

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

The Willa Cather Society

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"Willow Shade," Virginia, home of Willa Cather (1874-83).

— Photo Courtesy of David T. Parry

Destinations and Admonitions: Willa Cather's *Obscure Destinies*

Joseph R. Urgo
Bryant College

But certainty generally is illusion,
and repose is not the destiny of man.

— Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,
The Path of the Law (1897)

Obscure Destinies (1932) stands in opposition to the universal application of experience, or to the transference of experience into admonition. Conclusions that seem irrefutable in one of the text's three narratives are inapplicable, even absurd, if transferred to another of the stories. In the introductory paragraph to the last of the three narratives, Cather writes, "we like to think that there are certain unalterable realities," but such certainties have no real existence, not even "somewhere at the bottom of things" (193). Cather's trilogy suggests that what is true in one context or true to one particular destiny has obscure reference to

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Virginia Seminar Plans for June 21-28, 1997

Plans are taking shape for the Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar, to be held in Winchester, Virginia, June 21-28, 1997. The Seminar topic is "Willa Cather's Southern Connections," and seminar presentations and discussions will focus on the importance of Southern culture and issues throughout Cather's career, on her complex connections to Southern writing and writers such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, Ellen Glasgow and others. The intricate and troubling racial dynamics of Cather's fiction, especially *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, will be a major topic, as will the important issues of childhood and continuity raised by Cather's early years in Virginia. And, as always, other issues of ongoing interest to Cather scholars, teachers, and readers will be a part of the week's program as well, and a variety of theoretical perspectives will be represented.

A varied group of international scholars will form the seminar faculty. Familiar figures in Cather

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VIRGINIA SEMINAR PLANS

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scholarship such as Susan Rosowski, Bruce Baker, John Murphy, and Merrill Maguire Skaggs, newer scholars such as Joe Urgo and Ann Fisher-Wirth, and the indispensable directors of the 1995 Quebec Seminar, Robert Thacker and Michael Peterman, will all be in Winchester, as well as Cather's most recent biographer, Cynthia Griffin Wolff. In addition, critics of Southern writing and culture will join the faculty, including Noel Polk, widely honored scholar of twentieth-century Southern writing, especially that of William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, and Patricia Yaeger, author of *Honey-Mad Women* and a forthcoming book on Southern women writers. The faculty will be joined by additional speakers, including John Vlatch, scholar of Southern folklore and author of *Back of the Big House: The World the Slaves Made*, Phyllis Palmer, feminist historian of Southern women's work and of U.S. race relations in the twentieth century, and a panel of Washington-area African Americanists, led by Marilyn Mobley, who will discuss African American contexts for *Sapphira*.

The seminar will be based on the park-like campus of Shenandoah University, and participants will be lodged in a comfortable adjacent motel. This location will facilitate explorations of the landscape, architecture and culture in which Cather spent her formative early childhood years. Susan and David Parry, owners of Willow Shade, Cather's childhood home, have invited us to visit this handsome, evocative house and are organizing a Virginia "country tour" and picnic that will take us to many sites that were important to Cather's work and life. We will visit local landmarks, talk with local historians and meet some of the large contingent of Cather's who still live in the Winchester area. Lucia Woods Lindley will talk with us about photographing Virginia Cather sites, and we will be introduced to local quilting traditions, Blue Ridge folklore and Virginia gospel music — all of which are pertinent especially to *Sapphira*. Additionally, the seminar group will spend a day in Washington, D.C. based at George Washington University (where Cather's cousin was a member of the faculty) discussing Cather's Washington connections, which are especially evident in *The Professor's House* and *Sapphira*, and exploring local art museums.

A call for seminar papers will be issued soon. In the meantime, if you have questions or suggestions, or if you would like to discuss possible paper topics, please contact one of the seminar's co-directors, John Jacobs (site director) or Ann Romines (program director), at the addresses below. And remember to save the week of June 21-28 for the Seventh International Cather Seminar. It promises to be a memorable week!

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Shenandoah University, site of the 1997 International Seminar. Motel where seminarians will be quartered is at lower right. Across the parking lot to the left is Henkel Hall, where most meetings will be held.

Shenandoah University Hosting International Willa Cather Seminar

from *Winchester Star*, Monday, April 1, 1996
By Cynthia Cather

The Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar will be held next year at Shenandoah University in Winchester.

Cather was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and Virginia native. She died in April 1947. Her childhood home, Willow Shade on U.S. 50 West near Gore, has been restored by a Washington, D.C., couple. Her birthplace is on the same road.

The seminar, scheduled for June 21-28, 1997, will focus on Cather's Southern roots, Ann Romines, an American literature professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and program director for the event, said Tuesday.

Co-sponsors of the seminar are the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

More than 100 Cather scholars and fans from across the United States and around the world are expected to attend. Some events will be free and open to the public. The community will be involved as much as possible.

"This series has been going on since the early 1980s and is usually held every two or three years in places associated with Cather's career," Romines said. "We've never been to Winchester before, and we're very excited about coming."

Past seminars have been held in Nebraska; Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Quebec City, Quebec.

"Those places were settings in some of Cather's most famous works," said Romines, an accomplished Cather scholar. "We tend to think of her as a Western writer, but she had strong Southern connections. That tends to be forgotten."

Born in 1873 near Gore, Cather moved with her family at age 9 to Red Cloud. She only made a few trips back to Virginia. But Cather did return to her Frederick County birthplace to write her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which tells the story of a female plantation owner in the 1850s who suspects her husband, a miller, is having an affair with a mulatto girl. The plantation mistress' daughter, an abolitionist, helps the slave girl escape to Canada, tearing apart the family. The family reunites when one of Sapphira's granddaughters dies. After the Civil War, the slave girl returns home and a 5-year-old girl is among her greeters. That child is Cather.

"I think it's very telling that her last novel is set in Virginia," Romines said. "It shows the place she came from was on her mind throughout her life."

John Jacobs, an English professor at Shenandoah and site coordinator for the seminar, said the university has never hosted a literary seminar of such a high caliber. "It's probably the single most important literary conference we've had here," said Jacobs, who attended last year's Willa Cather Seminar in Quebec City and invited the group of Cather scholars to come to Winchester. "They really liked the idea."



War Department Building, described in *The Professor's House*, as it appeared in the 1890s when Cather visited and worked in Washington, D.C.

DESTINATIONS AND ADMONITIONS

(Continued)

another. Early in her career, Cather forecast the central dilemma of her text: "We are always taking temporary tendencies of humanity and regarding them as final. But the final tendencies and destiny are in the keeping of a greater hand than ours" (*The World and the Parish*, 269). Lived experience amounts to an accumulation of temporary tendencies, and the quest for repose amounts to nothing more than (again, from the opening of "Two Friends") a return "to something . . . known before," something understood as true because it is familiar, "vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us courage." Truths that are very personal are usually considered very true, but it does not necessarily follow that such truths are transferable, or communicable. In this sense, truth, in Cather's trilogy, may be nothing more than the veracity of one's own beliefs.

Obscure Destinies contains three discrete narratives, and each narrative closes with the name of a particular city and date: "Neighbour Rosicky" (New York 1928); "Old Mrs. Harris" (New Brunswick 1931); "Two Friends" (Pasadena 1931). In common practice, such place and temporal designation is meant to indicate where and when the preceding narrative was written. "New York 1928" thus marks the narrative of the final days in the life of a Nebraska farmer; "New Brunswick 1931" marks the site of writing about the Tennessee family who moved to Colorado and then didn't do so well; "Pasadena 1931" signals the narrative origins of the story about the memory of two friends who had a falling out. Of course, New York, New Brunswick, and Pasadena are all places where Willa Cather lived, travelled to, and wrote. She moved around a lot. In 1928 she was writing "Neighbour Rosicky" in New York; early in 1931 she wrote "Old Mrs. Harris" on Grand Manan Island; later that year she travelled to Pasadena and wrote "Two Friends." *Obscure Destinies* thus acknowledges the method of its own production as a matter of transience — first New York, then New Brunswick, finally California. Nonetheless, Cather designed the book as a continuous, trilogic text. For example, the fact that "Old Mrs. Harris" would make a larger single volume than *My Mortal Enemy* indicates that Cather saw the three stories in *Obscure Destinies* as related in some fashion and wanted them to be read together, perhaps more like Mrs. Rosen's cross-stitch, but cohesive nonetheless. Each narrative segment in *Obscure Destinies* marks a temporary tendency: a transitory writing place from which the author cast a fleeting indication of the human predicament. The volume must be considered as a whole in order to bring into focus the cross-stitch narrative that emerged from Cather's cross-continental treks.

Movement and juxtaposition are at the heart of *Obscure Destinies*. In the context of mobility, the

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idea of destiny brings to mind destination: how it is that in the space of three years a person could find herself in New York and then New Brunswick and then Pasadena, writing; or how it is that writing, begun in the mind, as an expression of certain unalterable realities, reaches its destination and is construed as stimuli, cross-stitched into another set of experiences as stimulation. Just as one's destiny may be fulfilled upon the arrival at a place or into a predicament that was not willed, so too the destination, or interpreted meaning, of what is written will be transformed as it moves from one mind to another. *Obscure Destinies* may thus be seen to mark Cather's acknowledgment that the final tendencies of her own work were not in her hands. Cather's trilogy thus forms a meditation on ends, on destinations and conclusions, and encourages speculation on the extent to which such finalities might be useful or credible for more than momentary appreciation, or application. The remarkable quality of the narrative sequence as a whole is the unavoidable conclusion, which this essay maps, that there is very little that one can impart from the vantage point of destination. *Obscure Destinies* suggests that those who have come to some conclusion, or whose experience has left them in possession of great insights into life — wisdom, if you will — will find it impossible and probably unwise to apply what they know to the lives of others. Destiny is closure, and closure is irrelevant to the unfolding of present circumstances.

Cather accomplishes the design of *Obscure Destinies* by writing three stories that implicitly contradict one another in terms of narrative implication and dramatic truth. As a result, criticism of the volume tends to center on one or another of the stories, with very few critics venturing to discuss the text as a whole. There are a few exceptions. Kathleen Danker finds unity in the three stories, "use of pastoral themes and imagery." According to Danker, "Cather traces the promise, the decline, and the death of the pastoral as an ideal of human life" (24). Danker's conclusions echo Susan Rosowski's sense that the text anticipates "the dark romanticism of [Cather's] final novels" (204) which follow. Michael Leddy finds unity in the narrative aesthetics of the volume, which features "three variations on the possibilities of observation and narration." Leddy's reading rescues linearity, and he finds that "the volume moves toward obscurity and darkness, from a life that is complete, beautiful and intelligible to lives that are incomplete, isolated, and puzzling" (141). However, these efforts are isolated within the more common critical practice of centering on one or another of the stories in the volume. Critical analyses searching for thematic continuities are inevitably blocked by the absence of such continuities. In fact, Cather's text contains three narratives at odds with one another at the very basic level of plot implication.

In the middle narrative of *Obscure Destinies*, youth and age are at odds, and old Mrs. Harris dies estranged from her daughter and unnoticed by her granddaughter. At her death, Mrs. Harris "slipped out of the Templeton's story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris" (190). The narrative concludes with this hopeful suggestion that the young people will come to appreciate Mrs. Harris as they mature. Thus the discerning reader may conclude that only through their own experience of aging do the young comprehend the predicaments of their elders. But to draw such a conclusion, the reader would have to suppress a reading of the narrative that follows "Old Mrs. Harris" in the text. In "Two Friends," the narrator recalls that ever since she was a young girl she "admired Dillon and Trueman," old as they are, because they were "secure and established" (197) and seemed to represent all that was honorable and enviable in life. If anything, the jack-playing narrator of the volume's final story recalls being a bit too much in awe of her elders. The young girl sees the two men as representative of "certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things," and because of this tendency she is sorely disappointed when the friendship proves less than eternal and the unalterable reality breaks in two. Nonetheless, the two men serve as the girl's anchors; they are the vivid memories she holds, the sources of renewal to which she returns again and again, like the seagulls that alight on their remote islands to breed. I don't know if Vickie or Victoria could possibly live long enough to see Mrs. Harris in this way.

The Templeton's move out West was a disaster for the family; there was no greater mistake made in that family than the day that Mr. Templeton "got the idea of bettering himself." His sense that "his boys would have a better chance in Colorado" (132) is regrettable. In fine Catherian understatement, we are told that "So far, things had not gone well with him" (133). One would not want to draw fixed conclusions from the Templeton's experience and apply them to "Neighbour Rosicky," however. Each person in the Templeton household regrets the move from Tennessee and the subsequent loss of status and space. Indeed, David Stouck describes the story as one which is "informed by quiet regret" (221). Among the Rosickys, on the other hand, the move out West, to Nebraska, was salvational. Anton Rosicky's life was lived in three countries, Bohemia, England, and the United States. In New York (where this narrative was written) "he was tormented by a longing to run away" (30) and that longing served him well as he, unlike Templeton, betters himself with each move west. But this success brings tension into his life as he attempts to translate his experience into advice for his sons. Much of Rosicky's final days are spent "trying to find what he wanted for his boys, and why it was he so hungered to feel sure they would be here, working this very land,

after he was gone" (58). In this sense Templeton and Rosicky have something in common, different as they are in spirit and destiny. Neither man's life is instructive, even if one may be preferable to the other. Templeton's failures won't keep his daughter from moving away, and Rosicky's tales of the evil city won't keep his son from becoming an urbanite. Neither man can translate destiny into admonition.

In *Obscure Destinies*, the transference of experience into common vision accounts for the textual definition of common bonds. Such transference is at the heart of the attraction the narrator in "Two Friends" has for the friendship she witnesses. Dillon and Trueman go to the theater together often, and the narrator waxes over the way in which "they saw the play over again as they talked of it." Their conversation inspires a gloss on Catherian poetics: "perhaps whatever is seen by the narrator as he speaks is sensed by the listener, quite irrespective of words." The thing not named doesn't have to be named, if it is recognized as a shared inclination. The narrator, moreover, is included in the transaction, and "in some way the lives of those two men came across to me as they talked" (218). Sensing the same thing is a valuable quality in human relations. It accounts for the success of the Rosicky marriage ("Life had gone well with them because, at bottom, they had the same ideas about life," [24]) — but the disappearance of such tendencies is what finally destroys the friendship in "Two Friends" and leaves the family at odds in "Old Mrs. Harris." A similar cohesion connects the narratives of *Obscure Destinies*. The trilogy is held together by this sense of transference, often by negation, from one set of circumstances to another, a cross-stitching from one point in time and space to somewhere else, another city, a few years later. It may well be that this impression of cohesion has no referent, that it is more an implication of something, pure and simple, with no anchor, no "somewhere at the bottom of things." The thing not named in this text is not named because it doesn't exist materially, it is only a temporary tendency.

When Dillon dies and Trueman leaves town, the narrator in "Two Friends" grieves the loss of more than the friendship. She expresses "the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted — one of the truths we want to keep" (230). However, this is exactly what happens to truth in *Obscure Destinies*, it gets wasted in the transference from possessor to interlocutor, it slips into the dust and gets lost, "like the last residuum of material things, — the soft bottom resting place" (212) of ideas. Truth is thus possessed fleetingly, and enlightenment, if it occurs at all, passes through experience like a season. Doctor Burleigh, looking over the view from Rosicky's gravesite, thinks that "Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had got to it

at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful" (711). These words end the narrative, and Rosicky's life does have a completeness to it, but it is not something he can pass on to his sons. Rudolph and Polly won't last on the farm, and by all indications in the narrative, they are bound for the city. Rosicky's life is complete, but these other lives are yet in the process of completion. What was for Rosicky a destination, the site of repose, is for his sons a starting place. We know as well from the example of the Templeton's that even as a destination, the West does not always lead to metaphors of completion and satisfaction.

Particular destinies in the text are thus obscure, problematic, and ambiguous, as far as their value can be discerned. Rosicky's destiny — a life of completion — is nontransferable, however admirable; the destiny of Mrs. Harris, to regret Tennessee and slip quietly out of the story, is unenviable, though the woman possesses great dignity; and the destiny of Trueman and Dillon, while not uncommon, is certainly unfortunate — and would be unremarkable except for the impression left on the narrator of the story. Indeed, at one point in the volume the value of a clear and precisely understood destiny is negated. When Vickie gets a scholarship to the University of Michigan, Mr. Rosen asks her why she wants to go to college. Their exchange leads to her assertion that she doesn't know why, she just wants it. Mr. Rosen is pleased with her at this point, because her desire conforms to his own beliefs. "Then if you want it without any purpose at all, you will not be disappointed," he says and then quotes Michelet — "The end is nothing, the road is all" — telling Vickie to keep that quotation with her college credentials. "Vickie knew he meant her to take it along as an antidote, a corrective for whatever colleges might do to her" (158-59). It is not easy, in other words, to maintain an *obscure destiny* while all around there are forces insisting upon definition and intention.

The three narratives about death — death of people and their communities — paradoxically constitute a text which emphasizes the prerogatives of the living to recast their own lives according to present desires, not past exemplars. "The end is nothing, the road is all" — Cather liked this quotation enough to employ it in *Not Under Forty*, to describe the shepherd people in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. "A shepherd people is not driving toward anything," Cather observes, and exists free of "the relentless mechanical gear which directs every moment of modern life toward accuracy" (99). An obsession with destination, with ends (or with the bottom line, in present-day terminology) obscures the deeper significance of human life. *Obscure Destinies* suggests in its various narrative and textual representations that little of anything is continuous in life, few lessons hold from one generation to the next, there are no unalterable realities to be gleaned from experience. Paradoxically, it is this observation that holds together Cather's

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trilogy. Cohesion results in the recognition that what binds is temporary, and thus of great value.

Cather's text undercuts seriously any claims to authority based upon experience, age, or textual closure. Vickie Templeton's antidote is thus at the core of the trilogy. As a guard against what colleges try to do, or what motivates anyone who seeks to educate, instruct, or advise, one must preserve the Catherian antidote: living is no application of principles but the unfolding of desires made less obscure in time. However, as obscurity passes and the thing gets named, so to speak, it slips out of life into the dust. In this sense Mrs. Harris' bedroom, in the hallway between the kitchen and the dining room, in a space "rather like a passageway" (92), marks the space of all existence. And although "we yet like to think that there are certain unalterable realities" that can be imparted or transferred from one to another like an estate or a heritage, Cather's trilogy suggests strongly otherwise. Those who don't die in *Obscure Destinies* must move on, must "follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable" (190). In "Neighbour Rosicky" Rudolph and Polly will move off the farm and into the untried city; in "Old Mrs. Harris" Vickie will move to Ann Arbor to attend college; in "Two Friends" Trueman packs up and moves to California. Each of these characters slips out of the narrative, not into death (as do Rosicky, Harris, and Dillon), but into yet another obscure destiny.

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News Items from the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

— Photo by Robert Graning

❖ Normally I start my columns with good news. This time, though, I do not. On June 10, Miss Josephine Frisbie, one of the two remaining founders of the WCPM, died in Omaha. Jo was a pioneer and a visionary. Born in 1903 and reared in Red Cloud and Amboy, Nebraska, she graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1920 and the University of Nebraska in 1927 (B.S.) and 1928

(M.S.). She continued graduate studies at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and Omaha University. She taught school in Norfolk, Nebraska; Concordia, Kansas; Fremont, Nebraska; and Omaha. While at Omaha Central High School (1936-1968), she served as chairperson of the English Department. From 1940-1960 she also worked as a guidance counselor. Throughout her teaching career, Jo provided continuous leadership in many Omaha organizations. Jo had the distinction of being the first woman to serve on the Omaha Library Board. She was president of the Omaha Education Association from 1948-1950.

❖ The death of Margaret Cather Shannon, Willa Cather's niece (daughter of Roscoe), was more sad news. Dr. Tom Auld, Willa Cather's nephew (Jessica's son), informed us that Mrs. Shannon had died suddenly and unexpectedly on April 14. With her death comes the loss of one more link to the past. Mrs. Shannon had wonderful childhood and young adult memories of her aunt; she and her husband, Richard, who predeceased her, were very interested in and supportive of the WCPM. We will miss her; I will miss her.

❖ On a brighter note, the highlight of this past winter was Julie Harris's visit to Red Cloud. She was here to film a segment for Nebraska Educational Television's *Plains Voices* series, the one which features Cather's "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" and "Winter Memories," excerpted from *O Pioneers!*, and adapted for *Plains Voices* by Joel Geyer, the producer/director of the series. Filming was done at the Cather childhood home where Miss Harris introduced and narrated the Cather pieces and also a segment from Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*. The series format is very similar to that of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

❖ It's nice to settle into the "tourist" season. In April visitors came from fifteen states and five

Joel Geyer, producer, gives final suggestions to Julie Harris, who is sitting in the parlor of Willa Cather's childhood home, during the shooting of a segment for Nebraska Educational Television's Plains Voices series.

— Photo Courtesy of Pat Phillips



foreign countries, in May thirty states were represented and four foreign countries, and June brought people from thirty-four states and four foreign countries. A dedicated group of Asbury College students led by Dr. John Paul Vincent (English) and Dr. James Hamilton (philosophy) spent the day in Red Cloud in early June. They were returning to Kentucky from New Mexico, where they had taken a course entitled "Cowboys, Indians, and Missionary Priests on the Rio Grande." As part of the course, they read *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, visited all the sites, and studied the historical aspects of the novel.

❖ "Ecology of Community" was the topic of the annual Prairie Institute which met from June 3-7 at Red Cloud High School. Thirteen students spent an intensive week in class, meeting from 7:30 to 5:00 daily. Evening speakers complemented and expanded the coursework and stimulated additional discussion. The presenters were Cloyd Clark, a District Judge from McCook knowledgeable about the community and the Poppers (Professors Frank and Deborah of Rutgers University who promoted the Buffalo Commons theory); Don Cunningham, editor of *Nebraskaland* magazine; and John Carter, curator of photographs at the Nebraska State Historical Society. On Thursday evening participants attended a "pioneer dinner" at Red Cloud's Little Red School House. The Institute was made up mostly of teachers from across the state — from Oshkosh and Gering to Omaha. A participant who came from Gaithersburg, Maryland,

wants to start a Cather Chapter of the WCPM in her community. This interdisciplinary course, offered for either graduate or undergraduate credit, will meet in Red Cloud next year from June 2-6, 1997 and feature the same instructors: James Fitzgibbon (science, geology, paleontology), Dr. Mark Eifler (history), and Dr. Charles Peek (English). Next year's topic is "Lost and Found: The Evolution of Prairie Pathways." Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* will be among the texts studied.

❖ On May 14, 15 and 16, "Pastimes and Playthings" offered three days of old-fashioned fun and tours to 150 elementary students from Nebraska and Kansas communities. In addition, more than the usual number of fourth grade students participated in our newest educational offering for young students, the 1880s school day at the Little Red School House.

❖ The Nebraska State Historical Society Board met in Red Cloud on May 31. At the end of the meeting, members toured the properties in and around Red Cloud. To assess the needs of the buildings prior to the meeting, Lynne Ireland, Associate Director, and Brent Carmack, Historic Sites Coordinator, carefully explored each of the properties.

❖ Articles about Cather and the WCPM appeared in *Historic Traveler* (March 1996) and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame's magazine, *Persimmon Hill* (Spring 1996). In the book section of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on Sunday, April 21, 1996, Attilio Favorini published an article titled "Willa Cather: Enigmatic Writer Discovered Her Creative Voice in Pittsburgh." (Willa Cather left Nebraska for Pittsburgh 100 years ago, in 1896.)

❖ We are grateful to Melissa L. Hamilton for giving us a bound copy of her Master's thesis, *Willa*



Jim Fitzgibbon points out an interesting aspect of the Republican River to Prairie Institute participants.

— Photo Courtesy of Pat Phillips

Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop: Narrative and Historical Inspiration. The Abstract states that "The purpose of this study is to look at Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and investigate Cather's use of history as both a foundation and

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inspiration for her narrative It has also been commonly argued that Cather's representation of some historical figures in this narrative do not accurately reflect historical record. This study will examine images of these persons. This study raises questions about the nature of both historical and literary interpretation and the relevance both have in relation to our reading of Cather's historical work." The thesis, submitted for a degree at Old Dominion University, is on file and available for reading at the WCPM archives.

❖ Nebraska Public Radio broadcast this year's Spring Conference panel discussion and evening performance of the New Year's eve party from *My Mortal Enemy* on three successive Sunday afternoons in June. This was made possible by the mini-grant we received from the Nebraska Humanities Council.

❖ This annual Norma Ross Walter Scholarship was announced at the Spring Conference. Winner of the \$8,000 scholarship was Kristine Kopperud from Wayne, Nebraska. She will attend Augustana College this fall. Kristine competed with more than fifty other very well qualified students for the award.

❖ The Library of Congress and Scott Foresman are working with Rymel Multimedia on an Author's Works/Writing Our Lives project which will feature fifty-four authors. The 7 CD ROM series is intended for students ages 11-18 (grades 6-12). Willa Cather will be featured on the Grade 11 disk. The intent of this project is to draw students to the selected writers.

❖ Newsletter readers can look forward to an unusual number of upcoming Cather-related events: the Pittsburgh Cather Conference on September 6, 7 and 8; the Nebraska Literature Festival on September 21 in Lincoln; the Western Literature Association meeting in Lincoln, October 2-5; Cather's



The Harling House (My Ántonia) owned by Bernard and Nancy Picchi of Bernardsville, New Jersey, received another boost toward restoration this summer when the Picchi's had the house painted its original colors.

— Photo Courtesy of Pat Phillips

birthday, December 7, with a possible special performance/symposium from Opera Omaha prior to her birthday; the annual Spring Conference scheduled for April 25-26, 1997; the American Literature Association meeting in Baltimore, May 22-26, 1997; the Prairie Institute, June 2-6, 1997 in Red Cloud, and the International Seminar at Winchester, Virginia, June 21-28, 1997.

Queening It: Excess in *My Mortal Enemy**

Ann Fisher-Wirth
University of Mississippi

In *The Lover*, Marguerite Duras writes of the "superstition . . . that consists in believing in a political solution to the personal problem" (68). This is an unfashionable sentiment these days; we are often reminded that the personal is political, and that everything, including everything regarding women or womanhood, is liable to a political analysis and very likely a political solution, so that to deflect away from the political is seen as an act of reactionary bad faith. But I believe that Duras's remark is in fact accurate for *My Mortal Enemy* — that to attempt to analyze or discuss Cather's novel by focusing primarily on what it says about the position of women in patriarchy, or about the inadequacy and dangers of romantic idealization in heterosexual relations, is to misread and shortchange it pretty severely.

Here is an example of how, in Cather criticism, such political analysis has worked. In what is generally a very good book called *Cather, Canon, and the*

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Politics of Reading, Deborah Carlin writes of *My Mortal Enemy* that the novel is at war with itself, that its two halves “cannot, finally, be reconciled textually,” for — according to Carlin — the first half is about “Myra’s subversive power within, and alternative readings of, heterosexual relations” and the second half is about “[locating] meaning in religion and mortality” (57). The problem arises therefore that “the Myra we meet in part one has been renounced both by the Myra of part two and by the text. She is to blame for her unhappiness, and she must be blamed if the text is to achieve symmetry or balance as it has been constructed” (55-56).

What Carlin seems really to be arguing is that *My Mortal Enemy* is a closeted lesbian novel that chickens out halfway through. She argues that Myra’s best relationships throughout the novel are with women, not with Oswald: “though not overtly lesbian,” Carlin writes, such friendships as Myra has with Helena Modjeska and the poet Anne Aylward “present an implicit alternative to heterosexuality” and “evinced a kind of romantic devotion and a profound lack of conflict directly in contrast to her marriage” (42). In the first half of the novel, Carlin avers, marriage is presented as “at best a disagreeable and at worst a disastrous choice for women and men, and romance is more easily located in female friendship than in heterosexual bonding” (43). Carlin describes the heterosexuality as “stilted” (42), and Myra and Oswald as miserably locked together in a “sadistic marriage” (48). Finally, echoing what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has written of endings in women-authored novels, Carlin maintains that “Myra, who has engineered the breakdown of the romance novel in part one . . . must die in the second half of the novel because she cannot be contained or explained any other way” (51, citing DuPlessis 15-16).

Problems arise with this kind of feminist interpretation, which locates the desire of *My Mortal Enemy* in a dismantling of romanticized passion or a critique of what Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality.” Carlin herself discusses the unforgettable scene when Madame Modjeska’s friend sings the *Casta Diva* aria from Bellini’s opera “Norma” (which I will return to in detail below) as the locus of the novel’s deepest meaning and the “clearest expression of how this text asks to be read” (46). She writes that this scene, “perhaps more than any other in all her work, typifies Cather’s narrative poetics with its absence of signified meaning and its insistence on being read with something close to what Keats defined as negative capability, ‘of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’” (45). Yet Carlin herself wants to embed the *Casta Diva* scene in a context of reasons, a clue to which is the fact that she mistakenly places the aria “after [Norma’s] discovery of her lover’s, Pollione’s, affair with a young woman” (45, emphasis mine). In truth, the situation is far more complex. What Carlin sees as a prayer for peace uttered by a Druid priestess who knows she has been betrayed by her Roman proconsul lover is in fact

a prayer for peace uttered by a Druid priestess who has been betrayed but does not yet know it, who is still passionately in love, and is therefore trying to stave off her people’s attack on the Romans. That is to say, the aria, which quintessentially expresses the “hidden richness” of Myra, the “compelling, passionate, overmastering something” (48) for which Nellie Birdseye has no name, arises in its supernal beauty precisely from the kind of situation Carlin would undo, precisely from the agony and tangle of highly melodramatic, heterosexual passion. Opera is excess, sheer expressiveness, and “Norma,” which gives us the riddling clue to the novel, is no less — in fact, a great deal more — romantic and melodramatic than Myra’s grand gestures.

To read the novel in the light of Cather’s lifelong passion for drama and opera, and for human behaviors characterized by the dramatic and the operatic, suggests how *My Mortal Enemy* has often been misread and has come under a lot of criticism for, I think, the wrong reasons — reasons based on our privileging the sane welfare of the individual rather than intensity or transcendence. Myra Henshawe is nothing if not dramatic. Nellie’s early fantasy of Myra’s magic is not false, inaccurate, despite Aunt Lydia’s remark that since their splendid elopement Myra and Oswald have only been “as happy as most people” (17); it is just not predictive. It is the imaginative overlay, the poetry or drama arising from and genuinely expressive of the moment in which it is enacted. The part a stage actress acts, if the play is great, may not express *her* life truly, but it expresses *life* truly — and the situation is intensified because Myra is the actress of her own existence; she plays the parts that will express her, moment to moment. Drama, then, becomes the overlay, the excess, which reaches for and testifies to the “something not said” (*NUF* 50), resembles what René Girard calls “metaphysical desire” (*Deceit* 83). *My Mortal Enemy* is one of the bravest and greatest of Cather’s novels, and it has almost always been given way too civilized a reading — partly, I think, because Cather is a woman writer and we (unlike, say, the Russians, with someone like the poet Anna Akhmatova) have a deep aversion to finding woman writers genuinely tragic.

In an excellent discussion of *My Mortal Enemy*, Hermione Lee talks about the thoroughgoing dramatic quality of the novel. “*My Mortal Enemy*,” she writes, “is as dramatic as *The Waste Land*. Of all Cather’s novels it is the one which most concentratedly shows the legacy of her theatrical apprenticeship” (211) during the 1890s, when she wrote drama and music criticism for several Lincoln papers. Not only does Cather organize the novel dramatically in “a prologue and two acts” (211) — with the prologue taking place in Parthia, Illinois, when Nellie Birdseye first meets Myra and Oswald Henshawe and first tells us the oft-repeated story of their long-ago elopement; Act One taking place at Christmastime in New York City when

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Nellie is 15; and Act Two taking place in an unnamed Western city ten years later, when Myra is dying of "two fatal maladies" (74). Not only does Cather construct many of the novel's scenes as if they took place on stage, with props like Oswald's glass of whisky or topaz cufflinks, or like the key Myra and Oswald fight about; with walkons like the New Yorkers bustling about, the street sweepers, the "old man selling violets" (MME 25); with posed and minor characters such as Ewan Gray at the station, Anne Aylward in her bathchair, the Polish soprano Emelia and the great actress Helena Modjeska; and with "vividly contrasted tableaux of secrets, asides, conspiracies, subterfuges, and confrontations" (Lee 214). But also, and pre-eminently, Myra "is the playwright and star of her own life" (Lee 214).

Merrill Skaggs suggests that Cather based Myra Henshawe on the actress Clara Morris, whose performance in *Camille* Cather reviewed in 1893, writing of her "medley of passions and emotions so great, so boundless that even the most emotional plays of the most emotional age can scarcely give them room to vent themselves. . . . Sometimes . . . her body writhes as though it were being literally torn asunder to let out the great soul within her" (KA 263; *Journal* 23 November 1893, 5). In fact, it is generally agreed upon that Cather based Myra Henshawe on another woman (Myra Tyndale, sister-in-law of Cather's old friend Julius Tyndale) (Woodress 380), but the point remains that in thinking of Myra one thinks of tremendous passion, tremendous joy and rage. From beginning to end, everything she does is gestural, slightly larger than life, gorgeously or chillingly histrionic. Imagine her, for instance, standing "markedly and pointedly still, with her shoulders back and her head lifted" (5), that first night in Parthia, waiting like a leading lady for Nellie to cross the room. Imagine her, as Aunt Lydia tells it, the night of her elopement — how she comes out the door "with her head high, and that quick little bouncing step of hers" (16), and her supporting cast around her ("We girls were all in the sleighs and the boys stood in the snow holding the horses" [16]). Or — to take an instance from late in the novel — imagine the staged beauty of her death, "wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea" (101). She conceives of her own life in terms of Shakespearian drama, seeing the cliff to which she is taken as Gloucester's cliff in *Lear* (72), seeing herself as persecuted royalty ("Oh, let me be buried in the king's highway!" she quotes from *Richard II* [92]), lying back ill near the end, repeating by heart "the long declamations from *Richard II* or *King John*" (83). The climactic moments of her life are richly allusive. I've mentioned Bellini and Shakespeare. Think, too, of her elopement with Oswald. Denied access to her lover by a dynastic (here, Irish Catholic) guardian, she flees in the snowy night from her great-uncle's estate, the

American dungeon/castle that becomes a convent, as if by magic, soon after her departure. What, in its broad outlines and fairytale enchantment, could be more like Madeline's flight with Porphyro in Keats's "The Eve of Saint Agnes"? The leading lady of her own daily experience, Myra reminds me also of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, always queening it, attended by a flawed but stricken lover, for whom she can never fade. "Age cannot dull, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety," Antony says of his queen. Or, as Oswald tells Nellie after Myra's death, "I'd rather have been clawed by her, as she used to say, than petted by any other woman I've ever known. These last years it's seemed to me that I was nursing the mother of the girl who ran away with me. Nothing ever took that girl from me. She was a wild, lovely creature" (104). Usually taken to indicate Oswald's inability to cope with Myra's aging, the lines seem to me instead to speak of his love and of something deathless about Myra's passion. "She gives you those moments of absolute reality of experience, of positive knowledge that are the test of all great art" — Cather is writing in these lines of Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra, but they describe as well something of the effect of Myra Henshawe:

The thing itself is in her, the absolute quality that all books write of, all songs sing of. . . . And this reminds me of what Plutarch says, that Cleopatra's chiefest charm was not in her beautiful face, nor her keen wit, nor her wealth of wisdom, but "in the immensity of what she had to give," in her versatility, her intensity, her sensitiveness to every emotion, her whole luxuriant personality. (KA 295; *Courier*, 26 October 1895, 6-7)



In "The Novel D meubl ," Cather defines the necessary ingredients for great drama as "one passion, and four walls" (NUF 51). A drama, then, is the staging of a passion. But there is a sense, as well, in which a passion is the staging of a passion; any given passion — say, Nellie's for Myra, Myra's for Oswald, Myra's for money — is not only itself but also the metonymic enactment of passion itself. Just as we can't see the wind directly but know its existence by its effect on surrounding objects, so we can't see passion directly but know its existence in its enactment. At this point, passion — or to shift the term, desire — reveals its metaphysical ontology, in ways Girard has elucidated in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. "There is only one metaphysical desire," he writes, "but the particular desires which instantiate this primordial desire are of infinite variety" (83).

The best clue to both Myra's character and the meaning of the novel is the unforgettable *Casta Diva* scene, which brilliantly links together histrionics, erotic excess, and the desire for death. It takes place on New Year's Eve, in New York City, shortly before Nellie witnesses the bitter fight between Myra and Oswald about a mysterious key that seems to confirm Myra's suspicions about her husband's philandering.

Myra and Oswald have had a party, a "whirl of high spirits" (46) attended mainly by stage people, at which the talk is all of Bernhard's hotly controversial performance of *Hamlet*, which has been running that week. By two o'clock everyone has left but a soprano, Emelia, and the great actress Helena Modjeska, and as they look out at the moonlight Modjeska asks her friend to sing the *Casta Diva* aria from *Norma*, which "begins so like the quivering of moonbeams on the water" (47).

Richard Giannone describes the plot: Norma, a Druidical high priestess in ancient Gaul, has sworn to live chaste but has broken her vows to fall in love with Pollione, proconsul of the hostile Roman army, to whom she has borne two sons. She "struggles to live a double life-in-love" (180), observing her priestly rites while loyal to Pollione, and she staves off the Druids' thirst for attack on the Romans. But Pollione has fallen in love with one of her attendants, Adalgisa. When this is revealed, Norma threatens first to kill him and their two children, then repents and offers Pollione safe conduct from her land if he will go alone. He refuses to leave Adalgisa and goes to the sacred grove to find her. He is discovered, and the Druids prepare to kill him. Norma saves his life at the final moment by announcing "a new victim. A perjured priestess" (McAdoo translation), and confesses that it is she. Consigning her children to her father, she is burned; Pollione, moved by her courage and devotion, joins her on the sacrificial pyre.

Much has been written about the appropriateness of *Norma* to the plot of *My Mortal Enemy*. Giannone, for instance, argues that duplicity characterizes both Norma's and Myra's situations: Norma, who invokes the chaste moon and prays for peace while herself remaining unchaste; Myra, who "shows fidelity to Oswald" while privately clinging to religious beliefs that marrying him has taken her from (181-182). Carlin points out how "both lovers are seen by the women as antagonists; Pollione is Norma's 'sacrilego nemico,' Oswald, Myra's 'mortal enemy'" (45). Woodress writes that Norma, like Myra, "has staked all on love and lost" (387). But these readings, though true, seem reductive. For the overwhelming thing one notices, listening to *Casta Diva*, or reading of Myra Henshawe as she listens to *Casta Diva*, is the way longing blossoms into almost unbelievable beauty.

The power and meaning of the *Casta Diva* scene come from staging, and from music. Myra crouches by the young Polish soprano Emelia, "her head in both hands," as the singer sits at the piano. Oswald stands "like a statue" — or, as Nellie later says, like "a sentinel," a figure of "indestructible constancy" (47, 103) behind the chair of Helena Modjeska. Modjeska — whom Cather met once and saw perform in both *Henry VIII* and *As You Like It*, and whom she described as "fit for those lofty and heroic impulses which belonged to the days when women were saints and queens" (*KA* 102 fn.; *Journal* 10 March 1895) — sits motionless in the chair, "half draped in her cloak, the moonlight

falling across her knees" (47). And her friend Emelia sings the *Casta Diva* aria from *Norma*, music written by Vincenzo Bellini, words written by Felice Romani, based on an old French story about a woman, Norma, who is sick at heart with love and war, and who sings to the *casta diva*, the chaste goddess, the moon, imploring her for peace. Nellie tells the story; Cather writes the novel. This passion, this anguish and beauty, belong to everyone, to no one. And because they are ours implicitly, already, we understand what Nellie is trying to express about Myra when she speaks of "that hidden richness in her," that "something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt: a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name" (48).

Powerfully, too, the staging of the *Casta Diva* scene recalls what Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* regarding the original function of the chorus. "In the earliest tragedy," he claims, "Dionysos was not actually present but merely imagined" (58). In both *Norma* and *My Mortal Enemy*, the circle of listeners and the singer create, by their presence and her song, the charmed space of plenteous absence to which Nietzsche alludes when he writes that "the stage with its action was originally conceived as pure vision and . . . the only reality was the chorus, who created that vision out of itself and proclaimed it through the medium of dance, music, and spoken word" (57). Further, though the opera and novel call not upon Dionysus but upon the goddess, they bear a deep connection with Nietzsche's "profound and mystic philosophy," his "mystery doctrine of tragedy" (67), through their music, which according to Nietzsche is the means by which the Dionysiac artist becomes "wholly identified with the original Oneness, its pain and contradiction" (38). Like Nellie Birdseye, Nietzsche struggles with the inability of language to express "the innermost core of music,"

for the simple reason that music, in referring to primordial contradiction and pain, symbolizes a sphere which is both earlier than appearance and beyond it. Once we set it over against music, all appearance becomes a mere analogy. (46)

According to Nietzsche, music expresses a longing for the "end of individuation," the end of "the source of all suffering" (67, 66). Certainly this is true in *My Mortal Enemy*. Later, when she is ill, Myra will speak of the wound healed only "by dark and silence" (73); even though disaster has not yet fallen in the *Casta Diva* scene, "dark and silence" lie beneath the moonlight, conjured by excess, divined by suffering.



Near the end of her life, Myra turns bitterly against Oswald and reconverts to her uncle's devout Catholicism. Like Saint Augustine, writing from the vantage point of conversion, Myra comes to believe that she has "perverted the order"; Augustine writes "For my

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sin was in this — that I looked for pleasures, exaltations, truths not in God Himself but in His creatures (myself and the rest), and so I fell straight into sorrows, confusions, and mistakes” (39). Similarly, Nellie remarks of Myra, “Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves . . . against themselves and all their idolatries” (96). Ironically, the extravagance of Myra’s devotions has turned her desire into idolatry: an infinite passion directed toward and expended upon a finite object. When Myra says, near the end of the novel, that “Religion is different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding” (94), Nellie understands that “in other searchings it might be the object of the quest that brought satisfaction, or it might be something incidental that one got on the way; but in religion, desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that rewarded” (94). But the reason for this is tricky and grim; desire itself becomes plenitude, hunger becomes its own kind of food — not so much, I think, because it is assured of its object as because the possession of its object *cannot* occur and the object’s consequent inability to measure up to or assuage desire is therefore never proven.

For, despite Myra’s conversion, *My Mortal Enemy*, does not become in any easy or conventional sense a Christian novel. The continuity Myra seeks is, in Georges Bataille’s phrasing, “not to be fully identified with the theologians’ concept of God” (*Erotism* 24). The means to it are too violent, too flamboyant, inseparable from her eros and her cruelty; she seems to seek, not heaven, but beauty and death. So that finally, her nature becomes utterly paradoxical. Father Fay wonders if she isn’t a great deal like the early Christian saints (93), yet she compares herself to “one of the wickedest of the Roman emperors” (63). Furthermore, only in a sense does Myra enact the abnegation of metaphysical desire and consequent self-surrender that Girard’s basically Christian schema argues are essential to the hero of the novel. She “triumphs in defeat”; she “triumphs because [she] is at the end of [her] resources”; she looks her despair and her nothingness in the face (294). But to the end, she never stops dramatizing herself, never renounces pride or triumphs over self-centeredness. This points, perhaps, to a flaw in Girard’s model, for precisely her self-centeredness, the quality Girard faults, creates in her the ability both to perceive and to represent flashes of something universal. “How the great poets do shine on, Nellie!” she says, at one of the novel’s most wrenching moments. “Into all the dark corners of the world. They have no night” (82). One of her most compelling qualities, as a literary character, is her ongoing insistence on the metaphysical validity of her pain, and these lines show how it opens, not once but recurrently, on to something deeper and larger. For “at a certain depth,” Girard writes, “there is no difference between our own secret and the secret of Others” (298).

Myra’s final hours are beautiful. She enacts her greatest fantasy, stealing off mortally ill to her cliff, to die where the sky “leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution” (73). “We found her there,” Nellie reports, “wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head had fallen forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands. She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn. . . . I told Oswald what she had said to me about longing to behold the morning break over the sea” (101). Staged to bespeak Myra’s queenliness, her agony and longing, the death scene in this most poetic of Cather’s novels reminds me, too, of what Bataille writes of poetry — that it “leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism — to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea” (25).

I have tried to express what I find so beautiful about *My Mortal Enemy*. Cather’s grimmest novel, it is also her purest example of the “*roman à l’ancienne*,” that spare, suggestive form that creates “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura” (*NUF* 50). Pity and terror are part of the thing not named — the feelings essential to tragedy Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus brilliantly defines:

Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause. (*Portrait* 204)

For though Myra lives, perhaps, just long enough to behold the sun matched with the sea, a curse haunts the final pages of Cather’s brief, bitter parable. Nellie tells us,

Sometimes, when I have watched the bright beginning of a love story, when I have seen a common feeling exalted into beauty by imagination, generosity, and the flaming courage of youth, I have heard again that strange complaint breathed by a dying woman into the stillness of night, like a confession of the soul: “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy!” (104-105)

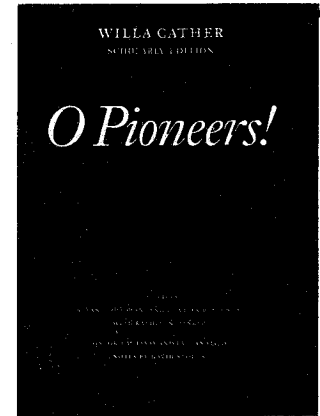
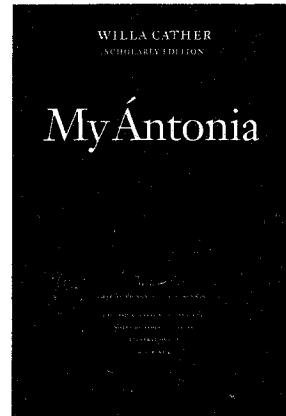
In tragedy, we would not have anything done differently. We would not instruct the tragic hero, change the flaws, the faults, the suffering — counsel Myra against her happiness, her cruelty — because it is the journey we need, the whole experience, each moment complete in itself yet also leading inexorably to its fulfillment and its undoing. Like the great Norma, Maria Callas, Myra is a figure the excessiveness of whose passions leaps beyond their objects to gesture toward existence itself. As Cather wrote of her, “It was the extravagance of [Myra’s] devotions that made her, in the end, feel that Oswald was her mortal enemy — that he had somehow been the enemy of her soul’s peace. Of course, her soul never could have been

at peace. She wasn't that kind of woman" (5 November 1940, to Mr. Pendelton Hogan).

*Mary C. Carruth's essay "Cather's Immortal Art and My *Mortal Enemy*," which at certain points intersects mine, reached me in the *Cather Newsletter* after my own work was complete.

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Covers of the scholarly edition of *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*
— Photos Courtesy of University of Nebraska Press

The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition: Texts for All Readers

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In 1982 when Susan J. Rosowski accepted an appointment to a position in Cather Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, she signed on not only as an English professor but also as the General Editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Within the year James Woodress agreed to serve as co-general editor and Cather scholars John J. Murphy and David Stouck, along with textual specialist Charles W. Mignon (who had recently completed an edition of Edward Taylor), joined the project, and the core editorial team was in place. In 1992 the University of Nebraska Press published the first installment in the Scholarly Edition series, *O Pioneers!*, marking the beginning of what will be a more than two-decade-long project making available scholarly editions of all of Cather's novels and major short fiction.

The objectives of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition are both basic and broad: to present a critical text faithful to Cather's intention for it, plus a full range of information relevant to that text. Although Cather requested that all of her manuscripts be destroyed, the editors of the Scholarly Edition have found that "her texts exist in multiple forms, some in typescripts heavily revised and corrected by Cather" (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 387). Textual editors Frederick M. Link (who joined the project in 1993) and Charles W. Mignon are responsible for identifying and locating editions and impressions of Cather's works. After studying copies of her correspondences and her publishers' production records and completing careful collations of authorial editions, texts that Cather had a hand in revising and editing, the editors adopt a copy text, the text that will serve as the basis for the Scholarly Edition.

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Like a detective investigating a crime scene, a textual editor must gather as much evidence as possible in order to uncover the copy text, which is usually the first edition emended according to Cather's notations. For Charles Mignon the investigation behind *Death Comes for the Archbishop* has been the most challenging because no single copy text exists. Editors are working with four texts of roughly equal authority, but even in the best editions "accents and spellings of Spanish and French words are incompletely presented," explains Mignon. When the Scholarly Edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is published, readers will encounter a new text, one that incorporates Cather's corrections which publishers failed to include.

Throughout her career Cather served as her own copyeditor, and she was fully involved in the design and manufacture of her work. Believing that "a book's physical form influenced its relationship with a reader," Cather hoped that her books would invite "the reader response she was looking for" (Rosowski et al, "Preface" ix). Richard H. Eckersley, designer at the University of Nebraska Press, used Cather's correspondence with Ferris Greenslet (her editor at Houghton Mifflin) and Alfred Knopf (her publisher beginning with *One of Ours*), other personal correspondence, and published statements as sources for decisions that reflect Cather's intentions (Rosowski, "Grant" 14). With respect to Cather's wishes, the editors of the Scholarly Edition follow Cather's preferences for a book's physical characteristics — wide margins, large generously leaded typeface, and cream antique stock.

Included in the Scholarly Edition with the definitive text is a textual essay that presents a "concise explanation of all phases of the establishment of the criteria of the volume" (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 395) as well as the history of the composition and publication of the novel. Following the essay is a list of emendations, which records all changes introduced in subsequent editions and printings that were published during Cather's lifetime, notes on emendations and a list of "Rejected Substantives." The editors have discovered that the revisions of each novel present distinct characteristics; for example, with *A Lost Lady* revisions reveal ways in which Cather "implemented principles of the unfurnished novel, or 'the novel démeublé,' that she laid out in her essay of that name" (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 396).

The textual information is complemented with historical apparatus. An original essay composed by one of the Scholarly Edition editors provides detailed information about the genesis, composition, and reception of the work, placing the novel within a chronology of Cather's life, considering Cather's motives for writing, identifying literary backgrounds against which Cather was writing, and highlighting contemporary reviews. In her historical essay about *Obscure Destinies* Kari Ronning, assistant editor on

the project and volume editor for *Obscure Destinies*, notes

The impetus for the first story, "Neighbour Rosicky," seems to have been the death of her father, Charles F. Cather, on March 3, 1928. This was the first loss of someone from Cather's immediate family circle, perhaps the first to affect her deeply. (3)

Ronning explains that the character of Rosicky was "based in part on John Pavelka, a Webster County farmer of Czech descent, who was the husband of Cather's girlhood friend, Anna Sadilek, prototype for both Antonia Shimerda and Mary Rosicky" (9). Cather's Rosicky dies while mending overalls just as John Pavelka did. An endnote to this observation states that Pavelka's death was reported in the Bladen, Nebraska, *Enterprise* on 7 May 1926, a notice Cather may have seen on a later visit to Webster County, although it seems more likely that she heard it from a member of the Pavelka family. Such details about Cather's materials and models extend the reader's pleasure in a work, says Susan Rosowski, because they reveal the stories behind the story (Rosowski interview).

Scholarly Edition editors have observed that not only major characters are drawn from actual persons, but even minor characters and occasional episodes and settings are based on actual people, places, and events (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 392). In the historical essay for the Scholarly Edition of *A Lost Lady* Rosowski explains that "the game of identifying models" sometimes has its humorous side (26):

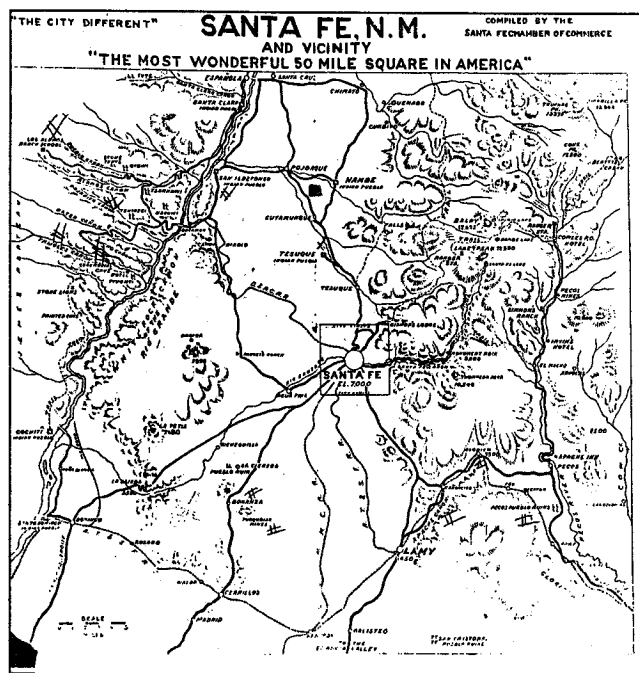
For example, in life, Frank Ellinger, the son of a well-known auctioneer in Webster county, attended the University of Nebraska and then married the niece of Jim Burden, a farmer in northern Webster county. Following a divorce from his wife, Ellinger became a traveling salesman. (27)

Rosowski notes that "the more one probes, the more surprising the connections appear" ("*A Lost Lady*: Historical Essay" 27).

Additional historical information is provided by pictorial illustrations and photographs. Among those in the Scholarly Edition of *O Pioneers!* is Clarence F. Underwood's "Alexandra," a picture Cather considered so inappropriate that she asked that it be removed, as well as a photo of the title page of the first printing of the first edition, a copy of the typescript page of "Prairie Spring" with holograph corrections, a picture of Cather circa 1911-1912, maps of Webster county, and contemporary photographs of typical Nebraska farmsteads and Lincoln sites described in the novel.

The discovery of such materials is among the many rewards felt by those conducting research for the Scholarly Edition. While scanning the lists of photographs and materials in Cather-related files at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Rosowski discovered an entry that read "Willa Cather's original map of Sante Fe, New Mexico." The topographical map, which was retrieved from the Willa Cather Pioneer

Memorial and Educational Foundation Collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society, was used by Cather in writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. "It lays out the region complete with Cather's characteristic hash marks," says Rosowski, "it reveals the life upon which fiction is based, and it belongs in our Scholarly Edition." Conducting research on the details of and perspectives on Cather's Southwest led *Archbishop* volume editor John J. Murphy to New Mexico and France, where he retraced references and allusions on site.



Willa Cather's original map of Santa Fe, New Mexico.
— Courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society

In addition to the revealing information presented in the historical apparatus are extensive explanatory notes that identify locations, literary references, people, and historical events, enabling readers to compare such references and allusions among volumes and to trace them through Cather's canon (Rosowski, "Grant" 2 & 3). The editors discovered that identification and translations of quotations and allusions from the classics and the Bible were relatively straightforward "because scholars have long recognized that Cather drew upon Virgil, Shakespeare and the Bible," but Cather also alludes to "more ephemeral sources" that are obscure to modern readers (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 390). The notes, then, provide information relevant to the meaning of the texts.

In preparing the notes for the Scholarly Edition of *My Ántonia* editors collected references to plants and animals in the text. With the assistance of University of Nebraska biology experts, they learned that "in Cather's fiction, flora and fauna are described in detail sufficient to identify plant and animal species" (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 393). "You don't have to be an expert to enjoy the notes," explains Mignon, "in fact, the notes alone are so suggestive that they will lead

you to historical realities." When Pam Weiner, production coordinator at the University of Nebraska Press, gave her mother-in-law, Nola Mae Skeen of Lorain, Ohio, a copy of the Scholarly Edition of *My Ántonia*, she was pleased to learn that she appreciated not only Cather's text but also the historical apparatus, particularly the historical essay and the illustrations. As Rosowski writes, each volume enriches Cather's art, helping readers to discover not only Cather's text but a community's history (Rosowski et al, "Editing Cather" 392 and Rosowski interview).

Support for the project has come from many sources: in the start-up year of the project the Woods Charitable Fund provided an essential grant; the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and the Nebraska State Historical Society have endorsed the project while providing counsel, research materials, and services; the Nebraska Humanities Council and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have assisted with funding, and in recent years the National Endowment for the Humanities has made it possible for the editors to continue their work.

O Pioneers! The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition (due out in paperback in spring 1997); *My Ántonia: The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition* (published in 1994); *A Lost Lady* (in press and due out in the spring of 1997) have been approved by the Modern Language Association's Committee on Scholarly Editions (CSE), the highest certification awarded to a scholarly edition. The CSE emblem means that "a panel of textual experts serving the Committee has reviewed the texts and textual apparatus of the printer's copy by thorough and scrupulous sampling, and has approved them sound and consistent editorial principles employed and maximum accuracy attained." At present *Obscure Destinies* is being inspected by the CSE, and the editors are now completing work on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

NOTE

O Pioneers! and *My Ántonia* Scholarly Editions are available for sale through the WCPM and the University of Nebraska Press.

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In Pursuit of "Aristocracy of the Spirit" Willa Cather and Robertson Davies

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The Sixth International Willa Cather Seminar in Quebec City last summer presented me with a particular challenge. As the English-Canadian part of Robert Thacker's organizing team, I had the inevitable (for me) chauvinistic urge to include a writer from Canada in my paper on Willa Cather. However, as I cast my eye over the bibliographical record, it was clear that most of the likely Canadian suspects — especially prairie or rural writers like Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Laurence, W. O. Mitchell, and Louis Hemon — had already been spoken for. Who then could I choose? Who might help to provide a fresh perspective on Cather and her writing? And on what grounds?

As I reread *Shadows on the Rock* (I was flying far above Quebec City on route from Paris to Toronto at the time), my trans-border literary light went on. Revisiting the way that Cather shapes the conflict between the Jesuits and leaders of the Catholic church in the new colony, Bishops Laval and Saint-Vallier, and the secular Governor of New France, Count Frontenac, I recalled a one-act play by Robertson Davies, written in the 1940s, for it spins its dramatic interest out of the same historical opposition and tension. As a piece of writing, Robertson Davies' *Hope Deferred* is a far less ambitious work than *Shadows on the Rock*. In fact, he wrote it at an early stage in his career and it is among his first published plays. In the corpus of his writing, it reflects in particular his deeply-rooted commitment to theatre and his acute sense of the problems faced by the creative sensibility in a cold and culturally underdeveloped country such as Canada seemed to him in the long, post-war shadows of the late-1940s.

On 2 December, 1995, as many readers of the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* will doubtless know, Robertson Davies passed away at the age of 83. Born in 1913 in rural southwestern Ontario (he commemorated his birthplace of Thamesville as Deptford in *Fifth Business* and what is now called the Deptford trilogy), he had by the time of his death achieved an international reputation as a novelist, humorist, journalist, educator, pundit, and historian of Victorian theater. In particular, his eleven novels,

highlighted by *Leaven of Malice* (1954), the aforementioned *Fifth Business* (1970), and *What's Bred in the Bone* (1982), and culminating in *The Cunning Man* (1994), which sold 80,000 hard-cover copies in the United States alone, have made him one of the most widely-read and respected novelists in the English-speaking world. The admiration and praise of writers as diverse as Anthony Burgess and John Irving suggest the range of his appeal. Irving in fact called him the greatest comic writer in the English language since Dickens.

Thus, in a way that was not particularly an issue when I presented the paper in Quebec City in June 1995, this essay can now serve as a tribute to both Davies and Cather. In them we have two writers who came to the novel somewhat belatedly out of theater and newspaper backgrounds, but who made the form the particular metier in their mature years. In them we have two writers whose full value must be weighed in the balance of their sustained creative power over their lifetimes. Neither was a shooting star. Both of them knew and respected the value of hard, deliberate, carefully-winnowed work. Both knew the importance of pursuing a vision that could lift and sustain the human spirit and both recognized the importance of refreshing that vision, of pursuing invigorating ways of reinventing themselves as artists. Emerging from restrictive provincial roots, both of them pursued a vision of the superior life, a life abetted by talent, experience, perspective and vision. Art and the knowledge of life gained in the pursuit of artistic excellence were keys to their thinking. Each of them knew the value of a creative life devoted to excellence. The novelist's voice was to them like the voice of a great singer, a voice to be trained and used carefully, a voice not for the moment but for the ages. I use that metaphor deliberately for not only did Cather explore the singer's sources of art and inspiration in *The Song of the Lark* but Davies did so as well in his third novel, *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958).

Though the magical world of theater was a major influence during the formative years of both writers, its hook sunk deeply into the imagination of Robertson Davies. He felt impelled to succeed in its world and he engaged in as many aspects of theatrical work as time would allow. He first appeared on stage at the age of five and soon developed a fascination with performance, especially the work of the touring English companies whose productions he saw in Kingston and Toronto during his high school and undergraduate years. Having developed a theatrically informed background that belied his upbringing in pre-World War Two Ontario, he made a name of himself as a graduate student at Oxford in the late 1930s, where he wrote a thesis (published soon after he defended it) on Shakespeare's boy actors; during those years he also became a vital force in the Oxford University Dramatic Society and his work on OUDS productions led to a job with the Old Vic Company in London under Tyrone Guthrie shortly after his graduation. The war

and its blackouts, however, soon closed off that opportunity and, with a reluctance that Willa Cather would certainly have understood, Davies, now married and anticipating a family, begrudgingly returned to Canada. Not one to be deterred by hinterland restraints, however, he worked as a journalist and assumed his share in the family newspaper business, all the while continuing to nurture his real ambition and trying his hand as a playwright with a variety of audiences in mind.

When his attempts to write full-length plays for former Old Vic colleagues like (Sir) John Gielgud and (Dame) Sybil Thorndike found no takers, he turned to an emerging local opportunity — the regional competitions sponsored by the newly-formed Dominion Drama Festival, a yearly program designed to encourage amateur theater in post-war Canadian communities. Thus, one-act plays, which Davies usually set in Canada and scaled to the obvious limits of amateur players and groups, became a staple for him in the 1940s. Having moved in 1942 to Peterborough, Ontario, a small city northeast of Toronto where he worked for (and soon edited) one of his father's newspapers, the Peterborough *Examiner*, he began not only to measure and satirize the conservative and puritanical attitudes that were a definitive part of daily Ontario life in those days, but also to value the experience of working with amateur groups like the Peterborough Little Theatre, which he and his wife Brenda helped to establish and develop.

Hope Deferred is just such a play. The action is set in the "private apartment" of Count Frontenac in the Chateau St. Louis in 1693. It requires only four actors, along with some modest elegance of scene and costume, and it is designed to make a sharp and powerful statement about the undervaluing of art and culture in Canada, be it in the early days of Count Frontenac or, by extension, in the dull and stultifying present of the late 1940s.

Why Robertson Davies selected that same historical situation as Cather did for *Shadows on the Rock* is something of a mystery, but it surely had much to do with his wide reading, both as book-lover and professional reviewer. So well-recognized was his book-reviewing, especially in *Saturday Night* magazine (still published in Toronto), that Cather's publisher, Alfred Knopf, approached him in the late 1950s to write "an idiosyncratic, opinionated, controversial survey of the contemporary literary scene." What Davies produced was somewhat different than what Knopf had hoped for. He called the book *A Voice from the Attic* (1960). The attic, of course, was Canada, and he used the invitation and his Canadian perspective to comment on various enthusiasms that characterized his reading life, from self-help books to works on psychology. Regrettably for present purposes, he made no comment on Cather's work in *A Voice from the Attic*. Neither does Davies' biographer, Judith Grant (who completed her study, *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth*, a year before

her subject's death) mention Cather in her consideration of his reading interests. Overall, in fact, given the evidence that Grant supplies, it is clear that Davies' interests were more British than American.

What then did Robertson Davies think of the famous Willa Cather and her Quebec novel at the outset of his own literary career in "America's attic"? More than the record would suggest. When *Shadows on the Rock* appeared, he was still attending Upper Canada College in Toronto as a high school student, though his parents had by then moved to Kingston — "Fort Frontenac" by its earliest colonial name and located in Frontenac County. Kingston was the site of Queen's University, which Davies would attend as an undergraduate, and the basis for Salterton, the small Ontario city which he made the setting for his first trilogy of novels — *Tempest-Tost* (1951), *Leaven of Malice*, and *A Mixture of Fraillties*. Accordingly, Davies did not write a review of *Shadows*.

However, by the time *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was published, he had returned to Canada from England and was working for *Saturday Night* magazine. He reviewed the Canadian edition of the novel in the 21 December issue of the magazine under the title, "Gold Star for Miss Cather." Though he does not mention *Shadows on the Rock* by name, he makes clear his personal familiarity with the body of her work. Terming *Sapphira* a "good" novel, but "less moving" than "some of her others," he ranked it with Thomas Mann's *The Beloved Returns* as among the best books of 1940; overall, he judged it "an unalloyed pleasure to read." The review's first paragraph provides the grounds for his admiration of Cather's fiction:

Willa Cather is one of the living novelists whose work has genuine distinction. First of all, her stories are always the outcome of long reflection, excision and rejection; her plots are never botched or hurried. Next, she writes with economy. She can say more in her three hundred pages than most novelists can say in a great *Monster Polypheme* of a novel which tires the reader's wrist and stuns his senses. Last, she has a fine literary style, not precious or idiosyncratic, but beautifully adapted to the expression of her particular type of thought. (p. 17)

Though I have found no remark by Davies on the occasion of Cather's death, he did comment upon the publication of Edith Lewis's memoir of Cather and E. K. Brown's biography in a *Saturday Night* review dated 2 May 1953. Applauding the respect for authorial privacy evident in the two books, he found each to be "excellent" in its own way. Of Brown's book he wrote:

It is an understanding and finely sensitive study of a writer whose work demands precisely those qualities in a critic which Brown possessed — intellect in control of feeling, and classic rather than romantic predilections. (p. 11)

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(Continued)

Together, the two reviews make clear Davies' awareness of Cather as an important and genuinely distinctive, contemporary novelist. She was for him a writer whose precise control of words one could not only observe with pleasure but also learn from. What he called her "fine literary style" was more, however, than an easeful clarity and concision; he was struck by her ability to adapt her mode of expression to the demands of her particular subject matter and thematic emphasis. At the same time, her "particular type of thought" supported his own inclinations, which were "classic" rather than "romantic," and "reflective" rather than merely dramatic. Though he had only begun to experiment with the novel when he wrote the Lewis-Brown review, he seems to have known that in Cather he had found a standard-setter, a model of excellence and control.

The popularity of *Shadows on the Rock* in the early 1930s — several thousand copies were sold in these years — was such that Davies, who was an unusually avid young reader, likely read it, especially given Cather's reputation and the novel's Canadian setting and story. *Hope Deferred* picks up on the attention she placed upon the longstanding conflict between the Jesuits and Catholic hierarchy, and the worldly Frontenac, even as it highlights the Jansenist tension between the wise but aging Bishop Laval (who was 70 in 1693) and the zealous Bishop de Saint-Vallier (who was 41). But while Cather's novel is the work of a mature novelist — a paean to a nurtured and nurturing domesticity and a homage to tradition and the forces in life that resist aging, change and loss —, Davies' play is the work of an impatient young man, much frustrated by the restrictive power of the establishment and the tyranny of religious and social conservatism that seemed to characterize Canadian life, past and present. Something of the anger of Cather's early stories from "Paul's Case" to "A Wagner Matinee" and "The Sculptor's Funeral" animates its conflict. Cather's "particular type of thought" in *Shadows on the Rock* may have had less appeal to him given their difference in age, but he likely learned much from the way in which she shaped the elements of her plot and capably adapted her source material to her particular narrative purposes.

Allow me to familiarize you with Davies' play about New France. On a winter's day in 1693, the "vigorous and handsome" Count Frontenac is entertaining his protégé Chimene, who is described as "a beautiful Indian girl, not quite 20." She dances for him; wearing "a 17th century compromise between Indian dress and Parisian fashion," her movements are "a French dancing-master's notion of an Indian war dance" and "she beats a small drum rhythmically as she dances" (57). Not quite so careful about realistic detail as Cather, Davies reports that Chimene has arrived from France the day before — that is, in winter, when no

boats would have been sailing. Frontenac, we learn, had in fact sent her to Paris five years earlier to be educated first by the Ursuline nuns (who, of course, could have educated her at Quebec) but, more importantly, to train her in the art of acting under the tutelage of the legendary Michel Baron of the Comedie Francaise.

As curious as this interracial Pygmalian education might seem, Davies had read in Francis Parkman's *Count Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV* about Frontenac's interest in theater and the hostility he had aroused in Bishop Saint-Vallier by encouraging amateur productions of Corneille's *Nicomede* (1651) and Racine's *Mithridate* (1673) in Quebec City in the early 1690s, likely during one of the young Bishop's periodic visits to France. Parkman cleverly entitled the chapter he devoted to this conflict "An Interlude" (91-109). As Parkman tells it, rumours had reached Saint-Vallier that Frontenac's officers were planning to put on a production of Moliere's *Tartuffe* that winter. The Bishop quickly set out to deal with the challenge, even as he sought to avoid a direct showdown with Frontenac himself. His strategy was to deny the sacraments to and put on trial the officer reputed to be the lead actor in the production. He also used the occasion to order the closing of the pastoral operations of the Recollect friars in the town. Since Frontenac himself conspicuously supported their work of the Recollects while ignoring, if not consciously snubbing, the far more powerful and power-conscious Jesuits, the order was as much directed at Frontenac as at the friars.

Proud of what he saw as an "heretical" streak in himself, Parkman clearly relished the story of Frontenac's stylish affronting of Jesuit power. While his research convinced him that a Frontenac-inspired production of *Tartuffe* never got beyond the talking stage that winter, it was clear to Parkman that Bishop Saint-Vallier used the occasion to emphasize his capacity to wield real power in the colony and to wield it effectively. The Saint-Vallier version of the truth, Parkman found, was given its most positive reading well after the fact through the "fabrication" of a Jesuit syncophant, Abbe La Tour, whose report was designed "to blacken the memory of the governor, and exhibit the bishop and his adherents as victims of persecution" (109). The Jesuits knew well the importance not only of controlling the immediate agenda but of writing history to suit their view of the facts.

With his love of theater and his growing certainty that post-war Canada was an unsupportive place for artistic development and expression, Davies found Parkman's chapter a fascinating instance of *deja vu*. Chaffing at the provincialism of Ontario just as Cather had of Red Cloud and Lincoln, Nebraska, Davies saw in the *Tartuffe* incident less an opportunity to take the artistic pulse of Canada than to dramatize the deplorable absence of such a pulse in a country where dollars, religion, and a conservative mind-set held so strong a sway.

When Laval and Saint-Vallier arrive at the Chateau St. Louis seeking an interview with the Governor, Frontenac arranges matters so that Chimene, who describes herself as "a Frenchified Huron" (58), is allowed to participate in the discussion. With the civilities of such a meeting dispensed with, the Bishops are horrified to learn that, under Frontenac's dispensation, a native girl has been coached in the arts of dance, singing, and declamation — in short, trained as an actress. The cautious Laval suggests that, given this news, it might be best to defer the "business" that has brought the two churchmen to Frontenac's quarters. Saint-Vallier, however, will brook no delay. He clearly prefers "an immediate encounter" to a "retreat." A bemused and shrewd Frontenac wryly observes, "this is ominous. When priests are ceremonious, my scalp tingles as at an Iroquois warwhoop" (64).

Raising the subject of theater in Quebec, Saint-Vallier suggests that, as "a man of the world" himself, his concern about Moliere is not in the least simple-minded or uncultivated. Some plays are "innocent in their nature," he allows, while others — the ones that affect his pastoral domaine — are "absolutely and irremediably bad and criminal in themselves." One such play of "evil character" is "the monstrous blasphemy *Tartuffe*" which, rumour has it, is to be performed in the city (66). Frontenac, whose "gusto" has already been acknowledged by Bishop Laval, is forthright in his reply. Making it clear that he himself chose the play and that rehearsals are soon to begin, he sardonically replies, "I apprehend from your remarks that you do not seek a role in it?" (66).

Dialogue is pitched to artistic and moral distinctions. What Saint-Vallier calls the "evil" of "present[ing] piety in an unfavourable light," Frontenac defines as the dramatic revelation of "false piety" (67), particularly in high places. Moliere, he asserts, was a genius who "the full weight of your church [in France] could not keep . . . down" (68). While the playwright may have been buried in unconsecrated ground, he was in death, according to Frontenac's assessment, if not in heaven as the church understood it, then at least in the good company of other great artists like Virgil and Aristophanes. As tempers flare and egos assert themselves, Bishop Laval assumes the role of diplomat and peace-keeper, attempting to forestall "a trial of strength between Governor and Bishop" (68).

Moderating his aggressive approach, Saint-Vallier asks Frontenac to consider the needs of "the humble people of New France, and particularly the Indians" (69). "[H]elp me make this a pious country before anything else," he urges. Frontenac is unmoved by the appeal. With words that apply directly to the cultural aridity of 1940s Canada, he asks, "Are you asking me to reduce the intellectual tone of this whole country to what is fit for Indians and shopkeepers?" (70). However, Frontenac's wit and rhetoric (racially insensitive as it now appears) lack force in the face of the realities of Canada. With trade and the needs of the shopkeepers at the forefront, he cannot for long resist

Saint-Vallier's demand. Money and trade are what interest Louis XIV, and Frontenac's situation vis-a-vis the French court is, as he well knows, less secure than he would have liked.

It is at this point that Chimene enters the dialogue, speaking more as the only native-born Canadian in the room rather than as a native person. Is "my land" to be "without art?" she asks. Goodness and greatness, the terms Saint-Vallier has used to define the piety he seeks for New France, are, according to Chimene, the goal of art as well. Happy to promote such "innocent arts" as basketry and beadwork, the Bishop admits that he is "glad that much of the nonsense called art is far away in the old world, and that the people who have come here do not long for it, and often do not know it exists" (73). When Bishop Laval expresses the hope that people can be simple and good without access to theater, Chimene answers with firm and precise rhetoric that obscures any evidence of her Huron identity:

It is because goodness without the arts demands a simplicity bordering on the idiotic. A simple man without the arts is a clod, or a saint, or a bigot; saints are very rare; clods and bigots are many. Are you trying to put my country into their hands? (74)

Saint-Vallier refuses to answer her question. His parting gesture is symbolical — he leaves Frontenac a donation of "[o]ne hundred louis," not, he insists, as a "bribe," but because, speaking as one man of the world to another, he is well aware that theater costs money, even if only to cancel a production still in the planning stages (74-75).

Hope Deferred ends with a bitterness of recognition that Frontenac cannot escape. He will gain some small satisfaction from passing Saint-Vallier's money on to the hospitals of Quebec, but he knows that it is not in his power to counteract the formidable combination of trade and conventional religious piety that the Bishop represents. "There is no tyranny like that of organized virtue," he tells Chimene (76). For her part, she concludes that, given the evidence, she must return to Paris where she knows her art will be appreciated and given room to develop. All that is left for Canada is "hope deferred," since it is clear that, as things stand, the country's artists will be forced to go abroad for training and development, while at home art will be generally ignored as a superfluous if not an evil exercise.

Hope Deferred is thus a highly argumentative play, a straightforward and sharp indictment of the lack of concern and respect for the arts that Davies saw as characteristic of post-war Canada. Writing as a young artist who was himself prepared to make a personal commitment to the country's future, he found little to romanticize in the gritty early days of community-building at Quebec. Still, in *Count Frontenac* he found a compelling cosmopolitan hero, an historical figure in whom he could locate a love of theater and the arts

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as well as a sensibility in which worldly wisdom was unclouded by illusion. In challenging Saint-Vallier's piety, Frontenac displays what, in another play called *A Jig for the Gypsy* (1954), Davies termed "aristocracy of the spirit." It is a quality that Cather herself had discovered in Frontenac, probably from her own reading of Parkman and other historians, a quality that constituted a superior sensibility and vision, greatness of human capacity without reference to money, position or family. At the same time Davies played rather loosely with the power of religion and tradition, especially when one compares his treatment with Cather's. The links between religion and domestic life that characterize the repose of the Auclairs' household, a "view" that Cather herself much "admire[d]" but "could not fully accept" (*Willa Cather: On Writing*, 15), are nowhere in evidence in *Hope Deferred*, except perhaps in the softer diplomacy and kindness of Laval. What Cather built very carefully out of her own spiritual and personal needs, Davies deliberately overlooked in his rhetorical presentation.

Responding like Cather to Parkman's romantic cult of personality, Davies fashioned his villain and hero to suit his particular didactic purpose. Indeed, in replacing Cecile Auclair and Cather's "particular type of thought" with the would-be artist Chimene, he put his youthful stamp upon his treatment. Not surprisingly, then, it is the non-historical creations, the youthful female figures, who most exemplify their creators in these two texts, and it is these figures — Cecile and Chimene — upon whom so much depends. Cather, we realize, circumscribes what we see of Quebec through Cecile's domestic and religious vision, in particular through her charming naivete and her less endearing but telling fastidiousness, which we are made to believe is a function of that vision. At her worst, Cecile seems either curiously exclusive or, as both Sue Rosowski and James Woodress have noted, an impossibly good girl, a picture of sainthood — seen domestically. For his part, Davies created an utterly focussed young *comedienne*, wedded to art over life and to a French vision of culture over her own sources of identity. Little did he anticipate the cultural inappropriateness Chimene's image would suggest fifty years later in her utter lack of concern for her native roots and heritage. To audiences and readers in the 1990s she must seem less the shining and self-assured product of a French education in the arts than a colonized hybrid, deprived of her authentic Huron heritage and culture by the superior culture that has claimed and stamped her. She has likely lost more than what the arrogant Frontenac dismissingly calls her "detestable Huron-French lingo" (58) and her "hair reek[ing] of fish" (59). In the play's small and didactic compass she seems all too happily to forsake her native being.

For all its thinness as a one-act play, *Hope Deferred*, when applied to *Shadows on the Rocks*, alerts

us to both Cather's astuteness and artistry on the one hand and her studied evasions on the other. The world of 1690s Quebec was a far more complicated place than Cather was willing to acknowledge in her novel. Consider, for instance, how much she underplays the historical role of the Intendant, Monsieur de Champigny, how she eliminates almost all the contact with the native people of the area (upon whom Cecile's father must have depended to a great extent for his knowledge about and supplies of local plants and medicines), and how she limits her presentation of colourful life of the Chateau frequented by Frontenac's officers and their entourage. These exclusions are both strategic and aesthetic, and are abetted by Cather's choice of a fastidious and devout twelve-year-old girl as her central point of view.

Such is Cather's artistic tact, however, that she manages to suggest and include a good deal in the episodes and stories she uses to fill out her narrative. We seldom feel, to borrow Davies' own words, that, "goodness without the arts demands a simplicity bordering on the idiotic" (74). Quite the contrary, in fact. We may feel some absences in the range of life depicted in *Shadows on the Rock*, but the domesticity and sense of refuge that Cather envisions and celebrates comprises an art in itself, as exclusive and garrison-like as it on occasion appears to be. Indeed, Cather is even generous to the bigotry that Davies so much detests; she gives us a chastened, wiser, and more generous Saint-Vallier in her Epilogue. Aging, it would appear, brings a kind of wisdom to all three of her historical figures, a wisdom of the kind that had no appeal to the young Davies. One suspects, however, that the young Cather freshly revisiting the narrow puritanical values of pioneering Nebraska and Kansas would have displayed a similar lack of understanding had she worked then with such a conflict.

There is much more to say about the similarities between Cather and Davies than space here allows. Thus I will restrict my final comments to two observations. The first concerns the way in which on subtle levels a writer's nationalistic orientation writes a narrative. The second involves suggestive prose. My attention here falls upon *Shadows on the Rock*, but it does so with Davies and a Canadian perspective in mind.

Cather's Canadian novel has what we might call two endings, "The Dying Count" and "The Epilogue." What is interesting to me as a Canadian is that both these endings conclude on a similarly American note of independence, despite Cather's affinity in the novel for things French and French-Canadian. In discussing Pierre Charron's future, Cather writes that, "as a Canadian," he "had not a throne behind him, like the Count (it had been very far behind, indeed!), not the authority of a parchment and seal. But he had authority, and a power which came from knowledge of the country and its people; from knowledge, and from a kind of passion. His daring and his pride seemed to [Cecile] even more splendid than Count Frontenac's" (268). Similarly, in "The Epilogue" she ends by writ-

ing that Cecile's children would "grow up in a country where the death of the King, the probable evils of a long regency, would never touch them" (280).

In both instances, what leaps out is the American affirmation of newness, of a fresh kind of authority based on knowledge, experience, and what Cather so lovingly calls a "kind of passion." America had placed itself beyond kings, reinventing itself with a different kind of pride and distinction. Canada, however, did no such thing, either in its New France origins or its long development as a British nation in North America. While it did its own kind of reinventions — a less dramatic and slow process of evolution that continues to this day (remaining painfully indeterminate, especially along Quebec's borders), the often-fond, often-vexed alliance to the mother countries has remained intact, though that connection grows more muted with each generation. Cather's final notes, so stirring in its sense of a better and brighter future, are thus somewhat erroneously conceived. She saw an aristocracy of the spirit in the *couriers de bois* like Pierre and in a young girl like Cecile, but she could not resist couching that admiration in language appropriate to her essential Americanness.

But in noting this *esprit nationalisme* I should also give emphasis to the way Cather so richly packs her prose. The example I chose is one to which Robertson Davies alerts us in his treatment of the same religious-political situation. Cather after all had closely read her Parkman and had noted Frontenac's penchant for theater. It was a penchant she chose to downplay for the most part. However, in the chapter called "The Long Winter" when Auclair describes Saint-Vallier as a man who is "less like a Churchman than a courtier" (121), Frontenac offers a less friendly assessment that shows Cather's close reading into his character. With a shrug her Frontenac replies, "Or an actor." Something of Frontenac's superiority of character — his aristocracy of the spirit — emerges in the contrast to Bishop de Saint-Vallier that Cather calls up in this scene.

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SUGGESTED READINGS — ROBERTSON DAVIES

- The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks* — the sayings and doings of Davies' alter ego
- A Mixture of Frailties* — Davies' third novel — the story of the making of a singer
- Fifth Business* — arguably Davies' best novel — the story of a school master's inner life
- What's Bred in the Bone* — art forgery, art collection, and quiet Ontario life
- The Cunning Man* — playing doctor to the sagging spirits of Canadians



Dr. Arthur Langvardt presents Kristine Kopperud, from Wayne, Nebraska, with the 1996 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship Award.
— Photo Courtesy of Red Cloud Chief

41st Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference Held in Red Cloud

Steven B. Shively
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The 41st Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, held May 3-4, 1996, served up the unique combination that has come to characterize the Cather Spring Conference: insightful scholarship, fun and fellowship, a few surprises, and a bit of entertainment, all occurring within an attitude of remembrance and honor for Willa Cather.

The nearly 200 participants began to gather on Friday afternoon for open house at the Cather Foundation buildings. An attentive crowd heard five papers on this year's featured novel, *My Mortal Enemy*: "Democratic Space: Cather's Definition of Art in *My Mortal Enemy*," by Anja Lange (University of Colorado); "The Salvation of Two Souls: Completing the Text of Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*," by Michael Lund (University of Nebraska-Omaha); "Through a Dark Glass, Laughing: An Examination of Self-Parody, Satire, and Dark Humor in *My Mortal Enemy*," by Sally Tennihill (Northwest Missouri State University); "Viktor Frankl's

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WC SPRING CONFERENCE

(Continued)

Psychology as Exemplified in *My Mortal Enemy*," by Marvin Jensen (University of Northern Iowa); and "The Women Defining Destinies: The Depiction of Women in Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* and Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Bonfire*," by Ann Tschetter (University of Nebraska-Omaha). The titles alone express the variety of critical views offered by these scholars, and the afternoon was further enhanced when Marvin Jensen acknowledged the presence of Darlene Ritter, the high school English teacher who introduced him to Cather's writing several years ago. Darlene is better known to most conferees as a teacher and scholar of plains literature at Midland College. The presentations were moderated by Virgil Albertini of Northwest Missouri State University.



Frank Morhart of Hastings (at left), who along with his wife, Doris, donated the historic Red Cloud Opera House to the Cather Foundation in 1991, was among those on hand when plans to restore the building were unveiled, a \$1.1 million project.

Later that evening, "Times and Places of *My Mortal Enemy*," a slide show with commentary by John Murphy, prepared the audience for the next day's roundtable discussion while demonstrating again that visual images can heighten our understanding of Cather's work. Friday's activities ended with a special candlelight Mass celebrated by Father Steve Ryan at St. Juliana Catholic Church. The historic beauty of the setting, the soft light, and Steve's warm voice talking about spiritual direction made this a magical experience for many people.

Saturday morning brought two of the treats that keep people coming back to Red Cloud — fresh kolaches and the music of the St. Juliana Choir. The church service at Grace Episcopal Church was conducted by the Reverend Jane Heenen, Rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Lincoln, who told of reading *O Pioneers!* to learn about Nebraska before moving

here. Mother Heenen was the first woman priest to lead a service at Grace Church; this newness in combination with the familiar liturgy, the stained glass windows, and the beautiful music created a memorable and inspiring event.

"The Passing Show" roundtable discussion of *My Mortal Enemy* was moderated by George Day of the University of Northern Iowa. John Murphy of Brigham Young University presented his thoughts on charity, suffering and reconciliation in the novel, followed by responses and additional commentary from JoAnn Middleton and Marilynn Callandar of Drew University, and John Swift of Occidental College. This session provided depth and insight for those who seek to explore Cather's ideas and to understand her language and art. The audience joined the discussion in a group effort to wrestle with this novel, which many readers consider Cather's most difficult work.

A sense of anticipation hung over the crowd watching and listening to the unveiling of plans for restoration of the Red Cloud Opera House, which will become the headquarters of the WCPM. The restored building will not only commemorate the importance of the Opera House to Willa Cather but will provide much needed office and exhibit space, proper storage for archival materials, a work place for visiting scholars, and an auditorium for programs. Indeed, the yet-unrestored Opera House was the highlight of Saturday afternoon's tour of Cather sites. The variety of responses to the dusty and junk-filled space represented the different meanings the Opera House will have for Cather folk. Some relished the old artifacts, exclaiming over a box of vintage sheet music, and the signatures of Douglas and Elsie Cather on the backs of scenery flats. Others eagerly matched up the restoration plans with the space, envisioning a future of usefulness, of people learning and enjoying themselves as a parade of programs crosses the stage. Still others wandered through the adjacent apartments and examined furniture and tools, pondering the lives of the people who had built and maintained this building and those who in the past had come here for entertainment and celebration. The excitement in people's voices and on their faces affirmed the decision of Frank and Doris Morhart to donate this property and the decision of the WCPM Board of Governors to restore it.

Saturday evening's banquet and program, guided by Master of Ceremonies Ron Hull, capped the weekend's events. Dr. Arthur Langvardt presented this year's Norma Ross Walter Scholarship to Kristine Kopperud of Wayne, NE, High School. A talented group of musicians and players, directed by Marya Lucca-Thyberg of the Nebraska Theatre Caravan, brought to life the New Year's Eve Party from *My Mortal Enemy*. Anne DeVries, soprano from Opera Omaha, thrilled the audience with the "Casta Diva", aria from Bellini's *Norma*, just as young Nellie Birdseye in the novel had been thrilled one cold New Year's Eve in New York City. The dramatic reading of Cather's words by Marya Lucca-Thyberg provided the audi-



Banquet entertainment this year included the talents of (left to right) Marya Lucca-Thyberg, Betty Kort, Steve Shively, Denise Millard and Anne DeVries.

— Photo Courtesy of Red Cloud Chief

ence with the full range of the emotion in the scene, from the trembling excitement of a young girl discovering beautiful people and wonderful music to the longing experienced years later by a woman who realizes that life would never again approach that level of excitement. Adding to the scene were Ms. DeVries's accompanist Denise Millard, WCPM Board member Betty Kort, who played Madame Modjeska, and Steve Shively, who played Oswald. Elegant costumes and lively staging, along with the reading and the music, transported the audience into the pages of Cather's novel. This year's Spring Conference provided a stimulating juxtaposition: the loss and despair that permeates *My Mortal Enemy* alongside the optimism and hope represented by the plans for restoration of the opera house. That kind of variety and stimulation should keep people coming to Spring Conferences for a long time.

Marsellus in the Mirror: Reflections of *Aeneid VI* in *The Professor's House*

Jeremiah P. Mead
Concord-Carlisle Regional High School,
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When Tom Outland first arrives at Professor St. Peter's garden Saturday morning in spring, he impresses the Professor by quoting from the *Aeneid*. He recites some fifty lines from the start of book II, beginning when Aeneas tells Queen Dido that, in bidding him to tell of Troy's fall, she is asking him to recall unspeakable grief (*infandum dolorem*). Later that day, at luncheon, when Lillian St. Peter asks Outland to tell where his remarkable pottery comes from, he refuses:

"I want to know all about it."

"Maybe some day, Ma'am, I can tell you," he said, wiping his sooty fingers on his handkerchief.

His reply was courteous but final. (120)

His request and her reply reinforce the association of Outland with the *Aeneid*.¹ Like Aeneas, he has a tale to tell of a lost civilization, of personal loss, of wanderings and labors. Unlike Aeneas, he does not tell it now. He will, eventually, on a rainy summer evening, when Lillian and her daughters are away. But there is another figure from the *Aeneid* that Tom also resembles. That figure, and the moment of his appearance in Virgil's epic, are pertinent to the characters and themes of *The Professor's House*.

On another fine spring Saturday morning, that winning young man Louie Marsellus runs up the stairs to the attic study of his father-in-law, Professor Godfrey St. Peter. He means to take the Professor for a drive, after they drop Rosamond at the Country Club. He looks with wonder around the room, and spies a blanket with a Spanish look:

Louie pounced upon the purple blanket, threw it across his chest, and, moving aside the wire lady, studied himself in Augusta's glass. "And a very proper dressing-gown it would make for Louie, wouldn't it?" (165-6)

St. Peter tells him that the blanket had been Tom Outland's, and was — or is — a "precious possession." Then, to the Professor's surprise, Louie announces that he regrets never having known Outland, and says assuringly that he does not consider Outland as a rival but "as a brother, an adored and gifted brother." And meanwhile he stands before the mirror, stroking and preening, completing his assumption of all that had and should have been Outland's: bride, patent, fortune, keepsakes, and, by the chapter's end, the admiration of his "vanquished father-in-law" (170).

Louie, clad in Tom Outland's purple, is a supplanting double for his "gifted brother." Louie had arrived in Hamilton "just at the time the city was stirred up about Outland's being killed at the front" (136). He came as a stranger, as Outland had done, with no past of his own; only a name, Marsellus, that in its uncorrupted form would have better suited Tom.

In 25 B.C., Rome's new Imperator, Augustus, sought to secure the order and the form of government that he was installing in Rome, by selecting for himself a male heir, a potential successor. He adopted Marcus Claudius Marcellus, age 17, the son of his sister Octavia. Augustus also arranged, in the same year, the marriage of Marcellus to his daughter Julia. But this promising young man died within two years, before he had the chance to achieve in deeds the fame for which his nature so clearly fitted him; clearly, that is, according to the lines in Virgil's *Aeneid* which made Marcellus for ages the type of the promising, doomed young man:

"*heu pietas, heu prisca fides invictaque bello dextera! non illi se quisquam impune tulisset obivus armato . . .*

heu, miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas, tu Marcellus eris. manibus date lilia plenis, purpureos spargam flores . . ." (VI, 878-880, 882-4)

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MARCELLUS IN THE MIRROR (Continued)

"Woe for goodness, woe for ancient honor,
and the hand unvanquished in war!
No man could have crossed his path in arms
without coming to grief. . . .
Alas, poor boy, if you can break the bitter fates,
somehow, you will be Marcellus.
Give me lilies by the handful,
let me scatter crimson flowers"

Tom Outland matches the young Marcellus in enough significant circumstantial ways to justify associating the two. He was not adopted by the St. Peters, but he certainly was one of the family for a while. He was engaged to Rosamond, and soon died, young, gaining death and glory. Louie's surname both clinches the association and calls attention to the differences between Tom and himself, between the true Marcellus and the usurper; the Roman and the Modern; the idealist and the materialist; the adventurer of the range and the adventurer of the market; the prewar, remembered hero and the postwar, present man.

Consider the spelling of Louie's name. In place of the hard Latin C is the serpentine S; the stressed syllable now is "sell," and that is what Louie does best. He sells the world on the Outland engine and peddles himself into the affections of Rosamond, Lillian, and even Godfrey, if not quite into the Arts and Letters. As Mrs. Crane nastily but accurately recognizes, Louie has "a salesman's ability" (138). For that matter, we know that "selling" is a despised notion to Tom, from his harangue of Roddy Blake: "But I never thought of selling [the relics], because they weren't mine to sell — or yours!" (242).

The pertinence of the Marcellus allusion is twofold. By itself it reveals the place of Louie in the novel and in time. It also calls attention to a passage or transition in the *Aeneid* relevant both to the Professor and Cather herself.

The lament for Marcellus is found near the end of Book VI. At this time, the epic's hero, Aeneas, has finally reached Italy, but before he can proceed to the Lavinian shores and the site of future Rome, he has been summoned to the Underworld by a vision of his deceased father, Anchises. Up until now, Aeneas has wandered from his fallen city and through various adventures with a knowledge of his destiny as founder of a new race but with incomplete commitment to that destiny. He has even stopped off for an affair with Dido, Queen of Carthage. In Book VI he is guided into the Underworld by an aged priestess, the Sibyl, and before he reaches the shade of Anchises, he meets three ghosts from his past: Palinurus, a crewman from his voyages; Dido herself, who has committed suicide after the loss of his love; and Deiphobos, a fellow warrior killed during Troy's last night. Each of these Aeneas leaves behind. He has to relinquish his ties with his adventures, his young erotic life, and his old home before Anchises can instruct him about his race's future.

When the Sibyl turns him over to Anchises, the old man shows Aeneas a succession of souls of worthy Romans waiting to be born — ending with the doomed Marcellus. He further tells him what will be new and different about the Roman world order, peace secured by law and military force, with clemency for those who submit, and destruction for the proud resister:

"tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento (hae tibi erunt artes), pacisque imponere morem, parcere subjectis et debellare superbos." (VI, 851-3)

"You, Roman, remember
to rule the nations with power
(these will be your special arts),
and to impose the habit of peace,
to spare the meek
and battle down the proud."

When Aeneas returns to the world of the living, he is ready to take on the greater task of establishing his people in their new land, and the next six books, the second half of the *Aeneid*, tell that part of the story.

Any voyage to the Underworld is a kind of death, and during Aeneas' trip his past associations (his youth) dies. But he returns to life with a new task ahead of him. As Brooks Otis states, "Aeneas has . . . endured his greatest ordeal, that of reencountering his past and leaving it behind him. Not until he has faced and left the unappeased guilt and empty nostalgia of his old self, could he be ready for the realities of his future."² Aeneas' situation in Book VI is like that of the Professor at the end of the novel. St. Peter's *magnum opus*, the study of the roaming Spanish adventurers, is complete, and Outland, his companion on their trail, is dead; the romance in his tie to Lillian is gone; unwilling, he must leave his long-standing home. He has his own appeasement to make with his past, his own relinquishing of precious but incommunicable memories before he can be ready for the realities of "the *Berengaria* and the future" (283).

And he has, as a model for survival of this ordeal of passage, Tom Outland himself. Tom, upon learning of the sale of the relics, had undergone a near death of his own:

I remember I sat down on the sofa in Hook's office because I couldn't stand up any longer, and the smell of the horse blankets began to make me deathly sick. In a minute I went over, like a girl in a novel. Hook pulled me out on the sidewalk and gave me some whisky out of his pocket flask. (238)

This scene prefigures the Professor's near death in several details: the sofa, the blankets, the deathly odor, the loss of consciousness, the rescuing tug outside to fresh air. And Tom recovered. He climbed the familiar mesa, confronted Roddy and expelled him, took a new kind of possession of the place.

Nor was he done moving after this recovery. On the mesa, free of what he has lost, he gained a new understanding of himself, read the *Aeneid* through to the end³ — and eventually got up, moved on, and made something new of his life. He went north and east to the university at Hamilton, involved himself in modern scientific studies, found a new bride. Though

he died young (and the second half of the *Aeneid* is full of men who die young), he did reintegrate himself into the real world.

Now it is up to Godfrey St. Peter to follow that model. He has been through hell, he has suffered a kind of death, he has let go of some precious possession (282), and some undefined task lies ahead for him. It is fitting that *The Professor's House* should have such an open ending, leaving the Professor in a posture of acceptance, not clinging with vain love to the certain past but facing, with an explorer's fortitude, the unknown.

And, unlike Aeneas, St. Peter still has with him his guide and savior, Augusta, whose name itself suggests connections to Virgilian Rome. She is more than a Sibyl to him; she also fills the role of Anchises, the figure who offers instruction to the hero in need:

Very often she gave him some wise observation or discreet comment to start the day with. She wasn't at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him . . . (280)

We can be sure, knowing Augusta and knowing Cather, that Augusta's heavy, dreary, sustaining words did not advise St. Peter to "rule with power, spare the meek, and battle down the proud."

One step further. If the situation of Aeneas at the end of Book VI has a lesson for Professor St. Peter, Virgil also had a message for Willa Cather. For just as the effort of the hero Aeneas to integrate his people into a new land will be difficult, so, early in Book VII, the author Virgil states that the rest of his text will be, in some sense, greater than what has come before:

*major rerum mihi nascitur ordo,
majus opus moveo.* (VII, 44-5)

A greater set of events starts now for me,
I begin a greater task.

Her prairie-youth, Kansas-boy, Red Cloud-girl tales had served their valid and important purposes, but it was time to consider other applications of her art: *majus opus moveo*. The moving is not yet over and done.

NOTES

¹Outland is not the first doomed youth to be associated by Cather with the *Aeneid*. In "The Namesake" (1907), Lyon Hartwell tells of his uncle, a "charming and brilliant" boy who joined the Union army at the age of fifteen, and fell in battle the next year. Hartwell's feeling of kinship with the boy — and, through him, with his nation's and family's past — came when he discovered his uncle's school copy of the *Aeneid*, with military sketches in the margins and, on the flyleaf, a Federal flag overarched by lines from "The Star-Spangled Banner."

²Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964) 297.

³Twice (113, 251) we are told that Tom read all of the *Aeneid* — not stopping, as so many students do, at book VI.

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Willa Cather at the American Literature Association May 29-June 2, San Diego

John Swift
Occidental College

When the ALA convened its spring conference on Mission Bay, Willa Cather readers from across the country and around the world joined more than six hundred members of the Association's sixty constituent American author societies for four days of literary conversation and shared scholarship. New critical work on Cather was presented in two paper sessions, both held on May 31st on the upper ballroom deck of the Bahia Resort Hotel's riverboat *William Evans*.

Ann Fisher-Wirth of the University of Mississippi chaired the morning panel, "Contextualizing Cather," whose three presentations drew connections between Cather's work and its contemporary cultural history. In "Modernist Darkness: Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Laura Winters and Sister Alice Lubin of the College of St. Elizabeth compared the two works' endings, suggesting both Conrad's direct influence on Cather and an ironic anti-romantic vision held by both writers. Kim Savelson of Brandeis University, in her "The Dilemma of Meaning in the Age of the 'New Commercialism': Anti-Industrial Sentiment in *The Professor's House*," investigated Cather's mid-career unease at America's romance with technology and utility. And in "Wild Flowers, Transplants, and 'Nature's Sad Substitutions'," Cheryl and John Swift (Whittier College and Occidental College) proposed some reflections of early twentieth-century ecological theory in *O Pioneers!* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

In the afternoon John Swift chaired "Willa Cather's Problematic *My Mortal Enemy*, 1926-1996," in which the first paper, Ann Fisher-Wirth's "Queening It: Excess in *My Mortal Enemy*," sympathetically explored Myra Henshawe's larger-than-life extravagance. In "My *Mortal Enemy* and the Mystery of Charity," John Murphy of Brigham Young University traced the theme of Christian charity in the relations of the novel's main figures. Emmy Stark Zitter of Bar Ilan University concluded the session with "My, My, My. . . Developments in Autobiography and Narrative Voice in *My*

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Mortal Enemy," reading Nellie Birdseye as a confident culmination of Cather's experiments with first-person narrative voices.

WCPM Director Pat Philips and Board Member Don Connors also attended the Conference and joined the eight presenters in sampling its 125 other paper sessions — as well as walking and bicycling along the beach, eating local seafood, and simply enjoying the San Diego sun.

"Cather in the Mainstream" — A Follow-Up

Loretta Wasserman
Annapolis, Maryland

In a recent Newsletter ("Cather in the Mainstream," Winter 1995) I reported on what I saw as an increasing number of references to Cather in writing aimed at the general public — newspaper columns, magazine articles, reviews, and the like. My supposition is that such quotations or allusions, which assume the reader's shared response, hint at a writer's general (as opposed to academic) reputation. My article provoked an interesting letter from John Anders, who sent two items culled from his reading, adding that I should use them in any future follow-up.

Mr. Anders' first citation is from Ruth Suckow's 1934 novel *The Folks*. Although obviously not speaking to current reputation, the passage is interesting as being from a popular writer of the time. In the novel, Margaret (later Margot), in flight from small-town life in Ohio, settles into a basement apartment near Washington Square. After a disastrous love affair, which takes her away from this Bohemian life, she returns to seek refuge with a friend living on "the small retreat of Bank Street," which, Margot thinks, ". . . at least kept a kind of twilight dignity." But as the taxi draws near, she comes upon "the noise of riveters and the dust of tearing down It was the old apartment house on the corner with its square, dignified windows, where people said that Willa Cather had lived, and that always made Margot think of the cool clarity of Willa Cather's prose" (483). It is interesting that Suckow, who wrote extremely well-furnished novels (772 pages!), should nevertheless admire Cather's restraint, and see the destruction of her old home as a loss to civility.

Mr. Anders' second example is from a movie review in *Time* (10 Jan 1994). The French film being considered, *The Accompanist*, tells the story of Sophie, a young pianist who becomes enthralled with the concert soprano who employs her, to the point of forgetting to lead her own life. The reviewer says,

"She could be a sister to Willa Cather's Lucy Gayheart . . ." As Anders observes, "It was particularly interesting that a movie reviewer in a popular magazine would refer not only to Cather herself but to one of her least read books." The reviewer ends with an interpretation of Sophie that may eerily fit Lucy: ". . . she perfectly embodies pent-up passivity as it longs for the golden chains of an enslaving passion."

I have recently come upon three references of some interest. The first is from Gore Vidal (*New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1992), writing about Sinclair Lewis, especially *Babbitt* and *Main Street*. Noting the ridicule the citizens of Gopher Prairie heap on a Swedish tailor who writes poetry (they call him Elizabeth), Vidal writes, "Plainly, the influence of Willa Cather's curiously venomous short story 'Paul's Case' of 1905 was still strong enough for Lewis to ring changes on the sissy boy who dreams of art and civilization and beauty." At this point Vidal drops a "curiously venomous" [sic] footnote: "For a brilliant analysis of Cather's sexual and social confusions read Claude J. Summer's *Gay Fictions* (Continuum, 1980): he believes that in 'Paul's Case' Cather was reacting fiercely against the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde (condemned ten years earlier); for her the young Paul is a Wilde *in ovo*, and doomed. She herself liked men to be men, and women to be men, too. She seemed unaware of the paradox."

An advertisement appearing in *The New Yorker* (11 September 1995) for *Mapping the Farm*, by John Hildebrand (Knopf), includes an excerpt from a *Washington Post* review: *Mapping the Farm* ". . . completes something begun by Willa Cather in *O Pioneers!* She portrayed, in glory, the opening of the prairie This book depicts its closing and is a sunset book. Both books are golden with the same Midwestern light."

A newspaper column in the *Washington Post*, 25 February 1995, praising the life-long charity of an Illinois churchman (Colman McCarthy, "The Bishop of Peoria") closes this way: "He possesses what Willa Cather called, in 'Death Comes for the Archbishop' a 'golden goodness'."

Additions, anyone?

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Response to Opera Version of "Eric Hermannson's Soul"

Mellanee Kvasnicka
Member, WCPM Board of Governors
Omaha Correspondent

As reported in the last edition of the Newsletter, Advanced Placement English students from South High School had worked with Libby Larsen investigating the process of adapting from one genre to another. Senior AP English students read Cather's "Eric Hermannson's Soul," then read copies of Larsen's libretto, and then as a final step, saw the workshop performance of the opera on April 10, 1996, at the University of Nebraska Strauss Performing Arts Center, Omaha. The project was made possible by Ms. Larsen's generosity and the Omaha Public Schools' Adopt-A-School program, which happily paired South High School with Opera Omaha. At the end of the forty-five minute piece, the audience was able to meet the composer, the conductor, Hal France, and the stage director, Chas Rader-Shieber.

The opera seemed strangely suited to minimal staging, given Cather's meticulous attention to detail. In a story in which scene is critical, the operatic treatment shifted the emphasis quite effectively from the Nebraska prairie to Eric's interior landscapes. The audience witnessed these shifts via imaginative staging which placed preacher Asa Skinner's congregation on one side of the stage and the music and dancing so vital to Eric's "conversions" on the other. Asa's congregation served as a kind of Greek chorus, admonishing, praying, singing, but always calling Eric away from the temptation of the violin. Dressed in black and white, the congregation served as a visual as well as thematic contrast to the ranch folk, including the visiting Elliots. In an interview (*Omaha World-Herald*, April 10, 1996), Larsen commented on her use of the Skinner congregation as chorus: "There is a point of view that is hidden in Cather's writing that is absolutely essential to her style. So I, out of instinct, added a chorus, which frames the whole piece and uses her poetry."

Appropriately, Margaret and Eric meet in center stage, the middle ground. As the story develops, Eric and Margaret break away from their own worlds and come together, however briefly, between them. Margaret's world is shown beautifully via a letter from her fiancé, and in the moment on stage, as in the pages of the story, the audience sees Margaret's life stretching down the years.

Music in the production focuses on Norwegian folk fiddle tunes, which begin each of the five sections of the opera. This music uses the Lydian scale, with a raised fourth, which in some cultures, according to Larsen, is associated with the devil. Asa Skinner's music is often punctuated by the harsh, discordant sounds of the electronic synthesizer, heightening Eric's emotional torture.

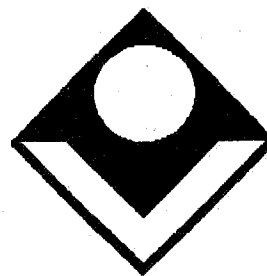
Larsen used Cather's original narrative, with one exception, the pony stampede, understandably omitted in the opera. However, the result diminishes the crucial point in Cather's story bringing Eric and Margaret together. In spite of the omission, the libretto is a powerful and deeply faithful adaptation, and given the brief rehearsal time (nine days), the workshop production was effective and exciting.

Students who attended the production were impressed by how quickly the production moved and how easily they were able to follow the libretto. Dan Bruning, a senior student, wrote "The ominous presence of Asa Skinner's religious zealots contrasted with the fiery-spirited Margaret Elliot on separate sides of the stage, leaving Eric Hermannson torn between the two." Dan also commented that the opera suggested the eternal struggle of youth for freedom against the establishment: "The opera demonstrates the old beliefs for salvation versus the new promises of life. The lines of separation have faded to the point that the innocent are the damned and the damned are the saviors. For Eric, just one ounce of freedom from such confusion is a day that 'shall be as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.'"

This project enabled students to see the development of a creative work from its inception, with the added bonus of having access to the creator herself. Students learned that literary works have appeal in the "real" world, and that Willa Cather is a literary personality with wide influence, extending far behind classroom walls.

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- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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