to the class being restless and dismisses them for noon recess. But there are other reasons for Edward's being able to speak less nimbly about Illinois than either Lesley or Miss Knightly. Edward's coming from Illinois, if anything, makes it harder, not easier, to talk about his State in class. His nervousness is partially due to dislocation at being taken from Illinois but also to the difficulty of speaking about something close to one's heart, a truth which renders all the more admirable Cather's works about Nebraska.

Lesley, it is shortly revealed, is in fact too young to teach school. She has her position only due to some legerdemain that has met with the tacit approval of Miss Knightly. Again, we have the stress on "earliness." In this early society, it is permissible to rush the progress of a young teacher if she proves she can do the job. Miss Knightly exercises her discretion in looking past Lesley's white lie about her age because she can see her potential and also because of the growing bond between the two women. Lesley is like Miss Knightly in some ways but unlike her in others; both are good teachers, but Lesley is part of the new Great Plains society in a way which Evangeline never can feel herself to be. The similarities and differences between the two women are underscored once we get a look at Lesley's family.

The Ferguessons are second-generation Scottish immigrants. Most of us think of Scottish people as coming to America primarily in the eighteenth century, but there was a sizable quotient emigrating to the United States (as they did to Canada and Australia) in the nineteenth, immigrants contemporaneous with the Bohemians and Swedes portrayed in Cather's fiction. Hector Ferguesson is dressed in kilts (377) as a sign of ethnic identification but a more serious index of the Ferguessons' somewhat distanced relationship to the surrounding community is in the character of "Old Ferg," the father of the family. Old Ferg is an idealistic intellectual of the sort that the new society of the Great Plains simply could not accommodate at that time. Dismissed by his neighbors in the town of MacAlpin (even though they also reluctantly admire him) as eccentric and insufficiently pragmatic, Ferguesson, who admires Miss Knightly (381), lives in a place that for him lacks the sort of infrastructure that has enabled her to find adequate vehicle for her talents.

Old Ferg's "profound admiration for William Jennings Bryan" (378) shows an interest in politics that is more far-reaching than most of his fellow townsmen who only worry about their own jobs. The Bryan references here and in "Two Friends" are rare occurrences of partisan, electoral politics in Cather's oeuvre. Interestingly, both stories are late and concern separations and losses that occur with the passage of time, as if Cather is less interested in immediate outcomes than in long-term consequences when making political references.

Thus the tableau is set up with both Miss Knightly and the Ferguessons, for different reasons, feeling a bit distanced, not completely at home in Nebraska, yet cherishing the place deeply all the more. The reader knows that something dramatic is about to happen, thus Lesley's death in a winter blizzard is in narrative terms no surprise. The relation of the blizzard is done at second-hand and is rather unemotional. As John J. Murphy puts it, "the reader is distanced from the catastrophe" (Wasserman 122). Far more emotional is the account of the prairie Christmas that precedes the blizzard, a Christmas filled with poignant, modest

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AFFIRMATIVE NOSTALGIA

(Continued)

resonance that establishes the character of the dreamy Hector, who is to be one of the dead Lesley's principal emotional legatees. The reader mourns for Lesley, but not overmuch, given that the story tells us she "acted very sensible" (388). The one really upsetting moment is when we are told Lesley did not recognize her family at the moment of her death. But this non-recognition supplies an agenda for the rest of the story, in which Lesley's memory is recognized even though she is no longer there to recognize others.

The sadness is also ameliorated by a swift passage of twenty years, and the eventual return of Evangeline after she has married and moved to Denver. Mrs. Thorndike, as she now is, has just passed through Nebraska; rather than settling there, her final goal is hundreds of miles to the west, in a growing major city. Yet she feels drawn back to the place where she once worked. In this return she recalls Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*, but the situations are really quite different. Jim has held on to Ántonia's memory as a kind of moral compass through his life's journeys in the East. He knows she is there upholding the values he regards as so well expressed in her life. Lesley, of course, is dead, and Mrs. Thorndike seems more fulfilled in her later life than Jim Burden. It does not seem that she has left a part of her psyche in Nebraska as has Jim. In addition, Mrs. Thorndike's return is accompanied by a description of Nebraska's modernization far more definite than anything in *My Ántonia*. The landscape has been settled and filled-in; it is no longer early, no longer, at least in literal terms, pioneer.

The look of MacAlpin changes. But we are given the impression that this is not due to any particular event (such as the death of Lesley) but to a general process, occurring in New Zealand and Australia as well as on the Great Plains, occurring anywhere where the identity of the community becomes less tentative and more established. Nebraska's cultural settlement has caught up with its physical settlement. The Fergussons, whose relationship to the town in its early days had seemed so provisional and problematic, have, somewhat surprisingly, prospered. Old Ferg's Democratic allegiance avails him well in the New Deal era as he benefits from political patronage (390) and, generally, his capacities are more valued by a town that has been settled for about seventy years. Readers who expect Cather to elevate the past uncritically at the expense of the present are bound to be disappointed, as the story makes clear that time has dealt quite well with those in MacAlpin most dear to Mrs. Thorndike. But the present state of MacAlpin is of importance to Mrs. Thorndike (and to the reader) merely because of the memory of Lesley and the pathos and regret she represents. Mrs. Thorndike's reaction to latter-day contentment is a combination of outward pleasure and good cheer and inward melan-

choly, as is shown when she goes to Mrs. Fergusson's house and chats amiably about a variety of subjects, Lesley being mentioned only after the topic is circled around and avoided for nearly a full page. Mrs. Fergusson suddenly shouts, "Oh, Miss Knightly, talk to me about my Lesley. Seems so many have forgotten her, but I know you haven't" (393).

Mrs. Fergusson is certain of this, we may infer, not just because Mrs. Thorndike has known Lesley in the past and can therefore be expected to have some notional memory of her but because Mrs. Thorndike is the *kind* of person who can be expected to remember that which is not immediately before her nor of immediate relevance. Lesley has lost relevance for most people in the town simply because she is dead and therefore no longer part of daily business. But her mother knows that Lesley's former supervisor has the kind of attention, of discrimination, that can remember and care for someone long passed away whose life had no spectacular impact but who nonetheless mattered to those who knew her. This discrimination does not mark Mrs. Thorndike as morally superior but as subtle and perceptive. Though Lesley's brothers have succeeded spectacularly (their deeds as ranchers, scientists, and executives are known by Mrs. Thorndike from the daily papers), they do not have Mrs. Thorndike's fine sensibility. Even dreamy Hector does not seem to have carried the spirit of his Christmas epiphany into adulthood, becoming merely a prosperous sheep rancher. But the brothers' lack of basic aesthetic capacities does not mean they no longer care for their sister's memory; their mother makes clear that they do care. In fact, their very ordinariness seems somewhat pleasing to Mrs. Thorndike, much as that of Cuzak's boys pleases Jim Burden, although of course the Fergusson brothers are far more successful in conventional, worldly terms.

The brothers, we might say, remember Lesley's presence but not her spirit. It must be said that their mother is equivalently, though dissimilarly, lacking, for she seems nostalgic about everything and sees every change as being a change for the worse. Lesley's death seems no more tragic to her than her own move from the old house by the depot or general changes in society reflected in the quickened pace of modern life, which Mrs. Fergusson castigates. Mrs. Fergusson somewhat resembles the sentimental modernist that more adverse literary critics have made Cather out to be, one for whom nothing good can happen in the present and anything after 1920 is merely mediocrity, dross, technological superficiality. But this is not the author's position here. The story's narrative perspective sympathizes with Mrs. Fergusson's sense of mourning and sorrow, yet manages to convey a different type of nostalgia, one that is not sterile but affirmative. We are given this perspective in the story's low-key but nonetheless central revelation, when Mrs. Fergusson tells Mrs. Thorndike that one of Lesley's pupils is now teaching in Lesley's old school:

The teacher is Mandy Perkins — she was one of her little scholars. You'll like Mandy, and she loved Lesley. (395)

Lesley Fergusson dies, but passes the baton, as it were, to Mandy Perkins. Mandy's vocation and life have been inspired by Lesley, and the reader has the feeling that, though Lesley only ended up living a short life, she lived it well, well enough to have her own commitment to education echoed in the adult life of one of her pupils. Lesley's truncated life, therefore, is not in vain. She is not just a mute object of elegy, not just someone who tragically never achieved her potential. She has taught Mandy Perkins, and she has taught her well, and Mandy may in turn go on to educate scores of students of future generations who at the back of their consciousness will have Lesley Fergusson's life grafted, in a small way, onto theirs. Thus Lesley's death, though sorrowful, is not tragic, and the sadness of her loss is made less bitter by her positive contributions to a present she never got to witness.

III

Mrs. Fergusson almost inadvertently points out the truth when she gives the story its title by saying "our best years are when we're working hardest and going right ahead when we can hardly see our way out" (394). We cannot appreciate the best years as they are happening; the selfconsciousness necessary to do that only comes later, when we have the perspective and the repose to know what we have lost. But the best years are not just in the past. Whatever Mrs. Fergusson's threnodies (themselves somewhat contradicted in her own pride in Mandy Perkins's very much ongoing and present-day efforts), the best years are in the present as well, for *now* we can appreciate the lost past in a way we could not *then*, and the memory of those days is continually available. Things have turned out well for the Fergussons and for Mrs. Thorndike. If Lesley's survival would have made everybody that much happier and given a qualitative difference to everyone's life whose loss is incalculable, her legacy will persist, however circuitously.

So much of Cather's long fiction reflects on the present's relation to the past. *My Ántonia* and *Lucy Gayheart* are the closest to "The Best Years" in the way they evoke Cather's longing for her own geographical heartland. Yet also pertinent here is a novel closer to the time of writing of "The Best Years," *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, with its remembrance of an even earlier homeland of Cather's and the way the author herself comes in as a child at the end to retrospectively make sense of the story for a modern audience. Even books like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *One of Ours*, in which protagonists move to other lands as fulfillment rather than exile, have at their core the dislocations engendered by changes in residence, by what Joseph Urgo has recently labelled "migration." It is not just the tragedy

of Lesley Fergusson that conveys the sense of loss and transition in "The Best Years" but the dislocation of Evangeline Knightly/Thorndike of New England and then Nebraska and then Colorado (with occasional vacations to New England, a sort of mirror-image of Cather's own geographical emplacement during this period). Yet Cather's approach to the impermanence of life as depicted in the story is not ironic, not savage, even though Cather can be both. It is filled with a mellow regret, and a sense that losses can be mourned best when the values they represent are echoed most forcefully by those who survive.

If in Cather's early ode to the prairie in *April Twilights*, "Prairie Dawn," earliness or dawn is good in itself, by "The Best Years" earliness is most valuable when cast in the afterglow of loving retrospection. Cather's approach is not intemperately optimistic. She knows what has been left behind. Lesley's memory will only filter, in diminished and incremental fashion, into the present; she will not have direct heirs; her name (unlike Cather's own) will not be permanently part of the settled landscape. The primary effect of "The Best Years" is not to evoke a time and landscape of particular personal importance (though Cather certainly does this along the way). As demonstrated by the Australia/New Zealand reference, Cather's goal in the story is to examine the perspective in which a later time inevitably holds an earlier one. In giving us such a panoramic view of early settler societies at the beginning of the story, Cather places Lesley's fate against the background of large movements of civilization and acculturation in which Lesley's obscure destiny has meaning in the present as well as in a remembered past. In this last testament of her Great Plains literary experience, Cather depicts an affirmative nostalgia that is confident enough of its status in the present to know what it has lost in the past. Cather's affirmations are well-earned because she knows what obstacles lie in their path. And the territories she opens up for the reader are even more beloved when filled-in than when newly settled; for the best years, Cather suggests, are only fully appreciated when reflected upon from a distance.

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My Aunt Willie!

William Thomas Auld¹

Biographies, articles, etc., etc., too numerous to mention have been and are now being written about Willa Cather (witness the recent *New Yorker* headlining "What Have the Academics Done to Willa Cather?"). I intend this to be merely reminiscences of one who grew up knowing a favorite aunt who happened to be a famous person. While she had no children, Willa Cather had nieces and nephews of whom she was very fond, to whom she gave her approval and affection.

Often in the summer time, Willa came home to her parents house in Red Cloud for a few weeks. Then on some nice summer afternoon, we three children, Mary Virginia, Charles and I, clean and brushed, would visit her. The Cather house, which as the pictures show, had a veranda across the front (east side) of the house and above this was a level deck (not a sloping roof) onto which opened a door from the second floor. We would sit there and Willa would read to us, Howard Pyle's "Knights of King Arthur" or "Robinhood" or my favorite, Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book." I still have a red Morocco leather bound copy of the *Jungle Book* inscribed "To my little chum, Tom, from his Aunt Willie, 1915." Following this is our sign, sealing imprinted with the intaglio ring she always wore — this was a special cachet with which she always sealed letters, etc., to us. I do not remember the circumstance, but below this she had signed, "Willa Sibert Cather, Dec. 20, 1922."

On other occasions we might stroll to the cemetery, less than a mile distant, I think. The Cather

family plot was near the north-west corner, near where the ground sloped down to the valley below. Red Cloud is different from most river valley towns which are usually built right on the railroad which follow near the river. The Republican River here runs through a wide, flat valley, with the river bluffs near it on the south, but to the north the land stays flat for a half-mile or so and then rises to a kind of plateau where the town is situated.

In those days, Nebraska had three cities with street cars, Omaha, Lincoln and Red Cloud! Since it must have been nearly a mile from the Depot to the Royal Hotel, a horse-drawn street car carried passengers from the train to the center of town. Red Cloud had a very fine train service in those days. Two passenger trains ran between Kansas City and Denver each day, one morning and one evening. We could board the train after supper, have a good night's sleep in the Pullman and arrive in Denver in the morning. Then return to Red Cloud again overnight, with a delicious breakfast (always wonderfully baked apples) in the dining car. Red Cloud was never a "backwoods" town.

But to get back to my story, we would sit on the grass or on tombstones and Willa would tell us stories. She had the most wonderful speaking voice I have ever heard — it was fascinating to listen to her.

One occasion I well remember was the Golden Wedding Anniversary of my grandparents. They had seven children (I don't think they had lost any), and I remember all of them being there for the celebration, but my sister, Mary Virginia, says one of the boys (which one?) could not make it. We three grandchildren whose home was there were the only grandchildren able to come. The celebration was held in the Royal Hotel, the proprietor of which was Roy Oatman. (Until recently, U.S. Route 66 from Kingman, Arizona, to the Colorado River ran through a very hilly stretch just before you reached the river. Along the road you go through the town of Oatman, where the Indians had waylaid and attacked a party and had scalped a man by the name of Oatman. He survived and later built the Royal Hotel. I guess as a small child, I must have seen him, but I have no recollection of it. His son, Roy Oatman, was proprietor when I was a child.) Anyway, it was a grand celebration.

The Bishop of the Episcopal Church came down from Hastings, Willa was master of ceremonies and told stories of life in Virginia when she was a small child. How her father and mother would ice skate, how Grandfather would cut an evergreen tree branch and seat her on it and pull her along as if on a sled.

Fortunately, as I grew older, my contact with Aunt Willa did not cease. As a student at Amherst College in Massachusetts, I was able to get to New York occasionally on weekends or vacations and sometimes would see her there. Later in the summer of 1943, when I was in the Services, I was detailed to accompany a discharged mildly psychotic service man back to his family in Brooklyn. I was granted a "five days

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delay" in route to stay in New York, and Jane, my wife, managed to accompany me. While there, I called Aunt Willa and she invited us to have dinner with her. We met at a public restaurant, had dinner, and when it was over, Willa sat us down in the waiting area and talked with us for over an hour! This was typical of Willa Cather! She had never met Jane and felt she must have us for dinner, but it was so arranged that if she had not liked and approved of my wife, after dinner was over, that would be it!

As usual, Willa had left herself an escape hatch, but I was pleased and happy that Jane had passed the test! I think it was in the February after this that Jane started sending Willa by air-mail some fresh camellia blossoms, which she always liked and responded to with nice little handwritten notes. The last of these she wrote just one month before her death; it was typewritten, she explained, because of arthritis — she could no longer write by hand. I hope I still have this note among my papers.

The last time I saw Willa was in March '46, when I was on my way home from Berlin, where I had spent four months with men from the 82nd Air-borne who occupied the American sector of Berlin. A group of us met every evening and entertained and escorted to dinner any V.I.P. who was forced to stop over on his way to or from Moscow. One of these was Yehudi Menuhin, whom Willa had known since he and his sisters were children. We took him to dinner and the movies afterward.

The ships that brought us home left us at Camp Beale for two days, and the second day we were allowed off base to go to New York. I called Willa and was able to see her in her apartment that evening. That was the last time I ever saw her, just a year before she died. I have many happy memories of the years when I knew her.

NOTE

¹Dr. Auld is the son of Willa Cather's sister Jessica Cather Auld.

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