



Willa Cather
REVIEW

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Blind Tom

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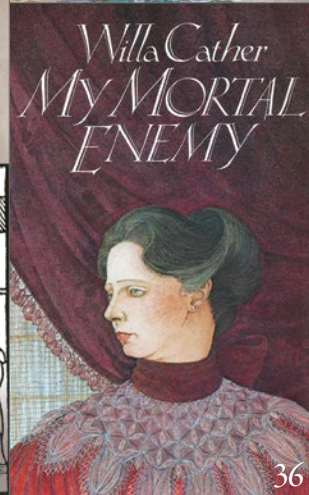
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FUNKE OPERA HOUSE
Frank C. Zehring, Manager.
THE ORIOLE OPERA COMPANY
Week Commencing June 3.
SUMMER OPERA AT POPULAR
PRICES—25, 35 and 50c.
Thirty People. Saturday Matinee. A Big Repertoire.
The repertoire includes: "Said Pasha," "Fra Diavolo,"
"Erminie," "Dorothy," "Bohemian Girl," "Chimes of Normandy"
"Mikado," "Mascot" and "Olivette."
—MONDAY NIGHT, MAY 27—
Mendelssohn Orchestra Concert.

40



47



36



55

Highlights of the Cather Symposium in Ireland

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On the cover: "The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset; between, the conquests of peace, dearer-bought than those of war."—"A Wagner Matinée."
Illustration by Joanna A. Blich



Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

In Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg observes, “There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm.” Thea’s moment of tribulation comes when she is thrust into finishing a performance of *Die Walküre*—with little notice and unrehearsed—when the soprano singing Sieglinde suffers from fainting spells. Afterward, Thea reflects that she best learns the delivery of a new part when performing it before an audience. Similarly, we’ve discovered that introducing new methods of digital program delivery is learned best when doing so is necessitated by a global pandemic.

One belief that has been routinely reinforced in response to social distancing measures in recent months is that, in some ways, the arts are more meaningful now than ever. Literature, visual art, music, and theater feed our souls. These art forms also offer a welcome reprieve from the occasional precariousness we have experienced in this rapidly changing world. I hope you’ve found

both solace and inspiration in many of the reimagined programs we have shared online in recent months: guided tours, poetry readings, a virtual conference, four incredible digital exhibits, and playlists highlighting music referenced in Cather’s fiction.

As a side note: one recent feature very worthy of revisiting as a supplement to Joseph C. Murphy’s essay in this issue is our **digital exhibit** that examines the dialogue between the novel *My Antonia* and the transformative art of John William “Blind” Boone, who helped inspire Cather’s *Blind d’Arnault*. A performance by John Reed-Torres adds appeal by sharing the music of Boone from the John William Boone House in Columbia, Missouri.

Wherever you’ve found yourself in recent months, I hope you’ve dug into a selection of good books and routinely connected with the people and causes that you love. With restoration and preservation work now underway at cherished Cather historic sites such as the Pavelka Farmstead and the Burlington Depot, there will be much to see, and to celebrate, the next time you visit the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud. Until then, we thank you. The support you provide as subscribers, members, and donors enables us to share Cather’s art, and the work of artists and critics inspired by her, with people across the world.



Letter from the President Glenda Pierce

I hope you and your loved ones are well and have found ways to experience joy during the past few months when so much of life has been on hold. Since I am retired and have a lot of flexibility in my schedule, I have turned to reading and more reading! And, of course, there have been many Zoom meetings and get-togethers.

As you read the essays in this issue and perhaps daydream about travels to the beautiful Irish countryside where the Symposium was held, you might be reflecting on the many adventures that Willa Cather must have had during her own travels. Like many of us, she traveled to many different parts of the United States and Europe. Thanks to the Cather Foundation’s sponsorship of conferences, seminars, and symposia, we have been able to travel where Willa lived and vacationed during her life and try to envision what her experiences must have been like at the time.

Although the pandemic forced us to close the doors of the National Willa Cather Foundation in March, our staff found new and creative ways to help you travel virtually to Willa Cather’s world and enjoy her works. We hope you have been able to experience some of the travels: Cather poetry readings by authors located all across the United States in celebration of National Poetry Month in April; recorded tours of the Cather historic properties in Red Cloud led by Education Coordinator Rachel Olsen; and, our first-ever virtual Spring Conference in June.

Another of our firsts in June was our virtual fundraiser during the Spring Conference. Thanks to a matching gift and the generous contributions we received, we have now reached 75% of our \$6.5 million Campaign for the Future goal! We invite you to join us on this journey as we restore eight historic Cather properties, expand programming, develop new visitor amenities, and grow our endowment to continue promoting the life, work, and world of Willa Cather. Your donation to the Foundation can travel through the postal system to our address in Red Cloud or via internet on our website. Thank you!



Introduction: A Cather Symposium in Ireland

Willa Murphy

It was in Flagstaff, Arizona in 2013 at the 14th International Cather Seminar that the idea of a Cather symposium in Ireland was first raised. Perhaps it was the week of exploring Cather's desert places—"Canyon, Rock, and Mesa Country"—that made soft Irish rainfall seem appealing. Or maybe it was the dry campus of Northern Arizona University that made a land flowing with Guinness and whiskey sound irresistible. Whatever the reason, when I pitched the possibility of hosting a meeting in Cather's ancestral homeland to the Foundation's education committee, the chair's eyes widened with expectation. "If you build it," he insisted, "they will come."

So in late June of 2018, the small market town of Limavady, thirteen miles north of the city of Derry, witnessed the arrival of over sixty international Cather scholars. Here, in a place defined by emigration, where somebody leaving is as familiar a sight as a boiled potato, was a sudden, unexpected reversal. The Catherites streamed in—from Nebraska and Utah, from New York and Boston, from Paris and London, from Eastern Europe and Asia. Suitcases bulging with waterproofs and woolly layers, they came expecting rain, expecting *Hibernia*—the "Land of Winter"—to live up to its Roman name. Instead, the rarest of heatwaves hit the North of Ireland that same week. The sun was splitting the stones the way it hadn't in twenty years or more, intoned the sages in the pub. The Ulster sky, so often forty shades of sodden gray, was transfigured into bands of azure, cobalt, and cornflower blue. Local housewives reported that clothes on the line actually dried. It was as if Cather's Southwest had also, suddenly, landed in the North.

The Catherites of Limavady—distant relations of Willa's American line—were significant developers of this town in the nineteenth century. Landowners and successful businessmen, they owned farms, mills, and distilleries, and provided Limavady with its bankers, sheriffs, and magistrates. The influential family built the Second Presbyterian Church, and financed the bell tower of a Presbyterian church outside of town; they built houses on "Cather's Row," and converted the local courthouse into a brewery. Meanwhile, the Cather women were heavily involved in the temperance movement, so, in that Christian tradition of being all things to all people (or that Irish tradition of having your whiskey and drinking it), the canny business family ran both the distillery on the edge of town and the Temperance Hall in its center, a detail their novelist cousin would have no doubt savored.

Willa Cather never visited Ireland, but her ancestors were part of the massive migration from Ulster to America in the eighteenth century, many of whom, like her family, ended up in the fertile Shenandoah Valley. These migrants have been described as "a people perfectly suited to the world of motion they inhabited and came to define" (Griffin 614). Caught up in the British Empire's shuttling of peoples and goods across the Atlantic, they became part also of the shift from empire to republic in the New World. The transformation or translation of Old World into New is of course one of Cather's abiding preoccupations in her fiction. But to what extent did this Ulster heritage inform her literary project? From minor Irish characters to major themes of immigration, identity, religion, and war, and continuing even to her distinctive style, the 2018 Symposium in Ireland explored connections between Cather and Ulster.

The Cather delegates were welcomed to Limavady with a mayor's wine reception at the Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre. Ulster University, in conjunction with Limavady Orange Heritage Centre, provided the venue for the Symposium, and papers on Cather were punctuated by talks on Irish history and Irish literary connections. We were treated to a lunch reception at Limavady Library to launch *Cather's Imagined Landscapes*, an exhibition featuring artwork by local school children.

The Cather Symposium in Ireland was made possible by generous assistance from the Willa Cather Foundation, the University of Nebraska, Ulster University's School of Arts and Humanities, the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, the Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre, the Drenagh estate, and the Ulster-Scots Agency. Tracy Tucker and Ashley Olson of the Cather Foundation did the heavy lifting in terms of costing, communications, and logistics. Limavady Councillor Aaron Callan was steadfast in his support for the event, and his staff at the Limavady Orange Heritage Centre kept Cather scholars full of tea and scones.





Left: Henrietta Cather, the last surviving Ulster Cather, in her drawing room at the Hermitage, the Cather family home in Limavady, around 1940. Below: The Cather family's Limavady brewery, dating from the earliest years of the 19th century, was converted to a distillery later in the century. Center: The Cather family built the bell tower of the Magilligan Presbyterian Church in rural Limavady. Bottom right: This portrait silhouette, dating from around 1800, shows David Cather and his family. Bottom left: One of a pair of stained glass windows endowed by the Cather family in the Magilligan Presbyterian Church. Its inscription reads "To the glory of god and in memory of the Cather family." Many thanks to Aaron Callan, owner of the Hermitage, for the use of his photograph of Henrietta Cather and the Cather family portrait silhouette.



The conference dinner was held in Drenagh, a nineteenth century country estate outside of town, a kind of Downton Abbey in miniature, where we drank champagne in the sumptuous drawing room and tucked into roast lamb beneath stern family portraits in the formal dining room. The walled garden offered a great escape for the children there that night, and from the French doors we watched their lengthening shadows crisscross the lawn. A local harpist provided Irish airs, and the evening unfolded into a session of Irish (and American) song. On the final day of the conference we walked the historic Derry Walls, then headed up along the jagged north coast to explore the geologic wonders of the Giants Causeway.

That evening, after a day blasted by Atlantic wind and rain, we sank into a farewell fireside night of Irish music, storytelling and pints. The weather had turned that day, and it was time to remember that Ulster, for Willa Cather, was also a kind of warm overcoat.

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Is it a skill of Protestant culture to make a virtue of monotony, or even try to redeem it? The route from modernism to minimalism has just such unpromising starts, but I suggest that the work of Cather and that of Beckett—their precipitated cultural idiom—play a powerful part along this route. Beckett’s minimal artifact is the triumph of the monotonous, of blankness, of the sheerest undramatic evidence of doing nothing, of waiting for God, of having nothing to say, of plunging into the depths of the featureless. Irish landscape offered him some rewards in this area, and it maps with uncanny precision onto Cather’s aesthetic.

The Joyce-Beckett relationship, personal and technical, laid down famous rules for modernism and minimalism, their work partly supported by Americans in Paris, notably in the circle of the review *transition*. The Beckett-Cather relationship (in terms strictly aesthetic) is related, but much less obvious: connected to a psychogeography of Ireland, in which Joyce inevitably joins. Joyce’s fatally addictive attitude to accumulating detail was equalled by Beckett’s determination to be rid of it. While acclaiming Joyce as his aesthetic mentor, Beckett went his own way into abandoning detail in favor of silence and an abyssal “lessness.” Cather’s modestly firm salutations to modernists suggest she had attractions toward copious detail balanced with equally deliberate retreats from it. To pair their voices for a second: Cather avers “It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious” (*My Ántonia* 28). Beckett reports “I surveyed the room with horror. Such density of furniture defeats imagination” (“First Love,” *The Complete Short Prose* 39).

Cather’s thought forecasts radical turns to wilderness, such as the later work of Beckett. I call such turns elsewhere an ‘iconography of the featureless’ (Davies “Earthing” 68) Standards for landscape art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stipulated the presence of “features” in a nearby, nearly wild, landscape. Accordingly, landscape with nothing whatsoever in it, or else a “ruinstrewn land” would be unthinkable (Beckett “Lessness” [1969], *The Complete Short Prose* 200). J.M.W. Turner would nevertheless offer seascapes whose fog-threatened features and objects are well on the move away from focus: at his most radical, his canvas is giving out mere light, neither water nor sky nor shore. Willa Cather’s idiom converses beautifully with that provisional and vivid sensibility, as she wrote at the outset of *My Ántonia*: “All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at

any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed” (38–39). While offering titles declaring some claim to landscape art, Turner was pretty clear he didn’t intend to offer us any more *features*. Cather famously, constitutionally, inscribes the prairie as a blank, as a space without features, only sparingly populated: a truly unfavorable place to begin any celebration of landscape. For Cather’s text, the prairie is a banded (but far from bland) featurelessness, that of intense red and the gray-green earth, and of the silver-gray overcast sky, a goldeny through to white palette intervening. For all we might agree that Turner nowhere near aimed for abstract art, it seems apt for a second to dream of Mark Rothko, who grew up from age ten in what Andrew Ritchie calls “virgin Oregon” (quoted in Ashton 198), suddenly occupying Cather’s Nebraska, staying there however long it takes to give his labor to an abstract canvas, in horizontal bands and interbands of blue, gray, white, red, green, black, lending to her prairie his reluctant rectangles and indistinct borderlines. Beckett’s radically abstract story “Lessness” set out in words to resolve, from a Parisian Ireland, just such a visual challenge: “All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir” (199). Willa Cather’s text in *My Ántonia* comes very close, as these three excerpts from early in the novel demonstrate: “Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out” (8), “Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I” (14), and “I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen” (18).

Cather might be slightly wordier than Beckett, but of her two favorite blank landscapes she presented the prairie as even more featureless than the desert. Like Cather, Beckett was radically adept in facing readers and audiences with the great blanks: the blanket bog during the fogs of his native Ireland, in which little or nothing can be seen or marked out on land or in sky—they are one “uniform grey”; and the desert, which he knew and liked from his regular holiday retreats in north Africa.

A daunting aspect of the Romantic Sublime which Cather and Beckett twist into their textual fabric, and with which their preferred bleak landscapes ideally harmonize, is the grandeur of flatness. Plain, prairie, desert, oceanic horizon, “birdless cloudless colourless skies,” as Beckett says (“Sedendo et Quiescendo,” *Short Prose* 13), overcast sky, snowfall so dazzling as to rival vertigo, and total darkness, all of them share and declare the psychologically

compelling character of objectlessness. This impression is helped by a horizon which stretches outwith the field of vision to left and right, declines any “center” or feature or detail that might pull the eye inward from infinity to attract the lover of objects, of things which typically *take center stage*. That dysfunctional object of “realist” focus is the very contrary of the vision of eternity implied by the adjective *boundless*, or, obliquely perhaps, by Julian of Norwich’s text *The Cloud Of Unknowing*. A cloud whose area is so large as to cover from the witness all view of sky in all directions (known to science as the “cloud table”), becomes an instrumental, intuitive demonstration of the blank, just as convincing as the one offered by desert or prairie. This blanket cloud, like the blanket bog of Ireland, is one specialty in Beckett’s offering (see Davies “Strange Weather”).

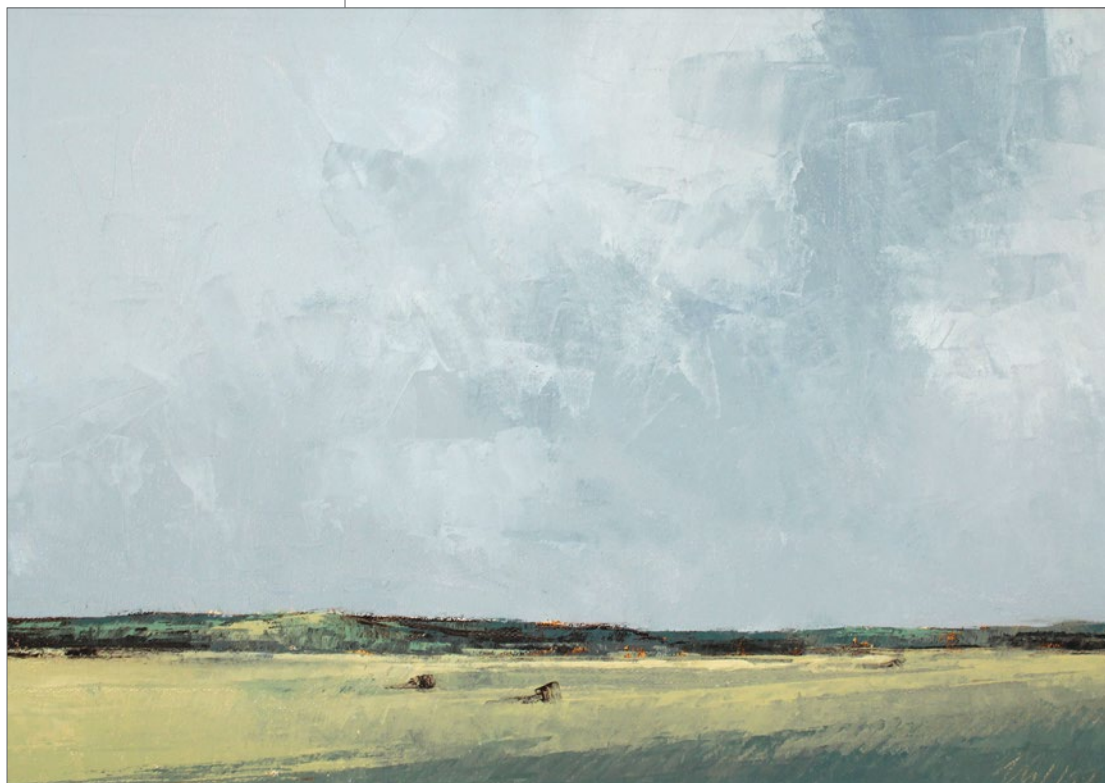
“In Nature there is no selection” (*The Professor’s House* 75). Thinking this, Cather’s professor refers succinctly, brutally, to the character of wilderness, of the blank. It neither fetches nor involves human arrangements. The compulsion such a blankness exerts over its witness is not only physical but metaphysical. It confounds, for the lover of landscape, the notion of locality, and even for moments dissolves it. The conventions of framing in fine art—portrait and landscape alike—encourage the viewer to center on an object: say a human body, or a tree, or a mountain, or an animal, or a full or not full moon; and then the frame deters further speculation. A blank horizon, without focusing and featurage, invites contemplative attention to dwell beyond the frame, even if (practically) there persists a vestigial frame or rectangle, as in the Rothko canvases of the 1950s to 1960s. (*Number 117* from 1961 is a perfect instance.)

When visual art is “versioned” into writing, the rectangular frame is, of course, instantly done away with. Literature’s only framing devices are the volume, the chapter, the stanza, the paragraph, the sentence, the line, the clause, the meme, the margin. Where wilderness is concerned, there’s little interest in outline or focus: for Beckett, “the scene was the familiar one of grandeur and desolation” (“The End,” *Short Prose* 90). The objects hoped for by an audience whose

habit might prefer localities (Cather’s Nebraska, Lawrence’s New Mexico, Rothko’s Oregon, Beckett’s Ireland) instead take part in a perversely determined secession, toward an abstracted form of the familiar. The “thingless” area of blank wilderness is forever, for these artists, the outcome.

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Richard Terrell. *Near Callaway*, oil on canvas, 1997. Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney, Nebraska. Gift of Larry Schulte and Alan Zimmerman.



Willa Cather on the High Seas

Mark J. Madigan

“This island is gray and foggy this season—mostly dry fogs and soft rainy-sounding winds. It’s just like being on a boat in the North Atlantic.”

—Willa Cather to Marion King,
Grand Manan, New Brunswick, Canada (July 1931)

In June 1902, Willa Cather boarded the SS *Noordland* at the Port of Philadelphia, bound for Liverpool, England, on her first transatlantic voyage. The *Noordland*’s sister ship on the American Line, the SS *Westernland*, would bring her home three months later. After that trip, Cather crossed the Atlantic twelve more times on six round trips to Europe or the United Kingdom from 1908 to 1935, sailing on ships of American, British, Dutch, French, German, and Italian registry. She was accompanied by Isabelle McClung two times and Edith Lewis three. Similar to the way steam locomotives enabled her to cross the country, steam-powered ocean liners transported her between the New World and the Old; and as her income grew, so too did her access to the world’s fastest and most luxurious vessels. In the Depression year of 1935, for example, she sailed from New York to Genoa aboard the SS *Rex*, an opulent Italian liner, which had recently broken the record for the fastest Atlantic crossing in a time of four-and-a-half days. Onboard were deluxe staterooms with private verandas, a spa, ornate dining rooms, museum-quality art, and indoor and outdoor swimming pools ringed by sand and beach umbrellas (“Legacy of the Great Liners”).

Ocean liners, and more broadly, maritime travel, not only played an important role in Cather’s life, but also in her literary work. Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, Tom Outland in *The Professor’s House*, and the Auclairs in *Shadows on the Rock* are among her characters that make life-altering voyages. This essay will focus on the ways in which Cather’s own transoceanic journeys informed works that have received less critical attention—“On the Gulls’ Road,” “Wireless Boys Who Went Down with Their Ships,” and “The Diamond Mine”—and how

the grand ocean liners she sailed aboard reflected her ascendancy to a privileged social class.

There is no better example of Cather’s ability to render the beauty of scenes observed from the deck of a ship than “On the Gulls’ Road.” Published in *McClure’s Magazine* in December 1908, the story is replete with details and images drawn from her voyage to Naples on the RMS *Carpathia* that year. For Cather, the trip also forged a personal connection to the RMS *Titanic* tragedy four years later, as it was the *Carpathia* that arrived first at the scene and onto which over seven hundred *Titanic* survivors were rescued from the North Atlantic. “On



Willa Cather and an unidentified young passenger aboard the SS *Noordland*, June 1902. This was Cather’s first transatlantic voyage. Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries

the Gulls’ Road” focuses on an unnamed American ambassador, who falls in love with a Norwegian woman, Alexandra Ebbing, while sailing from Italy to New York aboard the SS *Germania* twenty years prior to the telling of the tale.¹ The first of the correspondences between Cather’s voyage and the story occurs when the ambassador boards the *Germania* in Genoa, bound for New York in July, just as Cather did on her return trip. Her ship, the SS *Königin Luise*, was built in 1896, but since the story takes place in 1888, using that vessel’s name would have been a breach of historical accuracy. Instead, she chose to use the *Germania*, alluding to the *Königin Luise*’s national registry.

Cather drew upon a port of call in Naples for additional material to transform into fiction. In a May 3rd letter to her former high school teacher Alice E. D. Goudy, she described the view from the balcony of her hotel, which overlooked the bay:

“I sit there every afternoon and watch Vesuvius change from violet to lilac and then to purple” (*Selected Letters* 110). In the story, she elaborates upon that image as the ambassador sees it from the *Germania*: “The lilac haze that hung over the long, lazy slopes of Vesuvius warmed with golden light, and films of blue vapor began to float down toward Baiae. The sky, the sea, and the city between them turned a shimmering violet . . .” (83). Further refashioning of her correspondence into fiction can be traced to an April 18th letter to her brother Roscoe. From aboard the *Carpathia*, she wrote:



At three o'clock this afternoon we sighted Portugal, Cape St. Vincent, and ever since we have been sailing very softly along this shore which is pretty nearly holy ground to them as speak the English tongue. In a few hours we will be in Trafalgar Bay, where Nelson broke Napoleon's fleet for good. He chased the French fleet all up and down this coast as far as Cape St. Vincent, and the bottom all along here is strewn with the bones of Frenchmen and Spaniards and Italians that went down. Our English captain confessed to me this afternoon that he never steams down this coast without thinking of it and setting his heels tighter on his bridge. . . .

I wish you could see these soft gray waters, and the wild bleak Portugal coast, and could sit here with me and think about all their bones down below. (*Selected Letters* 108)

Similarly, in "On the Gulls' Road," the ambassador muses:

All about us was the sea of great adventure, and below us, caught somewhere in its gleaming meshes, were the bones of nations and navies . . . nations and navies that gave youth its hope and made life something more than a hunger of the bowels. The unpeopled Sardinian coast unfolded gently before us, like something left over out of a world that was gone; a place that might well have had no later news since the corn ships brought the tidings of Actium. (86)

In this passage, Cather presages the themes of her forthcoming prairie novels: the landscape as a place of great adventure, the sacrifice of older generations for succeeding ones, the passing of a bygone civilization that cannot be resurrected. She suggests that the sea, much like the prairie in her later work, is akin to a text, which betrays deeper meaning for those who explore its depths. In this analogy, the bones of the sailors at the bottom of Trafalgar Bay are to the ambassador what the Spanish sword dug out of the prairie soil is to Jim in *My Ántonia*: relics imbued with stories of great historical significance (235–236).

The similarities between "On the Gulls' Road" and Cather's accounts of her Italian trip suggest that other descriptions in the story may have been based on her shipboard experience. Consider, for instance, the specificity of the visual imagery in the following passage:

The coast of Sardinia had lain to our port for some hours and would lie there for hours to come, now advancing in rocky



1920s-era postcard image showing the *Berengaria* in harbor.

promontories, now retreating behind blue bays. It was the naked south coast of the island, and though our course held very near the shore, not a village or habitation was visible; there was not even a goatherd's hut hidden away among the low pinkish sand hills. Pinkish sand hills and yellow headlands; with dull-colored scrubby bushes massed about their bases and following the dried watercourses. A narrow strip of beach glistened like white paint between the purple sea and the umber rocks, and the whole island lay gleaming in the yellow sunshine and translucent air. Not a wave broke on that fringe of white sand, not the shadow of a cloud played across the bare hills. In the air about us there was no sound but that of a vessel moving rapidly through absolutely still water. She seemed like some great sea-animal, swimming silently, her head well up. The sea before us was so rich and heavy and opaque that it might have been lapis

lazuli. It was the blue of legend, simply; the color that satisfies the soul like sleep. (84–85)

Although a ship traveling west across the Mediterranean from Naples would have the southern coast of Sardinia on its starboard (right) side, not port, it is nevertheless true that the *Carpathia* would have followed the same route, enabling Cather to observe sights like those described in the story. While the plot of "On the Gulls' Road" is mainly concerned with a romantic encounter, this excerpt illustrates the story's true strength, which lies in its lyrical descriptions of setting—a hallmark of Cather's major works set in decidedly drier locales.

In "Wireless Boys Who Went Down with Their Ships," the sea is a site of mortal danger rather than romance. Cather's nonfiction homage to ten maritime telegraph operators who died in the line of duty was published in the *Associated Sunday Magazine* and *Every Week* magazine, of which Edith Lewis was an editor, on August 1st and 2nd, 1915, respectively.² It was occasioned by the dedication of a monument honoring the wireless operators in New York's Battery Park on May 12th of that year. Epistolary evidence establishes that Cather was in New York that day and may have attended the ceremony in Battery Park;³ she certainly visited the monument at some time, for she describes it in detail:

The monument is one of the most attractive and most friendly commemorative works in New York, and, unlike most of our monuments, it is beautifully placed—and humanly





RMS *Berengaria* postcard view. The sender remarked: "This is where everyone goes to talk and play cards after dinner until dancing time. The orchestra plays very refined music. You can see where they belong in the center of the picture."

placed. It is a single pilaster with a loop of sea-shells and seaweed across the front, and the names of the ten wireless men. The white pilaster stands against a thick clump of dark green cedars, with the red brick wall of the Immigration Building behind them. On either side of the monolith is a long, low granite bench, and in front of it is a generous granite bowl with a drinking fountain.

This cheerful monument has a peculiar attraction for the children who live in the neighborhood of the Battery. They sleep on the stone benches in the afternoon and play on them all the morning, and spell out of the names of the wireless men and the ships on which they went down.

Here, Cather's critique of the monument's placement and design recalls a preoccupation during her first trip to Europe in 1902, when she commented on the aesthetics of monuments to Honoré de Balzac, Rosa Bonheur, and Gustave Flaubert among others in her travel dispatches to the *Nebraska State Journal*. In this instance, Cather's assessment is not only descriptive, but also meant to entice. Her article conveys that the monument is worth visiting because it is both an attractive object and noble in its purpose.

As Cather states, the wireless operators honored on the Battery Park monument drowned in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Lake Michigan. Much of her article recounts the circumstances that led to their deaths. The most famous of them was the *Titanic*'s Jack Phillips, who heroically sent distress signals and the ship's coordinates to the *Carpathia*. Phillips learned telegraphy working for the postal service in England and took his first maritime assignment in 1906. He worked for the Cunard Line on a number of notable ships, including the RMS *Lusitania* and RMS *Mauretania*. From 1908 to 1911, he worked in Ireland at the Marconi station near Clifden. In March 1912, he was sent to Belfast for his fateful assignment on the *Titanic*, which was built at that city's port by Harland and Wolff ("John George Phillips"). Cather's account of

Phillips's final hours is based on a *New York Times* story by the *Titanic*'s junior wireless operator, Harold Bride, who survived even though he was washed overboard as the ship sank.⁴ She writes that Phillips "stood over his instrument until every lifeboat was gone, sending to the *Carpathia* directions as to how to reach the sinking vessel. But for his courage and persistence, the death list of the *Titanic* would have been 2,350 instead of 1,595" ("Wireless Boys").

What motivated Cather to write about the wireless operators is an open question, as there are no records concerning the article's publication. The topic may have been suggested by her presumptive editor Edith Lewis, or, as Melissa J. Homestead has conjectured, Cather may have been moved by the sinking of the *Lusitania* a week prior to the monument's dedication (331). Perhaps, too, she simply felt compelled to honor the men who provided a vital service for their passengers and fellow crew. Cather's motivation notwithstanding, "Wireless Boys Who Went Down with Their Ships" is an earnest tribute to one of the most important seafaring professions of the time. She concludes that although the ten wireless operators honored on the monument never met each other, they all had a common quality: none ever expected to be a hero. "They were all young men," she writes, "and went into wireless because it was a new and exciting business and appealed to the imagination. In a new form of service they found an old opportunity."

In 1916, Cather turned her attention to the *Titanic* and *Carpathia* once more in "The Diamond Mine." The ocean liner is portrayed therein as neither a site of romance nor danger, but rather a vehicle for self-promotion by opera singer Cressida Garnet. In the opening scene, as an unnamed ship is about to leave New York for England, the narrator observes:

I first became aware that Cressida Garnet was on board when I saw young men with cameras going up to the boat deck. In that exposed spot she was good-naturedly posing for them—amid fluttering lavender scarfs—wearing a most unseaworthy hat, her broad, vigorous face wreathed in smiles. She was too much an American not to believe in publicity. All advertising was good. If it was good for breakfast foods, it was good for prime donne . . . (75).

In this scene, Garnet uses the ocean liner as a prop, a signifier of her status. Later, her insistence on being a passenger on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* leads to her demise. She drowns in her stateroom, while her son and musical accompanist, who had crossed a week earlier, "came as safely to port as if they had never stepped out of their London hotel" (133).

Among the scenes drawn from history in "The Diamond Mine" is one that takes place outside the offices of the *Titanic*'s operator, the White Star Line, at 9 Broadway, just a few hundred

yards from where the wireless operators memorial is now located. There, hundreds of people gathered to hear the names of survivors as they were telegraphed (some by the rescued Harold Bride) from the *Carpathia* on April 15, 1912—a Monday, as Cather accurately specifies in the story (134). She could only have known of this event from newspaper accounts or word of mouth, for she was in Arizona when the *Titanic* sank. A week later, she wrote S. S. McClure, “I can imagine how shocked and horrified everyone in New York must feel because of the Titanic disaster. Even here in the desert it shakes me up a little. I am so sorry about Mr. Stead” (*Selected Letters* 153). The *Titanic* and British publisher William T. Stead, who died aboard the ship, were on her mind again when she wrote to poet Louise Imogen Guiney in August, asking if she had known him. In *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*, ghostwritten by Cather, Stead is called one of the “originators” of the inexpensively priced magazine and thereby an inspiration for McClure (207).

While Cather was more modest than Cressida Garnet, from the 1920s on, the ocean liners on which she sailed were emblematic of her own membership in an elite social class. In May 1930, for example, just six months after the stock market crash, she booked passage from New York to France aboard the RMS *Berengaria*, her second consecutive transatlantic journey aboard that famous ocean liner.⁵ As the ship’s First Officer, Harry Grattidge, wrote in his autobiography, “Everybody on the *Berengaria*, even the dogs, were ‘socially prominent’” (128).⁶ However, as the Great Depression worsened, the ship’s passenger total decreased dramatically (Braynard 53). In a letter written to Blanche Knopf during the voyage, Cather noted that there were “few passengers” on board—without speculating about the reason why (*Complete Letters* no. 2615). In a remarkable coincidence, the captain of the *Berengaria* in May 1930 was Commodore Arthur H. Rostron, who had been the captain of the *Carpathia* when it raced to the aid of the *Titanic* in 1912. There is no evidence that Cather met him on board, but she would have known of the world-renowned captain, who was awarded a U.S. Congressional Gold Medal and appointed Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

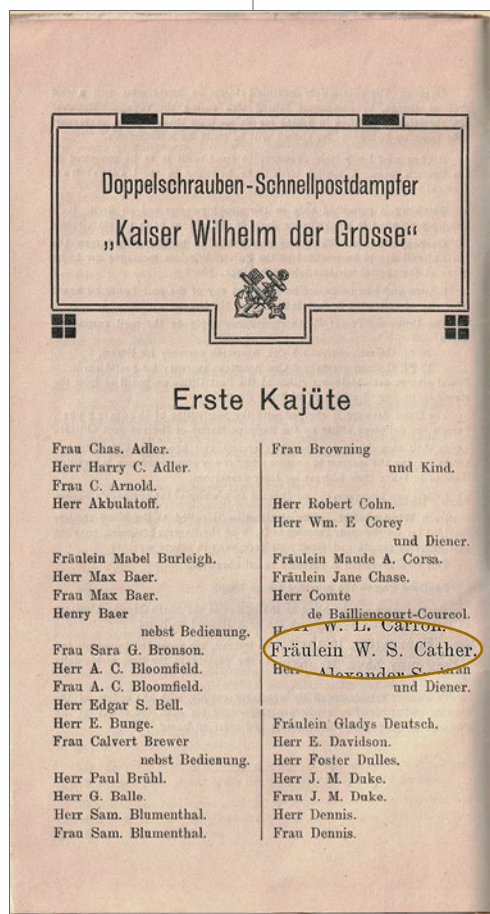
Cather continued to employ nautical references drawn from her personal experience in later fiction. In *The Professor’s House*, for example, Godfrey St. Peter awaits the return of his daughter Rosamund and her husband Louie, who are aboard the *Berengaria*. St. Peter notes that it is a “five-day boat” (274), which Cather knew because she had sailed on that ship for the first time in November 1923, just months before starting work on the novel. In the same novel, Tom Outland sails for Europe aboard the SS *Rochambeau*, which was the ship that brought Cather’s beloved cook Josephine Bourda and her family to New York from France (Madigan 26). Additionally, in *My Mortal Enemy*, Nellie Birdseye watches the SS *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* steam up the Hudson River with a “flock of seagulls in her wake” (19). In July 1909, the same ship carried Cather from Southampton to New York.

As we have seen, Cather used both personal and nautical history in her writing on ocean liners, but what is known of her own voyages across the Atlantic? Her letters written at sea lend insight. In May of 1920, for example, she wrote to her mother and sister Elsie while aboard the SS *Royal George*, traveling from New York to Southampton:

A week today since we left land, and we land in three days more. I have never had such a restful, peaceful crossing before. The weather has been beautiful, cold but not too rough, and I have felt exceptionally well all the time. Edith is always seasick and has been miserable—had to stay in her cabin most of the time. I don’t see how she can be so patient. We left New York with our cabin full

of fruit and flowers, six baskets of fruit in all and three boxes of flowers,—from both my publishers, from Madame Fremstad and other friends. I sent a lot of the fruit down to the children in the steerage and gave one basket of it to Miss Pfeiffer, of Lincoln.⁷ As Edith can’t eat any fruit, I am not equal to it alone. (*Complete Letters* no. 2417)

In the aforementioned letter to Blanche Knopf from the *Berengaria*, she wrote, “Thank you for the cherries—I was so glad to have them to nibble. I’ve been perfectly well and very lazy” (*Complete Letters* no. 2615). Lastly, in a letter written



Cather’s name appears on the passenger list in the souvenir booklet for the SS *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*’s crossing from Southampton to New York. National Willa Cather Center collection.



aboard the *Rex* during her penultimate crossing of the Atlantic in August 1935, she told Mary Miner Creighton:

Here we are, beyond the Azores, and the splendid autumn flowers you and Irene sent me still make our dinner table lovely day after day and turn my thoughts to my dear friends at home. So far we have had a rather rough passage, heavy seas with intense heat—a rather unusual combination. I was terribly tired when we left New York, but Mary Virginia came down to the boat with us and unpacked my steamer trunk and all my toilet things so deftly that I set off with a neat cabin. Before we were out of the narrows I went to bed and stayed there for 24 hours. For the first time in my life I had dinner and breakfast in bed on shipboard! Yesterday I began to feel like myself again, and today I am enjoying everything. I am never a sick [traveler], but to be terribly tired is about as bad. (*Selected Letters* 507)

Notwithstanding a bout of fatigue, these letters show Cather feeling at ease in splendid surroundings, demonstrating a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and literally enjoying the fruits of her labor. She is a sophisticated, experienced passenger whose cabin is laden with gifts from friends and famous people. Seasickness and the Great Depression appear to have been of little concern. Water conditions and weather posed problems, especially for Lewis, but for Cather crossing the Atlantic on a luxury liner seems to have been a pleasure.

Willa Cather saw major changes in transatlantic travel in her lifetime. The first ship on which she booked passage, the *Noordland*, had four masts and one funnel. It was four hundred feet long, sailed at a speed of thirteen knots (fifteen miles per hour), and took over two weeks to reach England. Five hundred of its 619 passengers were accommodated in steerage (“Immigrant Ship Information”). Her last voyage was aboard Cunard’s RMS *Aquitania*, which had four funnels, nine decks, and carried 2,200 passengers. Nicknamed “Ship Beautiful,” it was 901 feet long, maintained a speed of twenty-three knots (twenty-six miles per hour), and took only five-and-a-half days to cross the ocean (Layton 81). When Cather sailed on the ship in 1935, steerage had been rebranded as “tourist class.” The golden age of the ocean liner would end soon, however, as transatlantic commercial aviation rendered the grand ships to which she had grown accustomed virtually obsolete.⁸ Within five years of her death in 1947, all of the liners on which she sailed had been either scrapped or sunk in military service. Unlike the generic aircraft on which we travel today, these ships possessed rich

SALOON, CABIN, AND STEERAGE ALIENS MUST BE COMPLETELY MANIFESTED.

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor of the United States, under Act of Congress approved February 20, 1907, to be delivered to the U.S. CUSTOMER WILHELM DER GROSSE sailing from Southampton July 7th, 1909

No. List	NAME IN FULL	Age	Sex	Calling or Occupation	Place of Birth	Country	City or Town	Last Permanent Residence	Final Destination
1	Bull	38	M	Merchant	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
2	Frederick	58	M	Merchant	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
3	Agnes	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
4	Lillian	35	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	Chicago		
5	William	25	M	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
6	Anna	42	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
7	Lea	40	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
8	Elizabeth	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
9	Elizabeth	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
10	Elizabeth	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
11	Mary Jay	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
12	Mary Jay	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
13	Mary Jay	44	F	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
14	Joseph Morris	44	M	Home	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
15	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
16	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
17	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
18	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
19	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
20	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
21	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
22	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
23	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
24	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
25	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
26	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
27	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
28	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
29	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		
30	Willa Cather	34	F	Editor	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	New York		

“Editress”: Cather’s entry in the SS *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* passenger list when it landed in New York in July 1909. Records of the U.S. Customs Service, National Archives, through Ancestry.com.

histories and distinctive characters, qualities Cather valued in her personal life and inscribed in her literary work. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that in these lines from “On the Gulls’ Road” one hears Cather’s own voice declaring her appreciation for these ships and the pleasures of sailing aboard them: “She seemed like some great sea-animal, swimming silently, her head well up. The sea before us was so rich and heavy and opaque that it might have been lapis lazuli. It was the blue of legend, simply; the color that satisfies the soul like sleep” (85) And in the narrator’s voice, “I awoke every morning with a sense of speed and joy. At night I loved to hear the swish of the water rushing by. As fast as the pistons could carry us, as fast as the water could bear us, we were going forward to something delightful...” (87).

NOTES

1. Lloyd C. Griscomb, U.S. Ambassador to Italy from 1907 to 1909, was a fellow passenger of Cather’s on the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, sailing from Southampton, England, to New York in July 1909. “On the Gulls’ Road,” narrated by an American ambassador to Italy, was published seven months previous. Cather may have heard he was on board, but there is no evidence that Cather and Griscomb met or that he read the story.



2. There are two differences between the publications: paragraphs two through four of the *Sunday Magazine* text, which describe where the operators died and the appearance of the monument, are omitted from the *Every Week* version; and paragraphs seven and eight of the former, detailing Phillips's actions as the *Titanic* sank, are conjoined in the latter.

3. According to a May 10 [1915] letter to Houghton Mifflin's advertising director, R. L. Scaife (*Complete Letters* no. 0303), Cather was in New York working on stories and articles while awaiting page proofs of *The Song of the Lark*. Two days later, she wrote to him with copyediting instructions, establishing she was in New York on the same day the wireless operators monument was dedicated in Battery Park.

4. While Phillips is hailed for his heroism as the *Titanic* sank, there is controversy about his prior conduct. He was sending an accumulation of passengers' personal messages to Cape Race, Newfoundland, the day and evening of the collision, and is reported to have received warnings from other ships about icebergs in the path of the *Titanic*, which were not relayed to the *Titanic's* captain, Edward Smith ("Timeline of the *Titanic's* Final Hours").

5. The *Berengaria* was the largest passenger ship in the world when it was launched in June 1913 as the *SS Imperator*. After World War I, the German ship was seized by the U.S. Navy at port in Hamburg and used to transport American troops. In 1919, it was transferred to Britain's Cunard line as war reparations and renamed the *RMS Berengaria*, after the English queen, wife of Richard the Lion Heart. It was 918 feet long, had eleven decks, and traveled at a maximum speed of twenty-four knots (twenty-eight miles per hour). Its maximum capacity was 4,594 passengers and 1,180 crew. The ship was retired on March 21, 1938 (Layton 274).

6. According to Grattidge, the dogs included Rin-Tin-Tin, Jr., offspring of the famous canine that Cather was excited to meet in 1926 and called her "crush" in 1927 (Cather, *Selected Letters* 380, 390).

7. Laura Belle Pfeiffer (1862–1948) was a University of Nebraska history professor; see the annotations to *Complete Letters* no. 2417.

8. In addition to the ships named in this paper, Cather sailed on the *SS Patria* in October 1920, the *SS Volendam* in April 1923, and the *RMS Empress of France* in September–October 1930. The ship that transported her to England in May 1909 remains unidentified.

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Blind d'Arnault, Stephen Foster, and the Irish: The Blackface Minstrel Legacy in *My Ántonia*

Joseph C. Murphy

In his 2018 lecture “Our Cather Heritage,” Andrew Jewell no doubt speaks for most twenty-first-century readers of *My Ántonia* (1918) when he characterizes its racist depiction of African American pianist Blind d'Arnault as “an ugly moment in a beautiful book” (41:00–42:52). In fact, the attitudes expressed in the scene were, as Elizabeth Ammons argues, “objectionable then as well as now” (62), reflecting the limitations of narrator Jim Burden and of Cather, too. However, it will not do to dismiss this episode as a blemish on an otherwise pleasing creation. Rather, as I will contend here, the scene is integrally connected to *My Ántonia* as a whole—historically, socially, politically, and aesthetically as well. If the characterization of d'Arnault is offensive in language and tone, it is keenly aware of his significance to the ambivalent vision of America Jim Burden constructs: an America in which the culture of performance inextricably unites social groups—Black people and white people, Anglos and immigrants—who nonetheless remain separated in society at large. I share Ammons's view that d'Arnault typifies a broader African American aesthetic in *My Ántonia*, though my path to this conclusion will wind through different, specifically Irish American, territory.¹

Contemplating the theme of Cather's Irish connections, I have taken a fresh look at the d'Arnault episode, especially the cast of Irish Americans who fringe the proceedings: the salesman Anson Kirkpatrick and Willy O'Reilly, typifying the larger fraternity of itinerant Irishmen passing through Black Hawk; and Molly Gardener, born Molly Bawn, who makes her domineering presence felt as manager of the Boys' Home Hotel that hosts d'Arnault, even from Omaha, where she is at the time of d'Arnault's performance. These characters surrounding the Black musician symptomatize the outsized role Irish Americans played in the representation of African Americans in the nineteenth century through the enormously consequential tradition of blackface minstrelsy. D'Arnault's performance style—and Jim Burden's presentation of it—is inevitably steeped in this blackface minstrel legacy, which developed among white performers in the Northeast in the 1820s and 30s. Blackface minstrelsy maintained an intimate, cross-pollinating relationship with African American culture, and engraved racial stereotypes in the American mind that

persist today.² The most famous of the Irish Americans who dominated the blackface minstrel industry was Ulster-descended, Pittsburgh-born composer Stephen Collins Foster.³ In *My Ántonia*, d'Arnault's performance of Foster's “My Old Kentucky Home” and other “good old plantation songs,” as d'Arnault calls them, anchors a scene in which Irish Americans serve as mediators among a Black performer, non-Irish immigrants, and Anglo-American narrator Jim Burden (179). By situating d'Arnault in the blackface minstrel tradition, I am not discounting the significance of well-established African American prototypes Blind Tom and Blind Boone (to whom I will return below) but rather broadening the historical frame in which to view late-nineteenth-century Black performance. My consideration of blackface will, more specifically, reveal the intertwined Irish and African American traditions that underlie American immigrant consciousness—traditions that enrich, but also trouble, the elegiac tone of Jim's narrative. As a paradigm for bringing forth the multicultural nation that Jim Burden imagines, d'Arnault's minstrel-style performance is both liberating and limiting: it performs a fantasy of racial and cultural border-crossing while ultimately maintaining the divisions that it raucously and theatrically transgresses.

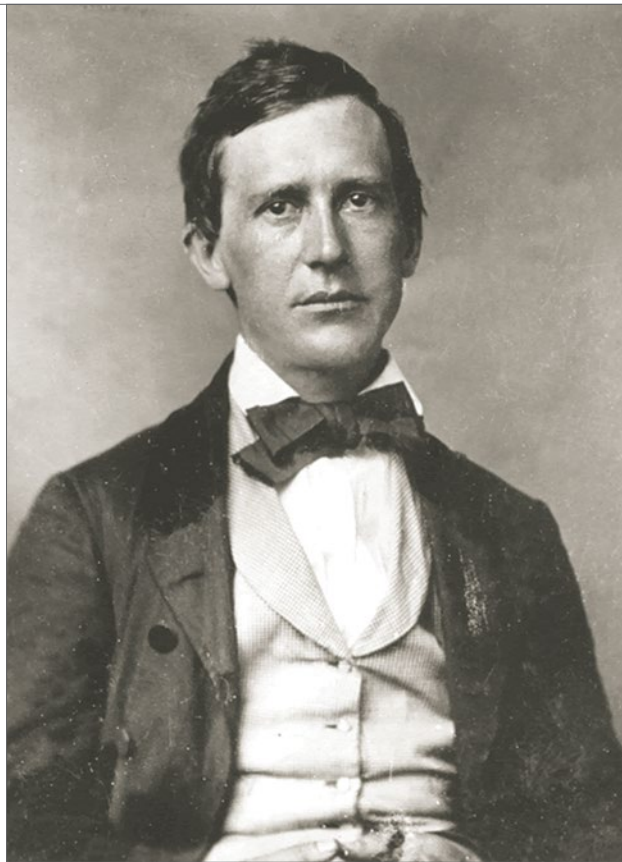
So omnipresent were Irish Americans in the culture of blackface minstrelsy, as creators, performers, and audience that, in Robert Nowatzki's estimation, “one could say that minstrelsy was as much an Irish-American invention as it was an American one” (174). Irish American minstrel luminaries besides Foster included Dan Bryant, Matt Campbell, Dan Emmett, Ned Harrigan, George N. Harrington (who went by George Christy), Joel Walker Sweeney, and the dancer Jim Diamond, to name only a few (Nowatzki 171; Lott 98; Emerson 139). The music, dance, and antics of the minstrel show fused Black and Irish signifiers: the African banjo and jawbone joining forces with the Irish fiddle, bones, and tambourine; “the vigorous, earth-slapping footwork of black dances warring with the Irish lineaments of blackface jigs and reels”; actors smeared in burnt cork spouting Irish brogues. Blackface, oddly, served as the default signifier of *all* ethnicities prior to the establishment of ethnic types (Lott 97–98).



Irish American minstrels' bearing toward African Americans entailed both identification and competition or, to cite the title of Eric Lott's classic study of blackface, "love and theft." Even before the upsurges of Irish immigration in the 1820s and 1840s, Irish and Blacks occupied contiguous class categories in the North ("smoked Irishman" was nineteenth-century slang for "Negro"), a situation occasioning conflict but also friendship and even marriage across racial lines. Minstrelsy projected stock Irish qualities onto Black people, and vice versa, to the comparative advantage of the Irish. As Lott writes, "The Irish elements of blackface, including the fact that minstrel characters were surely influenced by Irish low-comedy

types from the British stage, no doubt made possible the Irish ascendancy within the minstrel show, affording immigrants a means of cultural representation from behind the mask" (98). The Irish ascendancy in minstrelsy made possible their ascendancy over Black people in society at large; by foisting Irish stereotypes onto African Americans, the Irish secured their own position as white Americans. However, even as the Irish entered the American mainstream by the later nineteenth century (when the Blind d'Arnault scene takes place), their public identity remained bound to the image of African Americans on the minstrel stage.⁴

Jim Burden's racist characterization of Blind d'Arnault seems distilled from the lexicon of blackface and, indeed, from its founding myth. According to an often-repeated tale, the full-blown minstrel show fell together sometime in the winter of 1842–43, after four veterans of the circus and popular music circuit sitting in Manhattan's North American Hotel descended on the Bowery Circus to demand a gig, armed with fiddle, banjo, tambourine, and bones. Their method of persuasion was what their leader Dan Emmett called "charivari"—the tradition of "rough music" or mock serenading dating from medieval times and more recently associated with the ideology of revolution and natural rights. The upshot was a rousing performance of "Old Dan Tucker," followed by more "horrible noise" (Emmett's term) at the hotel and the establishment of



Stephen Collins Foster, circa 1860. *Library of Congress.*

the Virginia Minstrels as the first blackface minstrel troupe (Lott 140; Roberts 175–76). Scores of imitators followed, including Christy's Minstrels, which premiered many of Stephen Foster's "Ethiopian" melodies and purveyed what a visiting English actor memorably called "genuine negro fun" (Emerson 93). The antics centered on two clown types who became fixtures of the minstrel stage: Jim Crow and Zip Coon, the plantation fool and the city fool. Minstrelsy presented the Black body as a complex spectacle of pleasure, savageness, vulgarity, and childishness, with a proclivity for "oral and genital amusement," which Lott catalogues from an examination of blackface promotional material: "fat lips, gaping mouths . . . big heels, huge noses, enormous bustles . . . a child's-

eye view of sexuality" (149–50). These theatrical conventions extended to all-Black minstrel troupes that toured the nation in the post-Civil War era. African American troupes even reached Red Cloud, where, according to the "City News" column in the *Red Cloud Chief* for September 10, 1886, the all-Black Georgia Minstrels "entertained our people Monday night."⁵ Seeking to be more "genuine" than their white competition, the Georgia Minstrels nonetheless followed the tradition's standard practices (Southern 172), perpetuating racial stereotypes handed down to them from white rabble-rousers in the Northeast.

Although d'Arnault is not himself a minstrel performer, his music descends from the minstrel stage and Cather situates him within a culture pervaded by minstrelsy, one where Sally Harling sat at the piano and "drummed the plantation melodies that negro minstrel troupes brought to town" (153).⁶ Moreover, Jim's description of d'Arnault channels the industry's stock-in-trade: "To hear him, to watch him, was to see a negro enjoying himself as only a negro can. It was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black and white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers" (183). D'Arnault's piano playing originates in childhood as something barbarous and "perhaps abominable" (183)—like the "rough music" blared at the founding of blackface

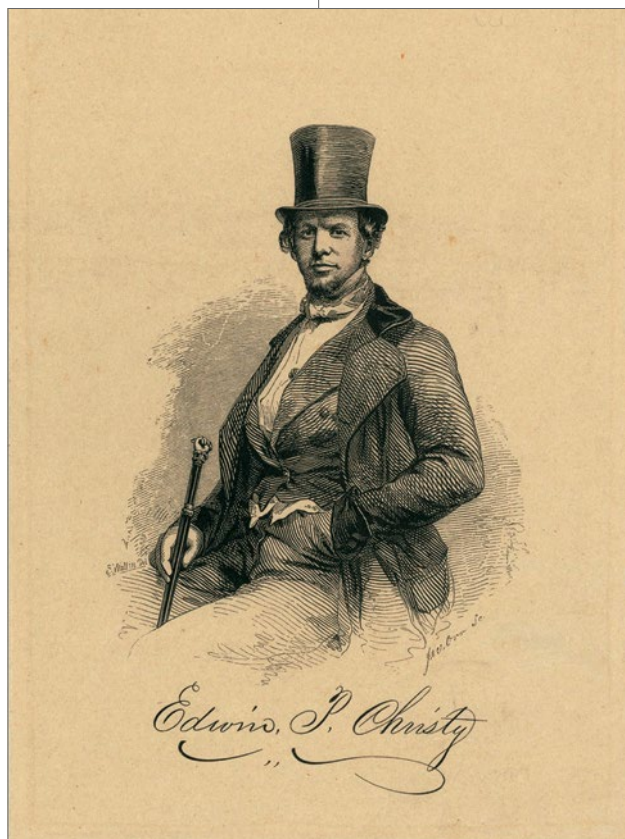


minstrelsy—and its sexual charge gains force in maturity, as he “spread himself out over the piano, and began to draw the dance music out of it” (185). Jim goes on, adding a dose of modernist primitivism: “He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood” (185). The flipside of d’Arnault’s primitivism is a “docile subservience” that recalls to Jim his own Southern roots: “the soft, amiable negro voice,” “the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia” (178). Jim’s personal nostalgia is filtered through the minstrel stereotype of the plantation slave. Although minstrelsy was largely an urban product of the Northeast and the Ohio River Valley, it propagated a myth of Southern origins. Philadelphia-born E. P. Christy of Christy’s Minstrels portrayed himself as a medium for the African American music that hung in the atmosphere of the slave states: he was “the first to catch our *native airs* as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south” (quoted in Saxton 68). Performing Foster’s songs, d’Arnault performs the staged Southern Black identity that is baked into them.

Despite the constraints of these stereotypes, d’Arnault has his agency. In a telling detail, Jim recalls Johnnie Gardener “directing” d’Arnault to the piano but then notes that the performer “would never consent to be led” (177–78). This was d’Arnault’s *modus operandi* even as a boy on the plantation, where he forged his own way despite, or perhaps even because of, the perception of him as a “hideous little pickaninny,” “idiotic” and “foolish” (180–81). Indeed, Jim’s narration of d’Arnault’s first discovery of the piano foregrounds the oral and genital fixations of blackface in a way that demonstrates the subversive power of these stereotypes. The quest of young Samson, previously “docile and obedient,” is a courageous defiance of his master’s authority and that of his mother, who has warned him that old Mr. d’Arnault “would give him to the big mastiff if he ever found him ‘meddling.’” To get to the piano, Samson must climb through the window and overcome his memory of the dog’s “terrible breath” pounding “in his face.” And so from his fixation on a

traumatic encounter with the mouth of a terrible beast, Samson “through the dark . . . found his way to the Thing, to *its* mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his finger tips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs. . . . He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. . . . He approached this highly artificial instrument though a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him” (181–82, italics mine). I will highlight two points in this sexualized imagery: the figuring of the piano as a primitive oral fetish (in the tradition of blackface imagery) and at the same time as an emblem of the master’s power (doubling the dog’s mouth) that the blind boy appropriates for his pleasure and his self-possession. In the piano we might see a figure of minstrel performance in general: the “highly artificial instrument” that offered to “piece out” a fully national identity for not only Irish Americans but, later, African Americans as well—or, as Lott puts it, “a site of political struggle for representation, debased and suspect though it may have been” (37).

Scholarly emphasis on blackface has vacillated between the polarities of its racist content and its progressive undercurrents, a dynamic deeply rooted in the history of the form itself. Recent scholars agree that before 1840 minstrelsy was more about social class than about race, a raucous performance largely by and for dispossessed immigrants and Black people of the Northeast arrayed against the middle and upper classes (Shaftel 2–3). As Dale Cockrell argues, blackface songs between 1828 and 1840 brim with “period references to political, economic, moral, and social issues, including the debate over slavery,” but by the mid-1840s, as minstrel performers gained affluence through mainstream popularity, their emphasis had shifted to “a form of gross mockery—of blacks, of women, of the powerful too” (146–47). At the same time, as the abolitionist movement gathered force blackface became a captivating, if unreliable, source



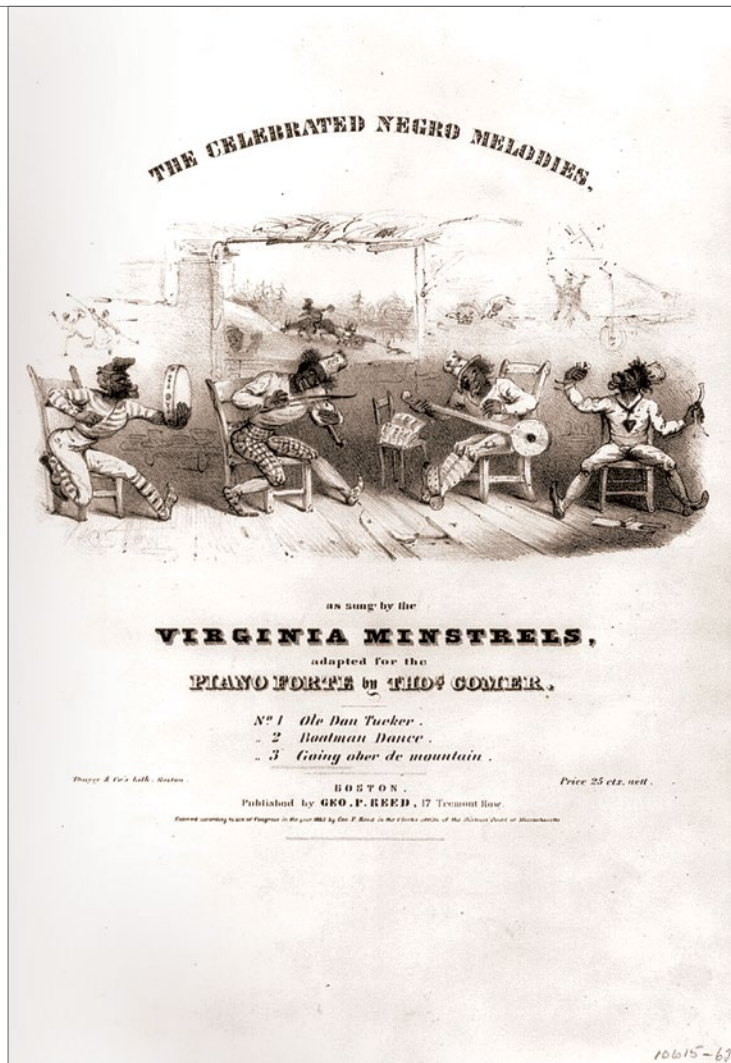
Edwin P. Christy of Christy’s Minstrels. *American minstrel show collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.*

of imagery among Northern whites about Black lives that were increasingly a subject of fascination (Shafel 3–4). As Lott writes, “Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed . . .” (6). Thus Lott finds in early minstrelsy “the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation . . . constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling” (18).

African Americans, perhaps more than other Americans, were attuned to the conflicting messages and effects of blackface minstrelsy. In 1848 Frederick Douglass condemned blackface showmen as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature”

(quoted in Lott 15). However, in 1849 he grudgingly supported the African American minstrel troupe Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders, while faulting the performers for “exaggerating the peculiarities of their race”: “It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race” (Douglass, “Gavitt’s”). Although they did not literally “black up,” Cather’s prototypes for Blind d’Arnault—Thomas Greene Bethune, known as Blind Tom, born a slave in Georgia in 1849; and John William Boone, known as Blind Boone, a Missourian born in 1864—emerged from a tradition in which “blackness” was “a matter of display or theater” and thus “a potential source of political advantage” (Lott 37).

Cather was familiar with both these blind African American piano prodigies: a review of an 1894 Lincoln performance by Blind Tom is attributed to Cather, and in



The Virginia Minstrels are depicted performing “The Celebrated Negro Melodies” in this illustrated sheet music cover ca. 1843. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

her letters she acknowledged Blind Boone, who performed in Red Cloud several times during the late 1880s, as a prototype for d’Arnault.⁷ She apparently drew upon both performers for her fictional pianist. Ammons suggests that d’Arnault’s “plantation history” and “subhuman physical characteristics” derive from Blind Tom, while his “dignity” is modeled on the younger musician Boone. This genealogy may be a bit too simple. Although Blind Tom was ruthlessly exploited and dehumanized by his handlers, he leaned toward a classical repertoire in line with Douglass’s call for “cultivation of . . . taste” among African American performers. By contrast, Blind Boone, seeking to promote “the rich sound world of African American culture,” “regularly performed camp meeting tunes, plantation melodies, negro

spirituals, minstrel songs, ragtime, coon songs, and his own black music-inspired piano pieces” (Davis 2), but as such he also engaged more directly, as does d’Arnault, with racist minstrel material. In any case, as Black performers during the Jim Crow era, both Blind Tom and Blind Boone were perceived within the range of stereotypes that blackface minstrelsy had fashioned decades earlier. As Ammons writes, “they had to confront the performance expectations created by minstrelsy, virtually the only theatrical venue open to black men in the United States in the nineteenth century” (71).

The plantation songs of Stephen Foster were a mainstay of this tradition, and they had the effect of both reinforcing and, to some extent, humanizing minstrelsy’s performance expectations. At the Boys’ Home, the men, accompanied by d’Arnault, sing “one negro melody after another,” beginning with Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home,” the only song mentioned by name. The highlighting of “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night!” (1853) is significant: it was among the



most famous of Foster’s “plantation melodies,” which represented, for him, the highest development of his songs in the “Negro” idiom. Foster’s earlier blackface minstrel songs were characterized by repetition, heavy dialect, and demeaning racial stereotypes. Typical is “Oh! Susanna” (1848), with its revolting couplet, “I jump’d aboard the telegraph, and trabbled down de ribber, / De lectrick fluid magnified, and killed five hundred Nigga” (quoted in Shaftel 12). But in the late 1840s Foster’s residency in Cincinnati, where he lived in close proximity to African Americans and their music, and in sight of the slave state of Kentucky, had begun to unsettle his politics and music (JoAnne O’Connell, ch. 7). “Nelly Was a Lady” (1849), for example, makes the radical gesture of conferring

a genteel title on a Black woman (Emerson 146). The added influences of abolitionism, an 1852 New Orleans trip where he likely witnessed slave conditions, and the serialization of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* beginning in 1851, led to a decisive shift in Foster’s idiom (Shaftel 14–17, 21). His plantation melodies—which include, among others, “Old Folks at Home” (1851) and “Old Black Joe” (1860)—offer a sympathetic and sentimental view of Southern Black people suffering under slavery. Channeling the refinement of his parlor ballads, they cut back on the Black dialect and the repetition and amplify the nostalgia (Shaftel 17–19). Foster drafted “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night!” under the working title “Poor Uncle Tom, good night,” then removed all explicit references to Stowe’s novel, shifting toward a more generalized narrative of homesickness and separated families (Emerson 191–95; Shaftel 21–23).

Foster’s plantation melodies were fantastically successful in mid-nineteenth-century America because they deployed a soft-focus image of slavery as stand-in for other historically specific experiences of suffering and loss, including widespread displacement in a nation wrenched by industrialization and expansion. Even a crude minstrel number like “Oh! Susanna,” which in its original form is apparently about Black lovers separated by slavery, quickly became “the national anthem of westward expansion” (Lott 213). As Cather writes of mid-



Poster for an appearance by “Blind Boone” (John William Boone) at the Red Cloud Opera House. *National Willa Cather Center collection.*

nineteenth-century New Mexico in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), “The negro melodies of Stephen Foster had already travelled to the frontier, going along the river highways, not in print, but passed on from one humble singer to another” (185). Foster allowed his songs to circulate freely among minstrel troupes and to be credited to them in print. However, with his plantation melodies he took more pains to establish authorship because he prided himself, he said, on “build[ing] up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order” (quoted in Emerson 183). Foster found a receptive ear in Willa Cather, who in her 1899 tribute to Foster praises his artistic intentions, perhaps too generously: “His negro melodies are entirely free from vulgarity and the flavor of burnt cork. They are sincere, exquisite, unique. Perhaps it was because he spoke only what his heart uttered that his voice always rang so true” (“Some Pittsburgh Composers” 6). However sincere, Foster was communicating from behind a minstrel mask; what is remarkable is the degree to which his simulated African American nostalgia struck the mystic chords of national memory.⁸

In *My Ántonia*, the Blind d’Arnault scene radiates an unrest and commotion typifying a nation on the move, extending from the performer himself to his surroundings. D’Arnault is in constant motion due to a “nervous infirmity” apparently modeled on that of Blind Tom (who exhibited symptoms of autism, though any historical diagnosis is speculative [Deirdre O’Connell 35–37]): “When he was sitting, or standing still, he swayed back and forth incessantly, like a rocking toy. At the piano, he swayed in time to the music, and when he was not playing, his body kept up this motion, like an empty mill grinding on” (178). This mechanistic agitation is the bass line from which d’Arnault’s music takes flight, and it animates the entire scene, to the point where Jim and Ántonia are left at the end of the evening in a state of existential “restlessness” (187). The excitement is abetted by the “atmosphere of unusual freedom” at the Boys’ Home Hotel, unleashed by the absence of the manager Mrs. Gardener and materialized in the physical

details of the parlor where d'Arnault performs: "The parlor had once been two rooms, and the floor was sway-backed where the partition had been cut away. The wind from without made waves in the long carpet. A coal stove glowed at either end of the room, and the grand piano in the middle stood open" (176). The very carpet is astir with the wind of the prairie, and the "sway-backed" floor associates d'Arnault, who "swayed back and forth incessantly" at the piano, with the breaching of walls and barriers. Indeed, this is d'Arnault's talent from childhood, when he crossed Miss Nellie's window to test the piano, to the present, when his detection of "somebody dancing in there" (183) effectively breaks down the partition between parlor and dining room and incorporate the furtive waltzing of Tiny, Lena, Antonia, and Mary Dusak into the night's shenanigans.

The Irish characters represented by Kirkpatrick and O'Reilly serve as mediators and gatekeepers, literally and figuratively, of d'Arnault's transgressive performance. It is Kirkpatrick who, cued by d'Arnault's detection of the hired girls, "mounted a chair and peeped over the transom . . . wrenched open the doors and ran out into the dining-room." He then catches "Tiny by the elbows" and implores the circle of hired girls to join the "roomful of lonesome men." Next, O'Reilly instigates the piling of chairs onto tables to clear space for dancing and dispels Johnnie Gardener's fears about his wife's disapproval. It is "at a word from Kirkpatrick" that "d'Arnault spread himself out over the piano" to bring on a new level of carousing (184–85). And finally, it is O'Reilly who exercises the privilege of dancing with Antonia, prefiguring the role that the novel's most consequential Irish American, Larry Donovan, will assume. In short order, the Irish cooperate to leverage African American performance into a medium of social bonding across immigrant cultures, reenacting in miniature the historical role Irish Americans played in nineteenth-century minstrel culture.

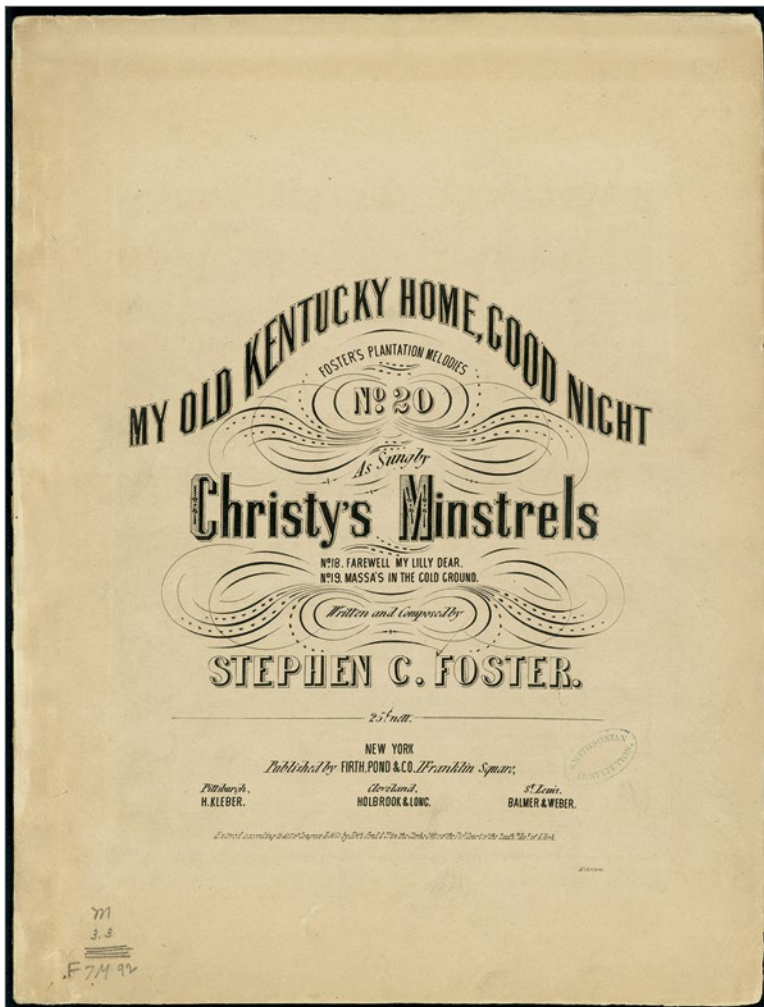
Although they presume to stage-manage d'Arnault, these Irish traveling men would also seem to identify with him—to share his vulnerability and his struggle for self-possession and manhood. D'Arnault's identity is merged with and perpetually moved by the piano: the piano resembles an industrial machine with a "pattern that lay all ready-made on the big and little keys" (182), and d'Arnault is "like a rocking toy" (178) or, as Cather called Blind Tom, "a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing powers" (*The World and the Parish* 166). D'Arnault exhibits the uncanny doubleness inscribed on the Black body by slavery, reproduced in the market economy by minstrelsy, and aestheticized in the culture of modernist primitivism: raw nature transformed into a machine.⁹ In their business pursuits, the Irishmen are

also mechanized, albeit more mildly, merging with the ready-made products or brands they travel for: Anson Kirkpatrick is twice called "Marshall Field's man," Willy O'Reilly "traveled for a jewelry house and sold musical instruments," and there are, otherwise unnamed, a "drug man" and a "furniture salesman." These men, housed in the appropriately named Boys' Home Hotel, are in a sense dwarfed by the economic forces that drive them: Kirkpatrick "a dapper little Irishman," and Johnnie Gardener—Molly Bawn's representative—"an affectionate little man" who "knew that without her he would hardly be more than a clerk in some other man's hotel." They are social climbers in a modest way, trading in the small change of prestige attached to talk of "good and bad hotels, actors and actresses and musical prodigies" (177). As, in Kirkpatrick's characterization, "lonesome men," homeless and on the move,



Cabinet card ca. 1882 of piano prodigy Thomas Greene Bethune, "Blind Tom," the first African American artist to perform at the White House. *National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*





1853 sheet music for *My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night*. Library of Congress, *Performing Arts Encyclopedia*.

they are particularly susceptible to the nostalgic sentiments in Foster’s plantation melodies. This makeshift male community carries on the longstanding tradition of blackface minstrelsy as a ritual of male bonding (Emerson 165, Mahar 266–67). D’Arnault’s “soft, amiable negro voice” reassures them of their dignity and manhood through a rhetorical call-and-response: “Good-evening, gentlemen. No ladies here? Good-evening, gentlemen. We going to have a little music? Some of you gentlemen going to play for me this evening?” (178). The allure of d’Arnault’s voice coaxes the men to submit to a program of “genuine negro fun,” revealing an underlying transaction between Irish Americans and African Americans: it is not only d’Arnault playing for the Irishmen, but the Irishmen playing for d’Arnault—their gentlemanly status is in a sense secured by temporarily giving it up.

This hotel performance suspends the hierarchy that holds sway in the workaday world. Railroad conductor Larry Donovan, “one of those train-crew aristocrats” who would never condescend to open a passenger’s window but would instead “silently point to the button that calls the porter”

(296), presumably a Black man, reconfirms the prevailing social divide between Irish Americans and African Americans. In the d’Arnault scene, Mrs. Gardener—who advertises herself by her maiden name Molly Bawn “in large blue letters on the glossy white side of the hotel bus” (185)—is the Irish character who implicitly asserts her aristocratic privilege over d’Arnault, perhaps reflecting the emergence of the Irish from “ethnic” to “white” status. She does this through her absence, a point underscored by the fact that her historical prototype Libbie Holland (born in Ireland about 1849 [Woodress 453]) was, according to Mildred Bennett, routinely present when Blind Boone played at the Holland House (Bennett 155; Ammons 73–74). Mrs. Gardener’s decision to see Shakespearean actors Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett in Omaha rather than remain in Black Hawk to host Blind d’Arnault amounts to a cultural choice informed by an awareness of race and class—in particular, the higher-brow status of Shakespeare in the late-nineteenth century, shedding the populism that had made Shakespeare parodies standard minstrel fare at mid-century.¹⁰ Mrs. Gardener’s absence defines her as an Irish type who profits from the minstrel industry but keeps her distance from it, even as “the rigid immobility of her face” contrasts with the perpetual motion associated with d’Arnault (176–77). In a pointed distinction, Mrs. Gardener’s selective showing of her diamonds divides hotel patrons into two classes, whereas d’Arnault freely displays the gold watch and topaz ring given to him by a Russian nobleman “who delighted in negro melodies.” Mrs. Gardener’s disapproving presence registers as a kind of remote surveillance over the barrier-busting freedoms holding sway at the Boys’ Home. “If I take a drink in Black Hawk, Molly knows it in Omaha,” Johnny laments. Tiny and Antonia must overcome feelings of alarm and fright before joining the dance party with the freer spirits Mary Dusak and Lena (184–86).

These transgressions replay d’Arnault’s childhood discovery of the piano, an artistic event also requiring courage to cross barriers, breach surveillance, and commandeer the master’s instrument. Just as young d’Arnault overcomes his terror of the master’s dog to appropriate Miss Nellie’s music “all ready-made on the big and little keys,” the adult d’Arnault appropriates Foster’s plantation melodies which are themselves plunderings, of a kind, from an African American idiom. This is why the scene at the Boys’ Home has the feeling of an unwieldy event unfolding among shifting centers of authority: Blind d’Arnault, Kirkpatrick and O’Reilly, Johnnie Gardener, Mrs. Gardener. I have characterized the Irish Americans as mediators of this shared musical experience, but d’Arnault too, through his call-and-response and his “sensitiv[ity] to



presences" (182), takes up this role, inviting ever widening circles of participation that expand beyond the traditionally male base of minstrelsy. But at the end of the evening, after "his manager came and shut the piano" and d'Arnault concluded his performance, "bowing to everybody, docile and happy," how much has the status quo changed? Jim reports how he and Antonia prolonged their walk home "until the restlessness was slowly chilled out of us" (186–87).

The aesthetic and social dynamics of blackface minstrelsy serve as a template not only for the d'Arnault scene but for *My Antonia* as a whole. The immersion of d'Arnault and his Irish spectators in the syncretic culture of blackface minstrelsy offers Jim a social and aesthetic model for his bearing toward immigrant culture in his literary performance. In d'Arnault's "good old plantation songs" Jim experiences a mass-mediated national culture keyed to a myth of Southern origins, animating the multicultural West where he feels most at home. As he depicts d'Arnault, so Jim portrays himself as "sensitive to presences" in the room: after Mr. Shimerda's death, he senses the old man there with him in the house, sheltered from the storm, and the "vivid pictures" running through his mind "might have been Mr. Shimerda's memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him" (98). One is reminded of E. P. Christy's account of how he caught "our *native airs* as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south," the music of enslaved people absorbed into the genius of the nation. Of course, these telepathic connections, however emotionally satisfying, do not in themselves alter the social separation of the groups involved; to some extent, they presuppose that separation. D'Arnault's appearance at the Boys' Home, flanked by his Irish spectators, reveals the haunting of Irish American identity by African American memory and the Irish aura surrounding African American performance, without erasing the social divides that minstrelsy itself reinforced. Memory as something "possessed together" is of course the novel's culminating insight, as Jim Burden becomes one of the boys—Cuzak's boys—by casting his corporate-class fortunes with the immigrant Antonia's. There he embraces the phenomenon pervading d'Arnault's performance at the Boys' Home: of separate roads converging, of a shared past that is "precious" and yet still "incommunicable."

NOTES

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1. Focusing on the cross-rhythms of ragtime, Ammons's analysis does not extend to the social and cultural background of minstrelsy, and of Foster's music, that concerns me here, although she does briefly mention minstrelsy as context for d'Arnault prototypes Blind Tom and Blind Boone. Other critics besides Ammons who interpret the d'Arnault scene as organically tied to the novel's overall aesthetic include Giannone (118–20) and John J. Murphy (42, 100, 128).

2. Various types of blackface performance in America date from before the Revolution, but blackface minstrel entertainment did not take hold until after the War of 1812 (Toll 26). The degree and direction of influence across racial lines in minstrel culture is a complex historical and musical question, somewhat clouded by debates about whether blackface constitutes "authentic" popular culture or cultural domination. Recent scholars like Lott and Mahar seek a middle ground in these debates; Mahar, building on work by Lawrence W. Levine, sees the relationship between white and Black cultural production as a two-way street (*Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* 6–7).

3. Stephen Foster's great-grandfather Alexander Foster emigrated to America from Londonderry around 1725 (JoAnne O'Connell, ch. 1). Although of Scotch-Irish extraction, Foster wrote music that was steeped in Irish as well as Scottish, English, and African American traditions.

4. To take one remarkable example, when Irish writer Oscar Wilde made his sensational American tour in 1882–83, he was widely parodied in blackface minstrel acts that competed with him for spectators (Mendelssohn 152–65).

5. "Georgia" typically designated a Black ensemble (Taylor and Austen 50–51).

6. Cather's use of "negro" here could designate, as Woodress notes, either "black" or "blackface white entertainers" (453), more likely the latter: Taylor and Austen note that the term "Negro" in the name of a minstrel troupe "was used for whites in blackface" (51).

7. Woodress 456; Ammons 66–73. The same page of the Sept. 10, 1886 *Red Cloud Chief* cited in reference to the "Georgia minstrels" also announces an upcoming appearance by Blind Boone on Oct. 5, 1886. For Cather's review of Blind Tom, see *The World and the Parish* 166–67. In a March 19, 1936 letter to Chilson Leonard, she said she modeled d'Arnault on Blind Boone, but knew of both Blind Tom and another pianist, Blind Noah (*Calendar of Letters* no. 1306). In another letter she calls d'Arnault a composite of Blind Boone and other musicians, but professes not to remember Blind Tom (*Calendar of Letters* no. 1807).

8. Foster's plantation melodies are a fixture in Cather's American imagination: not only in *My Antonia* but in *A Lost Lady* which, in Tomoyuki Zettsu's reading, harbors an extended allusion to "My Old Kentucky Home"; and in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* which, as revealed in a recently discovered letter from Cather to Blanche Knopf, had the Foster-inspired working title "The Old Folks at Home" (Homestead 5).



9. This association between blackface and technology, between an “African aesthetic” and a “machine aesthetic,” is explored by Chude-Sokei (129).

10. For an overview of blackface Shakespearean parody see Mahar, “Ethiopian” 186–202; for a fuller study of nineteenth-century Shakespeare performance in America, see Levine 11–82.

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Willa Cather and Storytelling: Small Scenes from the French Soirées

Diane Prenatt

During the decade she lived in Pittsburgh, from 1896 until 1906, Willa Cather joined the writer and editor George Seibel and his wife Helen for weekly “soirées” at which the three friends read aloud and collaboratively translated into English “a vast territory” of nineteenth-century French literature (Seibel 196).¹ The soirées provided Cather with an intense reading experience in the French language and expanded her already extensive knowledge of French literature. The soirées also foregrounded oral performance in a way that relates significantly to the narrative strategies and the depictions of human communication Cather would use in her own fiction over the next forty years. They drew her attention to the acts of oral storytelling and story-listening, and to the transcription of those acts to the framed narratives she was reading, and linked her to a tradition of women’s tale-telling rooted in domestic work. Writing her own fiction, Cather adapted her experience at the Seibels’ soirées to her own purposes.

As oral performances, the French soirées were enhanced by the sociability of the gatherings themselves. In his voluble 1949 reminiscence of Willa Cather, published in the *New Colophon*, Seibel describes the appeal these evenings must have held for Cather: the comfortable Seibel apartment in an old house, a little shabby perhaps, but filled with books and music; the baby put to bed and the lamp lit as the evening began. Seibel reminisces about sitting down to a simple supper of noodle soup, potato salad “larded with delicious slices of cucumber,” and “crisp and crackling” cookies (198). At Christmas time, Cather “crunched her share of anise cakes and *pfeffernüsse*” and chewed on needles from the Christmas tree (199). Seibel relates the orality of reading and translating aloud to their consumption of food and drink: The three friends devoured “pleasant pastry” like Souvestre’s *Un Philosophe sous les Toits* (*An Attic Philosopher*, 1854), “indulged oftener in devil’s food like Anatole France’s *Le Lys Rouge*” (*The Red Lily*, 1897) (197), and drank “deep draughts of young Rostand’s ruby wine” (203). He describes two of Cather’s *April Twilights* poems (1903) that she read aloud at one of the soirées as “sugared sonnets” and others with “a drop of absinthe from Verlaine” (199–200).

We cannot be sure of all the specific works Cather and the Seibels read during these French soirées, nor how completely they read them, but of the dozen titles Seibel lists, two suggest

a model for Cather’s later transcription of oral performance to a frame story.² Daudet’s *Femmes d’artistes* (*Artists’ Wives*, 1874), a collection of stories about the problematic lives of married artists, begins with a prologue in which two male friends are engaged in after-dinner conversation; the wife of the host has taken the baby to bed, and the men can hear from afar the sound of “soft laughter” and “childish babble” (1). Lounging on a divan in the studio, smoking cigars, they debate the wisdom and foolhardiness of marriage. Finally, the host hands his guest “a much-thumbed manuscript,” which, he says, “I beg you to read. . . . Read it, and come to me when you have read it” (11–12). The narrator—who is neither of these men—explains that the guest evidently did not take good enough care of the manuscript, for he himself was able to “detach a few leaves,” which have been collected as the book we are reading (12). In *Le Roi des montagnes* by Edmond About (*The King of the Mountains*, 1856), the narrator is surprised in his garden by a student-traveler on his way to Greece. The narrator invites him into his study for conversation; he reminds him “a little” of Herodotus (6); a servant brings in breakfast. The traveler, one Hermann Schultz, “seated himself on a divan, with his legs crossed under him like the Arabian story-tellers . . . [he] lighted his [huge porcelain] pipe and began his tale” (7). The narrator “took stenographic notes as he dictated” (7); hence we have the very book we are reading.



George and Helen Seibel, seen at home in Pittsburgh with their daughter Erna, 1899. National Willa Cather Center collection.



Like Seibel's food and drink references, the pipe and cigar underscore the orality of these storytelling scenes. The twentieth century has come and gone since the French soirées, and we know that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but nevertheless, Daudet's and About's smoking narrators construct these frame narratives as scenes of specifically masculine orality. The clubbiness of the two framing scenes recalls Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1844), which opens upon the narrator enjoying a meerschaum pipe in the library of his friend C. Auguste Dupin, who will subsequently narrate the framed story, and is similar to the later tales told by Sherlock Holmes, smoking his briar and clay pipes, to an admiring Doctor Watson (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892).³ About's pipe and Daudet's cigar are emblems of privileged male discourse, enjoyed by men with the luxury of time and space for expansive conversation, men comfortably removed from babbling children and the breakfast things, men speaking to men.

The oral nature of storytelling conveyed by the "Prologue" to Daudet's *Femmes d'artistes* resonates in the framing "Introduction" of *My Antonia* (1918). In both, the manuscript is concretized as a physical object—the "well-thumbed" *Femmes d'artistes* and *My Antonia* in Jim's "bulging legal portfolio" (xiii)—that represents an expansion or clarification of an earlier oral conversation. In both, the conversational listener is transformed into a reader who will respond to the manuscript: "Read it as soon as you can," Jim says (xiii), and Daudet's writer urges, "Read it, and come to me when you have read it" (12). The narrator of About's *Le Roi des montagnes* is echoed in Cather's Professor St. Peter, who "was working in his garden one Saturday morning" (*The Professor's House* 110) when a traveler from New Mexico happened by—Tom Outland, like Hermann Schultz, a student with a story to tell. Like About's frame narrator and Hermann Schultz, Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland come inside from the garden in a later scene that introduces the long inset piece of the novel, "Tom Outland's Story."

Cather depicts the exchange of oral storytelling and story-listening throughout her fiction; examples include the Peter and Pavel story *Antonia* translates for Jim in *My Antonia*; Padre Herrera's story of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the story

of Junípero Serra and the Holy Family in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927); and Mother Juschereau's story of Sister Catherine, Antoine Frichette's tale of his adventures, and Hector St.-Cyr's story of Noël Chabanel in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Scenes of oral storytelling and story-listening—as well as embedded or inset narratives not told aloud, like Cécile's remembrance of the stories of Catherine de Saint-Augustin and Jeanne Le Ber in *Shadows on the Rock*, Professor St. Peter's reveries of his youth, and Archbishop Latour's reminiscence of the young Vaillant—are consistently used by the nineteenth-century French *romanciers* who seem to have made up the largest portion of the

soirée reading list. The short stories of such writers as Maupassant, Gautier, Loti, and perhaps especially Balzac and Daudet, belong to the French *conte* genre that developed with reference to the early French folktale tradition. Many nineteenth-century *contes* depict an exchange between speaker and listener who are often enjoying a meal or a drink together, perhaps in front of a fireplace or at a table that emphasizes the interiority of the scene, as in Daudet's "The Poet Mistral" from *Lettres de mon moulin* (*Letters from My Windmill*, 1869), which Cather read in college. The narrator has dined with Frédéric Mistral at the poet's home on "slices

of roast kid, mountain cheese, must jam, figs, muscatel grapes. All washed down with that excellent châteaufort des pages . . ." (153). It is a feast day, and the two men can hear from outside the sounds of vesper bells, fireworks, marching bands, and bulls bellowing on their way to the arena. "But I," the narrator reports, "with my elbows on the tablecloth and tears in my eyes, I listened to the tale of the little fisher-lad of Provence" (154). In Gautier's short story "The Priest" ("La Morte Amoureuse," 1836), the narrator begins his tale by responding to his brother's question, "Yes, my dear brother, I have loved. . . . There is nothing I wish to withhold from you . . ." (15). In Balzac's short story "The Red Inn" ("L'Auberge rouge," 1831), male and female dinner guests "were in that contented state of languor and quiet that results from an exquisite meal" and so "turned happily toward the good German [guest of honor], all of them delighted to have a tale to listen to . . ." (74–75). In "Another Study of Womankind" ("Autre étude de femme," 1830), Balzac's narrator writes, "Toward two in the morning, our supper winding down, no one was left at the table



Willa Cather in the Seibel family library, ca. 1900. National Willa Cather Center collection.

but intimate friends” (20); they are curious about the early life of the newly appointed prime minister de Marsay, who graciously responds, “I’ll tell you the story” (21).

The scene in Cather’s *The Professor’s House* that introduces “Tom Outland’s Story” is similarly constructed as a communication of experience that grows out of social relationship, enacted in an enclosed setting. Mrs. St. Peter and daughters are vacationing in Colorado, and the two men have the evening to themselves. These solitary evenings often begin with dinner together in the garden, prepared by the professor—perhaps “a fine leg of lamb, *saignant* . . . steaming asparagus . . . and a bottle of sparkling Asti” (173). On this particular evening, the two men are inside because it is raining; they sit “before the fire in the dining-room,” where they sometimes read Lucretius, and Tom tells the professor his tale of Cliff City (174). The gendered intimacy of the firelit dining room invites disclosure: “Tom at last told the story he had always kept back” (174).

Storytelling scenes in Cather’s fiction that feature female narrators also grow out of social relationship and are gendered by the specific activities engaging the narrator. Two small scenes from *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* are typical; we might call them “kitchen stories.” In the very short third section of *O Pioneers!* titled “Winter Memories,” Marie Shabata confides to Alexandra her concern about her husband’s discontent, sketching the back-story of a younger Frank Shabata, prompted by the dandy’s cane they come across in a closet while searching

for crochet patterns. Her conclusion—that “you almost have to marry a man before you can find out the sort of wife he needs” (177) is the kind of axiomatic “moral” often attached to orally told tales.

The other story, from *My Ántonia*, is the story Ántonia tells about the tramp who killed himself by jumping into a working thresher, a tale as horrific as any fairy tale of a grandmother devoured by a wolf or children shoved into an oven by a witch. The story is almost a mere anecdote, with nothing like the plot development of the Peter and Pavel story, although it has a larger context: the tramp is out of work, he is disdainful of the Norwegian farmers (“I thought this was Americy” [172]), and the nostalgic poem about childhood and the chicken wishbone found in his pocket hint at a melancholic life. Upon finishing the story, Ántonia wonders “what would anybody want to kill themselves in summer for? In thrashing time too! It’s nice everywhere then” (174), offering hard-won personal wisdom from the daughter of a man who killed himself on such a cold January evening that his body froze in the pool of his blood.

Both stories are told in the context of food preparation for guests who are the listeners of the tale. Alexandra has brought old Mrs. Lee with her for their annual visit with Marie Shabata, which takes place in the kitchen. Marie has just baked sweet rolls stuffed with stewed apricots; she also has on hand a “coffee-cake with nuts and poppy seeds” (175). The women sit near the stove enjoying their coffee while the December snow falls outside.



The “vast territory”: Top row: Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas *fils*, Alphonse Daudet, Anatole France, Alfred de Musset. Middle row: Edmond About, Pierre Loti, Émile Souvestre, Théophile Gautier, Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget. Bottom row: Joris-Karl Huysmans, George Sand, Prosper Mérimée, Guy de Maupassant, Édouard Rod, Jean Richepin, Edmond Rostand.



The coziness of the scene is crucial, but it is not simple. Tension between Alexandra and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Lee's daughter, has worried Mrs. Lee; Marie is unhappy in her marriage and in love with Alexandra's brother Emil. In the absence of men, however, the women's comfortable chatter about baking and protecting potted geraniums from the cold reestablishes the intimacy that allows for personal disclosure.

Needlework functions in this scene, in addition to food preparation, to create relationship among the women. Mrs. Lee is pleased with the apron she's wearing, which she just finished the night before with fine thread that her sister sent from Sweden. The apron is cross-stitched with a design of fir trees and a stag and dogs and huntsmen, Old World motifs that represent her ethnicity as much as Marie's kolache do hers. Mrs. Lee's beautiful cross-stitching reminds Marie of the crochet patterns she wants to give her and, extending the kitchen chat upstairs, she and Alexandra look through a closet, and thus the story of Frank is told. In its interiority, the scene is similar to the dining room fireside scene that leads to the telling of Tom Outland's story in *The Professor's House*, and to About's and Daudet's framing scenes. The crochet patterns and the cross-stitched apron mark it as a scene of female storytelling, however, as does Marie's baking. The professor's leg of lamb notwithstanding, most male narrators in storytelling scenes are served food; they do not cook it. For this reason, they and their listeners are typically seated in a dining room rather than a kitchen, as are About's host and Hermann Schultz and Daudet and Mistral. (Mistral's mother, who has prepared their lunch, "does not sit at table" with his guests as "she speaks only the Provençal tongue. . . . Besides, she is needed in the kitchen" [153].)

Similarly, the scene in *My Ántonia* takes place while Ántonia is making taffy for Jim and the Harling children. Sugar is boiling on the kitchen stove. The children are picking over walnuts to add to the taffy. Mrs. Harling is present, but Mr. Harling is not. In fact, he never participates in these evenings of treats and play; if Jim sees that he is at home, he doesn't stop by for a visit, for Mr. Harling requires all of Mrs. Harling's attention, and there will be

no merrymaking on those nights. But on the other nights, with only women and children present, Ántonia bakes cookies and makes popcorn for the children and often "brought her sewing and sat with us" (170).

Cather's use of storytelling as a narrative strategy is undoubtedly related to her writing of S. S. McClure's *My Autobiography* (1914), as Robert Thacker has convincingly shown. He argues that in her role as the "sympathetic listener" and "stenographer" of *My Autobiography* (128), Cather discerned an alternative narrative strategy from which she developed an "autobiographical aesthetic" (137) that would inform such later novels as *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House*. But the reading list of the French soirées suggests that Cather's interest in the "emotive relation between teller and tale which would sustain much of her subsequent fiction" (Thacker 128) was piqued even earlier—that is, during her Pittsburgh friendship with the Seibels, which began more than fifteen years before her collaboration with McClure.

The narrative function and the cultural meaning of Cather's scenes of oral storytelling are clarified as well within the context of Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller," as Richard Millington demonstrates in his very fine essay "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*" (1994). Benjamin's essay laments the loss of oral storytelling to the production of the printed novel, which has substituted the solitary reading experience for the collective performance of telling and listening to stories. Benjamin contends that the novel is concerned with communicating nothing but information, like the newspaper, "one of [the middle class's] most important instruments in fully developed capitalism" (88). On the other hand, he asserts, oral storytelling relies on memory and personal experience and communicates useful "counsel" (wisdom) that compels the retelling of the story. To see Cather's storytelling scenes through Benjamin's essay, then, allows us to see them as coherent and aligned with her longstanding critique of mechanized and commercial contemporary culture. In *My Ántonia*, as Millington notes, oral storytelling allows Cather to counter "the overarching, normative narrative of maturity that



Frontispiece to *Histories, or Tales of Past Times* (London, 1729), the first known English translation of Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (1697). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

constitutes middle-class culture in Black Hawk” (701). “Tom Outland’s Story” functions similarly in *The Professor’s House*, suggesting a liberating alternative to the story of Professor St. Peter’s entrapment by socioeconomic success. In historically grounded novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* that evoke a heroic past, oral storytelling scenes remind us of what we have lost, “something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions . . . the ability to exchange experiences” (Benjamin 83). Like Nikolai Leskov, whom Benjamin praises as a rare modern fiction writer steeped in the oral tradition of tale-telling, Cather proves in these scenes to be one of “the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (Benjamin 84).

Benjamin identifies two prototypes of the traditional storyteller: the man who has returned home from traveling afar with stories to tell (for example, a seaman) and “the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions” (a farmer) (84). Benjamin’s storyteller achieves “full corporeality” (84) only in the integration of both prototypes—or, we might say, in that person who knows both the world and the parish.⁴ Benjamin contends that this integrated storyteller thrived during the Middle Ages, in the master craftsman who had spent time as a journeyman.

To root storytelling in the artisanal tradition of the traveling journeyman, however, is to exclude the female storyteller. Certainly, there were women artisans in the Middle Ages: speaking very broadly, women in the artisan class in western Europe were usually trained in textile production—from the processing of flax into linen and the spinning of sheep’s wool into yarn and thread for weaving and knitting to the sewing of garments and the creation of such embellishments as lace and ribbon. Women were often trained as brewers (“alewives”). There were even individual women who worked as jewelers, goldsmiths, and the like, having been trained by master craftsmen who were their fathers. But these women did not fully participate in the formation of the craftsman and did not travel as the journeyman did. A medieval woman might leave home on pilgrimage (as we know from *The Canterbury Tales*) but she would not leave home to undertake the journey that was part of the formation of the master craftsman. Her formation was domestic and her work was, too.

Benjamin’s storyteller, like the medieval master craftsman, is male. In his essay, the storyteller and story-listener are always “he.” We might understand the pronoun to be generic, given the grammatical conventions of German in 1936 (as well as those of the 1968 English translation), but every example of the storyteller Benjamin cites is male. He is especially concerned with Leskov, who wrote *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, but every other writer

he mentions from Herodotus to Cervantes and Montaigne to Johann Peter Hebel and Dostoevsky is male. Benjamin’s listener/reader is male as well: he is “a man listening to a story” or a “man reading one” (100); he is the “righteous man [who] encounters himself” in the figure of the (male) storyteller (109).

And yet there have always been women storytellers. The fairy tale and folktale tradition from which the French *contes* developed often represents women engaged in domestic tasks—typically spinning or sewing—while they are telling tales, reflecting daily life in pre-industrialized France. The Provençal poet Jean-Henri Fabre (1823–1915), for example, remembered his own grandmother as one such tale-spinner:

Pickles, hemp, chickens, curds and whey, butter; washing the clothes, minding the children, seeing to the meals of the household: say that and you have summed up the strenuous woman’s round of ideas. On her left side, the distaff, with its load of flax; in her right hand, the spindle turning under a quick twist of her thumb, moistened at intervals with her tongue. . . . I see her in my mind’s eye particularly on winter evenings, which were more favorable to family-talk. [After the evening meal,] grandam went back to her distaff, on a stool by the chimney-corner. We children, boys and girls, squatting on our heels and putting out our hands to the cheerful fire of furze, formed a circle round her and listened to her with eager ears. She told us stories, not greatly varied, it is true, but still wonderful, for the wolf often played a part in them. (43)

The most celebrated published version of these early tales, Charles Perrault’s *Tales of Mother Goose* (*Contes de ma mère l’Oye*, 1697), included a frontispiece picturing an old woman spinning wool in front of a fire, surrounded by attentive children and a cat. Perrault’s frontispiece reflected the role the female storyteller had already established in the seventeenth-century French imagination, confirming, as Elizabeth W. Harries points out, that “women are often supposed to be tellers of tales . . . patient, nurturing conduits of oral culture or spinners of tales” (102). Revised and reproduced in countless books of tales, Perrault’s spinning storyteller relies on the traditional association of the spindle with women’s storytelling (Harries 101).

Benjamin’s insights regarding the association between physical work and storytelling are imaginative and original. He states that the art of storytelling “is lost because there is no more weaving or spinning to go on while [stories] are being listened to” (91). He writes of the repetitive, even boring nature of human work that allowed for storytelling and listening, of the rhythmic nature of physical work that generated stories by liberating memory. But he fails to include women performing gendered domestic work among the storytellers of the world. He praises



the French poet Paul Valéry's profound observation that, in the modern age, we have abandoned tasks that require time and we are thus losing the idea of eternity; he downplays, however, "the very remote context" of the observation—Valéry's appreciative essay on Marie Monnier's embroideries.⁵

The relation between domestic work and the creation of art was not remote for Willa Cather. In her childhood world, women who baked and sewed also told stories; their domestic work provided the impetus for oral storytelling. In her 1913 interview in the *Philadelphia Record* Cather remembered, "Even when they spoke very little English, the old [Nebraska immigrant] women somehow managed to tell me a great many stories about the old country. . . . I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter making. . . . I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said" ("Willa Cather Talks of Work" 10). Edith Lewis relates Cather's childhood memory of sitting under quilting frames and listening to the stories the women told as they sewed. "Many of these stories Willa Cather remembered all her life" (11). In her mature years, Cather observed with dismay that middle-class consumer culture had displaced domestic art and beauty in the United States. In contrast, however, "when a French painter wants to paint a picture, he makes a copy of a garden, a home, a village. The art in them inspires his brush" (Feld 71). Art is made from "good cookery; cottages that are homes, not playthings; gardens; repose," she contends and laments, very like Benjamin, "it is possible that machinery has finished us as far as this is concerned. Nobody stays at home any more; nobody makes anything beautiful any more" (71). Throughout Cather's fiction, we see women performing domestic tasks characterized by the rhythm and repetition that Benjamin links with oral storytelling—the kind of work that liberates memory and generates story, the kind of work that people do at home, to make things beautiful.

Mrs. Erlich in Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) performs this kind of work: as he sits in her kitchen watching her bake Christmas cookies, Claude Wheeler discerns the stories of her past, "the fragrance of old friendships, the glow of early memories, belief in wonder-working rhymes and songs" (69). As does Mother Juschereau in *Shadows on the Rock*, who tells Cécile the story of Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin while she crafts artificial flowers out of silk and velvet scraps and colored paper. These scenes, like the small framed kitchen stories of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, are not only deft narrative strategies; they convey the relationship between the domestic work of everyday life, especially as performed by women, and the art of storytelling as a means of preserving the personal and historical past. The French

literature Cather read in the Seibel home provided a model for such storytelling, one that Cather would use time and again in the future; just as meaningfully, it echoed Cather's profound experience of the past, as a child listening to stories.

NOTES

1. The "vast territory" of French literature included "all those Gallic writers of [Henry James's] *Partial Portraits* [1888] and *French Poets and Novelists* [1878]" (203). Seibel's extensive list includes "our adored Flaubert," Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dumas *films*, Alphonse Daudet, Anatole France, Alfred de Musset, Edmond About, Pierre Loti, Émile Souvestre, Théophile Gautier, Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget, Joris-Karl Huysmans, George Sand, Prosper Mérimée, Guy de Maupassant, Édouard Rod, Jean Richepin, and Edmond Rostand. It thus extends considerably beyond James's (Seibel 196–97, 203).

In addition to his competence in French literature, George Seibel was fluent in German and devoted to music. He and Cather first met when he submitted an article on Richard Wagner to the *Home Monthly*. For more on Seibel, see my essay, "Willa Cather as Translator: The Pittsburgh French Soirées," forthcoming in *Cather Studies* 13.

2. Cather's book reviews for the *Pittsburgh Leader* and the *Lincoln Courier* during this time give us further clues as to what might have been on the reading list. Although Seibel lists only "Maupassant" among their authors, for example, Cather reviewed Maupassant's *Fort comme la mort* (*Like Death*, 1889) in an untitled translation for the November 4, 1899 *Courier* (*The World and the Parish* 730–32), and another reference indicates she had read his *Notre coeur* (*A Woman's Pastime*, 1890) by 1897 (575). Seibel's list includes Théophile Gautier's "Une nuit de Cléopâtre" ("One of Cleopatra's Nights," 1838) included in a new edition of Lafcadio Hearn's 1882 translation of a Gautier collection that Cather reviewed for the November 18, 1899 *Leader*, mentioning specifically not only "Une nuit de Cléopâtre" but "La Morte amoureuse" (1836; "Clarimonde" in Hearn's translation) (732–33).

Cather brought an extensive reading in French literature to the soirées. Her columns for the *Leader* and the *Courier* on the death of Daudet indicate that she had read all of his work by 1897 (*The World and the Parish* 572–576). In a 1929 letter to Yale French professor Albert G. Feuillerat, she wrote, "Before I was twenty I had read all of the novels of Balzac a good many times" (*Selected Letters* 419). By the time of the Pittsburgh soirées, she had read enough of Zola to reject him as soulless (*The World and the Parish* 592–94).

3. Tom Outland confides to Roddy Blake and Henry the story of his discovery of Cliff City "after supper, when we had lit our pipes" (201). In *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden observes that Gaston Cleric "was more likely to linger and become talkative . . . if he found a bottle of Bénédicte and plenty of the kind of cigarettes he liked" (252); "Cleric went through canto after canto of the 'Commedia,' repeating the discourse between Dante and his 'sweet teacher,' while his cigarette

burned itself out unheeded between his long fingers” (253). In *One of Ours*, the appealing orality of the five Erlich brothers—“like talk in a play” (64)—is evident at the big supper table and also in the “pipes and boxes of tobacco, cigars in a glass jar, and a big Chinese bowl full of cigarettes” set out on a living room table (62).

4. Cather quoted Sarah Orne Jewett’s advice to her, “One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish,” in the “Preface” to the 1922 edition of *Alexander’s Bridge* (p. 197; emphasis in the original). Benjamin’s paradigm for the storyteller suggests also Cather’s remarks on the function of “Tom Outland’s Story”: She had seen a Dutch painting in Paris, she writes, and noticed that “in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea,” giving one “a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe—to Java, etc.” (“On *The Professor’s House*” 31).

5. Marie Monnier (1894–1976) was a French artist whose embroidered works, often inspired by literature, were highly regarded by Paris modernists. She was the sister of Adrienne Monnier (1892–1955), who founded the Paris bookstore that inspired Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare & Co. The sisters’ circle included not only Valéry, but also James Joyce, whose fragmented publication of *Finnegans Wake in transition* was illustrated by one of Monnier’s embroideries (1927). Valéry’s statement comes from “Les Broderies de Marie Monnier,” his introduction to the catalog for a 1924 exhibit of Monnier’s work.

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Cather, Sassoon, and the Church of St. Ouen

Richard C. Harris

Several Cather scholars have noticed the description in *One of Ours* when Claude Wheeler visits the Church of St. Ouen in Rouen and found it to be a particularly beautiful, moving, and significant passage. While there, Claude experiences a rare moment of aesthetic and spiritual insight. I have written previously about this passage myself, most recently in a paper at the 2017 Pittsburgh seminar focused on the tolling of the bell and “purple heart” in the rose window.¹ Here I take a look at similarities between this incident in Cather’s novel and a similar description, one describing a young British soldier visiting that church in Siegfried Sassoon’s 1917 sonnet “In the Church of St. Ouen” (see page 29).

Over the last thirty years, much of my work on Cather has focused on identifying sources for her fiction and exploring the ways in which Cather alluded to, borrowed from, and adapted source material in her works. In creating the passage in *One of Ours*, Cather clearly drew upon her own 1902 visit to Rouen and apparently conflated memories of both the Church of St. Ouen and the Rouen Cathedral. There she noted that the exterior of the latter “is by no means so fine as that of the beautiful church of St. Ouen,” but was struck by features of the interior. Her description focused on several elements in particular—its “stillness and whiteness,” the columns, and the windows: “The uniform whiteness of the walls and arches and high, slender columns,” Cather wrote, “is varied by the burning blue and crimson of two rose windows almost as beautiful as those of Nôtre Dame.” There is a “silence absolute and infinitely sweet”; “the interior is vested with a peace that passes understanding” (“Dieppe and Rouen” 99–100). So too the church in Sassoon’s poem has a quality of quiet serenity.

In reading the description of Claude Wheeler’s visit to the church in Cather’s novel, one is immediately struck by the essential similarity between the scene described in Sassoon’s poem and the passage in *One of Ours*. Of the churches he sees in Rouen, Sassoon declares St. Ouen “much the best” (*Diaries* 136) though he too comments at greater length on the cathedral.² In both works, a young soldier enters a church and finds a moment of peace amid the war that rages around him. For Sassoon’s soldier this is a horror he has already experienced; for Claude, it is one yet to come. Both men are overwhelmed by the physical beauty of the church. In *One of Ours* Claude notes the “slender white columns in long rows, like the stems of silver poplars”

(450). In a passage on his visit to the cathedral, Sassoon speaks of the “half-lit arches and the noble columns” (*Diaries* 138). Both Cather and Sassoon are especially struck by the windows. In his notebook Sassoon calls Église de St. Ouen “glorious” (140) and notes, “At one end above [the] organ a very good rose-window, a sort of cheery futurist effect of terra-cotta red, powder-blue, and arsenic-green” (*Diaries* 136); in the poem Sassoon’s soldier tells us, “the windows *burn* and bloom like flowers” [emphasis mine]. Claude Wheeler stares in particular at “the rose window, with its purple heart” (450), “purple and crimson and peacock-green” (452), “*burning* up there in its vault of gloom” [emphasis mine] (452). Both men are soothed by the peaceful quiet of the sanctuary, broken only by the tolling of the bell in *One of Ours*, “the throbbing of an undreamed-of quality of sound” (450), and “rich music at the close of day” in Sassoon’s poem. And both experience a moment of transcendent contemplation. For Sassoon’s soldier, the moment is more religious: His “spirit longs for prayer.” He imagines himself a believer “six hundred years ago,” trying “to build within my heart/A church like this . . . lost to God, I seek him everywhere.” Claude Wheeler too experiences a spiritual, though not specifically religious, moment as he sits in the church, “his elbows on his knees, his conical hat swinging between them in his hand, looking up through the twilight with candid, thoughtful eyes” (452): “The revelations of the glass and the bell had come almost simultaneously, as if one produced the other; and both were superlatives toward which his mind had always been groping,—or so it seemed to him then” (450).

In Sassoon’s journal there are pages of additional description of the Church of St. Ouen, including pencil sketches of the windows and further comments on his emotional response to the church. However, Sassoon’s soldier must leave St. Ouen because the spring offensive is near and duty calls. Claude leaves the church to join up with other members of his company as they step again into the world outside. Both writers focus especially on certain soldiers’ weight and stupidity. “Fat Sergeant Hicks” (452) and others ridicule Claude for having mistakenly gone into the church in Rouen instead of the cathedral. (The church is the larger, more imposing of the two.) In a February 27 diary entry, Sassoon reports staring across a room at a Brigadier-General with a “puffy, petulant face” and realizing that he will “guzzle [himself] to the grave” while Sassoon and other common



soldiers will die “in a shell-hole up on the Somme.” “O damn all these bald-headed incompetent belly-fillers!” he rants (*Diaries* 139–40). And in a companion poem to “In the Church of St. Ouen” titled “Base Details,” also written on March 4, 1917, “scarlet Majors” bear the full brunt of Sassoon’s sarcasm. Sassoon records scathing invectives against British officers who spend their time “guzzling” and care little for the men they are supposedly leading. He looks at many of the officers and wonders “if they were really as stupid as they appeared to be” (137). Upon leaving the cathedral, Sassoon almost immediately bumps into that “stout Staff Major,” a character very reminiscent of Cather’s Sergeant Hicks, who is described as a kind of vulgar, gluttonous, “big stupid” (429).³

The similarities between Sassoon’s poem and the passage in Cather’s novel suggest that Cather indeed might have been familiar with Sassoon’s poem. If so, this “borrowing” would be akin to Cather’s having used Dr. Sweeney’s diary and having “borrowed” freely from Joseph Husband’s *A Year in the Navy* when writing book four of her novel, “The Voyage of the *Anchises*.”⁴ Cather could not have seen the poem in print, however; for reasons not entirely clear, it was not published until 1973. In his study of Sassoon’s poetry, Patrick Campbell says that Sassoon might have thought the poem “‘too purple,’ too self-indulgent for public consumption” (139). It certainly is much more lyrical and less indignant and negative about the war than most of the other poems written by Sassoon during this period.

However, further reading in Sassoon’s journal as well as a look at several biographies of Sassoon revealed that he came to the United States in early 1920 to take part in an “American tour,” on which he read many of his poems to American audiences.⁵ Might Cather, then, have heard him do a reading of “In the Church of St. Ouen” at one of the many appearances he made in New York? She certainly would have been interested in this former soldier and popular poet, for as she told Dorothy Canfield Fisher in a March 1922 letter, for two or three years she had been obsessed with “Claude” and his story (*Selected Letters* 315, 316).

In mid-1919 Sassoon was invited by the Pond Lyceum Bureau of New York to come to the United States to speak on his experiences in the war. Biographer Jean Moorcroft Wilson summarizes Sassoon’s feelings about the invitation. He came to America to disabuse those who heard him about any idealistic notions of war, and “a lecture tour on the subject seemed an effective way of doing so.” This was “a prospect he found both exciting and disturbing.” Such a tour would bring Sassoon attention and acclaim. The prospect of such a tour, however, was at the same time “disturbing” because he was an

In the Church of St. Ouen

Time makes me a soldier; but I know
That had I lived six hundred years ago,
I might have tried to build within my heart
A church like this, where I could dwell apart,
With chanting peace; my spirit longs for prayer,
And, lost to God, I seek him everywhere.
Here, while the windows burn and bloom like flowers,
And sunlight falls and fades with tranquil hours,
I could be half a saint, for like a rose
In heart-shaped stone the glory of Heaven glows.
But where I stand, desiring yet to stay,
Hearing rich music at the close of day,
The Spring Offensive (Easter is its date)
Calls me. And that’s the music I await.

Siegfried Sassoon

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inexperienced speaker, who knew full well that he lacked the confidence and assertiveness that are essential to effective presentations. Pond assured him, however, that he “would not be expected to deliver ‘professional discourses’” but merely read selections from his poems and comment briefly on the war (Wilson 73).

Sassoon’s notebooks from January 1920 and his 1945 account of these years titled *Siegfried’s Journey* indicate that while he was aboard the ship bringing him to the United States, he, in fact, made a list of poems he decided would be good choices for readings before New York audiences. “In the Church of St. Ouen” is not included in the notebook list he made in January 1920. He may or may not have edited the original list; unfortunately, changes involving the titles of particular poems to be read are not recorded in the notebooks. According to Wilson, however, between his first performance in early February 1920 and his last in late May, “he revised his presentation at least eight times” (77). For example, Sassoon relates that he changed his original intentions at Bryn Mawr on March 10; he read twenty poems, and when the audience insisted that he continue, he read “some of my pleasantly lyrical ones” (*Siegfried’s Journey* 179–80). Sassoon also indicates that, as he became a more experienced speaker, he adopted a



more spontaneous approach to these performances (*Siegfried's Journey* 180).

Sassoon arrived in New York on January 28, 1920, and almost immediately began his presentations. An appearance at the National Arts Club was followed by another at the Astor Hotel for the Poetry Society of America. According to biographers Wilson and Egremont, between February 6 and May 26, Sassoon

made public presentations at numerous additional New York sites, among them the Greenwich Village Theater; the Rittenhouse Club; the MacDowell Club; and the Carnegie Hall Free Synagogue, where he spoke to over two thousand people (Egremont 251). Many of his presentations were at colleges and universities, including Columbia University and the Cooper Union in New York, as well as Bryn Mawr, Yale, Vassar, Harvard, Smith, Amherst, and Cornell. He spoke too in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Toronto (Wilson 76–78, Egremont 243–58). By the end of May, Sassoon was exhausted from the speaking tour. Although he planned to leave the United States in June, he was not able to sail for England until August 12.

One place where Cather might likely have heard Sassoon read his poetry was the Cosmopolitan Club. Sassoon made an appearance there on the night of February 24, during which time Cather was in New York too—though she would leave for France in May. Cather, in fact, was a member of the Cosmopolitan Club, an exclusive club for women interested in cultural affairs, having joined in 1911. In *Siegfried's Journey* Sassoon notes that at the club he “was entertained at a large dinner party” (186)—might Cather have been there?—after which the program began as planned, with Sassoon reading and commenting on his poetry. His choice of readings clearly reflected his hatred of the brutality of war, his condemnation of the war effort, and his sense that most people had little or no idea how futile the conflict had been. His tone was often ironic; he once described his poetic form as involving “two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line” (*Siegfried's Journey* 29). Sassoon talked for about forty-five minutes on what trench warfare did to men, described cases of shell-shock that he had seen first-hand, and



Siegfried Sassoon, 1915. Photographed by George Charles Beresford.

then read seven poems related to these subjects (Egremont 247). As is indicated in Sassoon's notebooks (and described by Egremont), as soon as he finished the pre-arranged part of the program, the scene became chaotic. John Jay Chapman, father of Victor Chapman, a twenty-six-year-old American pilot who had died in action at Verdun in June 1916 (and the prototype for the pilot Victor Morse in *One of*

Ours) jumped onto the stage, shouted, “What is to become of Thermopylae?” and began to condemn Sassoon's views on the war (Egremont 247). According to Sassoon, he “let fly at me in an extraordinary emotional explosion” (*Siegfried's Journey* 188). The scene, which suggests comparison with Daniel Clayton's description of an angry dialogue between Paul Fussell and war widow Bernie Langfield in 1995, would have been unforgettable for those who attended the reading.⁶ Although he was generally considered a pleasant man, Chapman was given to emotional outbursts, and after 1916 nothing provoked such outbursts more than the death of his son Victor. Earlier in his life John Jay Chapman intentionally burned his left hand in a fire to punish himself for having struck another man in a fit of anger, and then had to have the hand amputated. At this time in his life he wore a hook where his left hand had been, no doubt making the scene at the Cosmopolitan Club even more dramatic.⁷ Unfortunately, the Cosmopolitan Club archives have no record of who attended the program that evening or of just which poems Sassoon read before the incident with Chapman. I have found no report of the incident in the various New York newspapers. Cather does not mention the incident in her letters, those previously published or, according to the editor of the *Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, Andrew Jewell, the known letters still to be published. One can only speculate as to why this dramatic incident involving two well-known figures apparently was not mentioned in any of the city newspapers.

This explosion must have come as a shock to Sassoon, who had met Chapman shortly after his arrival in New York. After lunch with him on February 2, Sassoon described Chapman as “a rather nice old thing.” And then, having had lunch with Chapman and his wife on February 10, he described

them as “a delightful homely couple, quite first-rate,” adding, however, he “only sees the heroic side of the war” (*Siegfried’s Journey* 185). This “debate” over the war had developed almost from the outset: to many it seemed a great crusade in which traditional civilized notions, chivalric ideals, and noble values were necessarily fought and sacrificed for; to others it seemed a senseless slaughter, a horrific exercise which wounded, killed, and betrayed an entire generation. Cather herself was certainly aware of both ways of seeing that “great war.” Despite the opinions of some readers both early and later, Cather was by no means unaware of the horror of war. For those readers willing to see what Cather actually wrote about the horrors of war in *One of Ours*, it is clear that she was well aware of the misery and destruction it brought. In 1925 in *The Professor’s House* she would refer to it as “one great catastrophe [which] swept away all youth and all palms, and almost Time itself” (261). Yet, at the same time, like Chapman, she clearly believed that it was a significant cause for which his son and her cousin “died the most glorious death[s] . . . especially for [their] ideals” (*Victor Chapman’s Letters from France* 41). In *One of Ours* Claude’s mother’s thoughts in the days after being notified of his death—that he had been one of many “who in order to do what they did had to hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately” (605)—echo the words of Alan Seeger, killed in battle in July 1916, who declared that the war had given many young men “that grand occasion to excel, / That chance to live the life most free from stain / And that rare privilege of dying well” (170).

I have found no solid evidence that Cather and Sassoon met during his 1920 visit to the U.S. or that Cather was aware of his poem “In the Church of St. Ouen.” Perhaps the several similarities between his 1917 poem and the St. Ouen passage in *One of Ours* must simply be attributed to the beauty of St. Ouen, as well as to an emotional and spiritual response to the church that any number of visitors might experience. However, questions about the two authors’ possibly knowing each other does not end here, for there is a clear connection between them. A July 20, 1930, letter in the Cambridge University archives from Cather to Sassoon, shown on pages 32–33, raises questions about other possible correspondence between them. The heading of the letter says, “c/o Morgan & Co, 14 Place Vendome, Paris, July 20,” and the salutation reads, “Dear Siegfried Sassoon;” (For the means by which this letter can be dated, see the postmarked envelope shown on page 33.)

Cather begins the letter by saying how sorry she is to hear that Stephen Tennant has not recovered from the flu, adding that he must find his “having to be still” terribly frustrating. She is glad, however, that Tennant has “a good friend” like Sassoon

with him at this time. So, a brief bit of history. Sassoon had met Tennant in late June 1927. While an exploration of the relationship that developed between them is not relevant here, it does bear brief mention in relationship to Cather. As is noted by Sassoon biographer Wilson, Tennant had been dubbed by Evelyn Waugh as one of the “Bright Young Things” of twenties English society: He was “wealthy, privileged and beautiful [he was often called the most beautiful man of the day], his effeminate manner and provocative behavior attracting attention wherever he went” (195). Sassoon, himself gay, was soon smitten, and Tennant was to become “the most consuming love of Sassoon’s life” (Wilson 195).

Interestingly, Cather herself had become fascinated with the young English dandy only three months before Sassoon met him. Explanations of how the relationship between the two began differ significantly, with the key point being whether Tennant first wrote to Cather or Cather first wrote to Tennant.⁸ However that may be, the initial correspondence led to a twenty-year friendship. Cather and Tennant corresponded on a regular basis, and the correspondence “ripened into a close friendship” (Woodress 385). Woodress calls Tennant’s visit to the United States in the winter of 1935–36 “the high spot” of the season for Cather (466). In Cather’s Park Avenue apartment, they talked at length about subjects of mutual interest—literature (often Cather’s novels), music and art—and Cather clearly enjoyed the conversation as well as the opportunity to be a sort of mother figure to the frail young British aristocrat. According to Edith Lewis, Cather “kept all his letters—the only ones she kept like this, except Miss Jewett’s” (178). Upon Cather’s death in April 1947, Lewis became the executor and trustee of Cather’s estate, and she and Tennant developed a close friendship. Lewis and Alfred Knopf, of course, were responsible for the publication of *Willa Cather on Writing* in 1949, with Tennant’s introductory essay, “The Room Beyond.” Tennant biographer Philip Hoare relates that during one visit from Tennant after Cather’s death Edith Lewis told him that Cather had kept all his letters and they were all “tied together in her secretary” (300). Hoare states that Tennant’s letters to Cather “were summarily burnt” by Lewis (218) and that those letters Cather wrote to him were subject to “his constant re-reading and attendant wear and tear” (218) and had reached the “death throes stage” (384).

The July 20, 1930, letter to Sassoon, however, indicates that there were other Cather letters to him that have been lost. Both the substance and tone of the letter suggest a familiarity. Tennant had suffered from tuberculosis for years; in the second week in



Add 8889 / 2/3

Address

10 Morgan & Co

14 Place Vendôme

Paris, July 20 1930

Dear Siegfried Sassoon;

I am so sorry to learn that Stephen Tennant got such bad results from his influenza and is having to be still - almost the hardest thing on earth to do. Anyway, I'm glad to have a good friend like him to help him be quiet. One needs a lot of help for that.

I am going South tomorrow night to see some old friends in the department of Var, near Toulon, and they can't meet me in a cooler place. I hope later to be able to seek out the Bavarian address you were good enough to send me.

Morgan & Co. will always forward letters to me, but I'm always so glad of a word from you to tell me how



I cannot do so. I wish I knew
something new and altogether
delightful for him to read,
but I'm bound to go back to Paris
temporarily - I can find nothing
later here that might not have
been left behind.

With warmest good wishes to Thomas
and to you, whom I know very well
yours all,

Yours

Willa Cather

UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY
CAMBRIDGE



Mr. Siegfried Sassoon
Wilsford Manor
Near Salisbury
Wilts.

Add 8889/2/3

(England)





Donald Shaw MacLaughlan, *St. Ouen, Rouen*, etching in black on Japanese paper, 1903. Charles Deering Collection, Art Institute of Chicago

June 1930 he learned his condition was worsening. This setback may well be what Cather refers to in her opening remark about his health. Despite the sometimes negative effect Tennant's illnesses had on his own life and career, Sassoon was dedicated to caring for him. In the second paragraph of her letter, Cather notes that she is "going South" the next day to visit friends near Toulon and adds that she hopes to "seek out the Bavarian address you were good enough to send me" [emphasis mine] (see page 32). The Bavarian address is surely Haus Hirth, a "holiday or rest home" in the town of Untergrainau, a two-hour drive southwest of Munich on the northern border of Switzerland. Stephen Tennant had stayed there with an aunt in early 1928, and he and Sassoon subsequently stayed there the first of several times in September of the same year. Sassoon, greatly impressed with the pension, wrote to Walter de la Mare that the hosts' "homely warm-heartedness is beyond description, and the air and sunshine ditto" (quoted in Wilson 205–11). He had clearly recommended the hotel to Cather in a previous letter. In the third paragraph Cather invites Sassoon to write to her, informing him that any correspondence will be forwarded by Morgan and Company. An amusing comment about the lack of good reading at the time in Paris is followed with her "warmest good wishes" to both Tennant and Sassoon, "whom I know very well after all."

Let me return to the point at which we began, however: Sassoon's sonnet "In the Church of St. Ouen" and Cather's passage in *One of Ours*. There is no doubt that their visits to the Rouen Cathedral and Church of St. Ouen were profound experiences for both Cather and Sassoon. Both of

their characters come into the church uncertain, searching for something that almost defies description or definition. For Claude Wheeler "the revelations of the glass and the bell . . . were superlatives toward which his mind had always been groping." Sassoon's soldier "lost to God," comes seeking him in an impressively beautiful place of worship. As Patrick Campbell states, his young officer "longed for an epiphany" (139), and a "purple passage" (so titled by Sassoon) in one of Sassoon's diaries, "shows he came close to one":

He had wandered into this astonishing Roman Catholic temple to stare at the coloured windows. And now, in the gathering gloom, glory faded slowly from those gateways of heaven, those jeweled frescoes of tracery and brightness. . . . In the house of God he had found, not God, but beauty. . . . He was going away from all this, going away to the naked horror of the War, that he already knew so well. (*Diaries* 138)

Writing to a friend almost fifty years after that 1917 visit, Sassoon declared that he still remembered how powerful the experience had been: "But St. Ouen completely got me," he said, "I liked it far better than the Cathedral (Rouen) which didn't make me feel holy at all" (Corrigan 84). Amid the chaos and horror of war, both Claude Wheeler and Sassoon's soldier, if only briefly, discover truth in something permanent and beautiful: the place and the experience become for them emotionally and spiritually significant, as Eliot suggests in *The Waste Land*, fragments to shore against the ruins.

NOTES

1. See Christine E. Kephart's *The Catherian Cathedral*. In "Claude Wheeler's Visit to the Church of St. Ouen," I too, at that time not having seen Kephart's book, explored several of the same details in the passage. My apology to her for not having been aware of this excellent work.

2. Sassoon also seems to conflate his descriptions and memories of the church and the cathedral. He says that his experience in St. Ouen was more beautiful and more moving than that in the cathedral but describes the cathedral in greater detail. The "purple passage" (*Diaries* 138–39) is titled "In the Cathedral," yet, as noted, Sassoon, writing to Felicitas Corrigan in 1973, declared that he liked the church much more than the cathedral, "which didn't make me feel holy at all" (Corrigan 84). His description of the soldier in "The Church of St. Ouen" clearly does convey a sense of holiness. One wonders whether that passage was mislabeled in 1917, with the "error" repeated in subsequent print editions of the notebooks.

Copies of Sassoon's handwritten notebooks are available through the University of Cambridge Digital Library. The notebooks are also referred to as "diaries" and "journals." References here are to *Siegfried Sassoon: Diaries, 1915–1918*.

3. For a summary of various interpretations of the “cheese shop” passage (425–30) and a different view of the Sergeant Hicks character, see Smith.

4. See my article “Getting Claude ‘Over There.’”

5. The two major biographies of Sassoon are those by Egremont and Wilson. Because Sassoon left detailed accounts of his activities both during and after the war in his journals and then wrote of many of these events in *Siegfried’s Journey* in 1945, biographical works tend to be very similar in their accounts of what happened during these years, with some, of course, including details that others do not.

6. My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer of this article for reminding me of Clayton’s account of this incident.

7. Sassoon says Chapman was “pacing to and fro, wagging his hook” (*Siegfried’s Journey* 188). A less dramatic comment on the incident can be found in Howe’s biography of Chapman, pp. 348–49.

8. Explanations as to how the correspondence between Tennant and Cather began differ significantly. See Lewis, pp. 177–78, Woodress, pp. 384–85 and 549, and Hoare, pp. 57–59. Edith Lewis and Philip Hoare, Tennant’s biographer, state that the correspondence began when Tennant wrote to Cather directly, praising *A Lost Lady*. Hoare dates this first letter to the spring of 1926 (*Serious Pleasures* 57). However, in a March 28, 1927, letter to Tennant, Cather notes that she received a letter from “a mutual friend” in which Tennant had praised *My Mortal Enemy* (*Selected Letters* 392–93). According to Woodress, Tennant wrote to novelist Anne Douglas Sedgwick, with whom Cather was acquainted, praising *My Mortal Enemy*, and Sedgwick forwarded the letter to Cather, who then wrote to Tennant. Woodress, based on comments by Patricia Yongue, says that Cather’s writing to a young author she had never met would have been “totally uncharacteristic” (385, 549). For additional comments on the Cather-Tennant relationship, see Hoare’s article, “A Serious Pleasure: The Friendship of Willa Cather and Stephen Tennant.”

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Ireland, Irish Americans, and Cather's Irish Portraits

John J. Murphy

Most of my forebears were Irish, so Ireland's story and those of the Irish in America contribute to my story, and they contribute to Willa Cather's as well. My maternal grandmother was from Ulster, the Irish province of Cather's own forebears and of S. S. McClure and his. Cather experienced Ulster secondhand in writing McClure's *My Autobiography* (1914)—subsequently to be known as *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*—and she described the place with the sympathy and lyricism evident in her major fiction. Without a doubt, this contributed to her Irish American portraits in *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) and in “Two Friends” (1932). To understand them and McClure himself is to understand the conditions in Ireland advancing emigration to America. Poverty and underclass status made most Irish docile, but many were resentful or ambitious. Cather's Irish are the latter.

Ireland's story is a sad one of conquest, exploitation, and misery. “Irish” Ireland's customs, speech, and clothes were considered a degenerative threat for the English even before the Reformation, but after it, religion seriously aggravated the struggle for mastery. An oath required for membership in Dublin's parliament barred Catholics from participating in their own government, and as an effort to subdue the whole country under English law, Protestant plantations of English and Scottish settlers (the Cathers and McClures among them) were set up, and natives were obliged to surrender their best land. The repercussions were condemned by Edmund Burke, who in 1748 complained of Irish lack of money and a diet of potatoes, sour milk, and water; “it is no uncommon sight to see half a dozen Children run quite naked out of a Cabin, scarcely distinguishable from the Dunghill,” he wrote (quoted in Johnson 70). In the next century, Benjamin Disraeli rebuked the British parliament for the “extreme distress” of Ireland's “starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien church” (quoted in Johnson 99). By the end of the nineteenth century Ireland had lost almost half its population, dropping from over eight to over four million “in a national diaspora which rivals that of the Jews” (Johnson 107). Its peasantry had become the poorest in Western Europe.

The McClure Autobiography

Although she never visited Ireland, and her Ulster ancestors were in her distant past, Willa Cather did visit it imaginatively when writing McClure's autobiography in 1913—just after *O Pioneers!* was completed. She shared with him her descent from the Protestants planted by the English on Irish soil, and in writing

his life story was very aware of Ireland's history of resentment and intolerance, which they decided would introduce the book: “I was born in Ireland, fifty-six years ago. Antrim, the northeast county of the Province of Ulster, was my native county,” it begins. “The family had come across the North Channel [from Scotland] about two hundred years ago and settled in Ulster. After the battle of the Boyne [1690], as for hundreds of years before, it was a common thing for the Protestant kings of England to make large grants of Irish land to Protestant colonists from England and Scotland. . . . The injustice of this system of colonization, together with the fierce retaliation of the Irish, brought about the long list of reciprocal atrocities which are at the root of the Irish question to-day” (*Autobiography* 1–2).

Cather and McClure expand on this “dark historical background,” but what interests me here is the feeling for Irish life and countryside that McClure communicated to Cather and which she reproduced so vividly and beautifully: the McClure stone house and farm, the food, the school, the town and community, the wake of McClure's father, the hard times that follow—all become Catherian creations. However, it is the landscape descriptions that are as compelling as those in Cather's Nebraska and Southwestern fiction—too many to quote here, except briefly from McClure's return visit home from Indiana at the age of nineteen, ten years after his departure:

I have never forgotten that ride from Belfast to Glarryford. It was a beautiful day late in June, with brilliant sunshine and a sky intensely blue, and everywhere the wonderful green of Ireland, like no other green in the world. I could see, as it were, the cleanness of the grass, washed by so many rains. The whole countryside presented the look of neatness and tidiness that I had always missed in Indiana and Illinois. The white houses, plastered and graveled outside and then whitewashed, glistened in the sunshine, and the rose bushes were everywhere in bloom about the doors. I noticed the rich green of the boxwood hedges about the gardens, and the dark laurel bushes which I had always loved when I lived among them.

The train seemed to go very slowly. The fields looked very small, of course, to a boy who had been a farm-hand in the great corn country of the West; but they looked very restful, too, and well kept behind their green hedges. Many of the country people were out weeding in the potato and beet fields that morning. Most of the early wild flowers were gone, but here and there on stony hillsides the yellow gorse bushes were in bloom. (*Autobiography* 73–74)



One day, soon before his return to America, he strikes across the country, to the east coast, to “the line of purple hills which I used to watch from the door of our house when I was a child. These hills . . . were covered with pink and white and purple heather. As I climbed them, the farm-houses grew fewer and fewer, until at last I was quite alone amid the heather. This was exactly what I had wanted, and I felt a great relief. . . . I was gone on this tramp for two weeks. I walked from Larne to the Giant’s Causeway down the rugged coast, nearly always keeping the ocean in view . . .” (79).

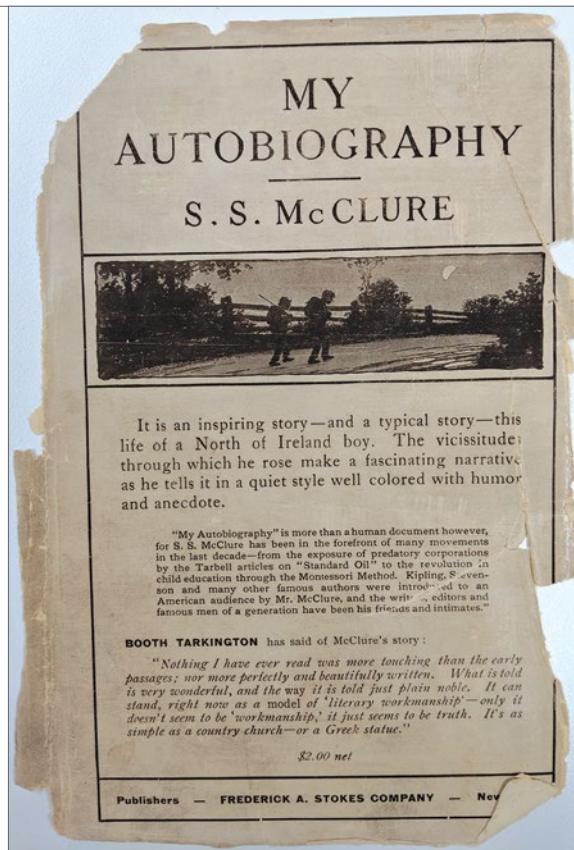
McClure was mercurial and ambitious. One of his classmates remarked that he had “never seen so much enthusiasm and life in such a small carcass” (quoted in Goodwin 162). This made his outsider status in America all the harder to bear. Cather captures the

embarrassment, anxiety, and insecurity of the poor conditions of his family during the early years in America, and the humiliation of his father-in-law’s painfully long-term resistance to wasting his daughter on an impoverished Irish immigrant (*Autobiography* 95–98). What McClure did not have to suffer was the added burden of Catholicism, which was a factor for most Irish and is for Cather’s Irish Americans.

Cather’s Irish Americans

Like some of her early contemporaries (such as Stephen Crane in *Maggie*) Cather was guilty of representing the degenerate Irish. I’m thinking here of the “fat and dirty” Mrs. Foley, the stock functionary janitress who allows Don Hedger roof privileges in “Coming, Aphrodite!” (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 12). An early exception, of course, is highly successful actress Hilda Burgoyne, Bartley Alexander’s undoing in *Alexander’s Bridge*, who has “a neat little sum in the bank” and owns “a mite of a hut” in Galway (49). However, Cather’s fullest and most emphatically Irish portraits are products of her later career, in *My Mortal Enemy* and in “Two Friends.” Working with McClure and writing his life undoubtedly informed these portraits, although they resemble much more the iconic story of ambitious Irish Americans later represented by the Kennedy family.

The Patriarch, David Nasaw’s biography of Joseph P. Kennedy, traces the rise of this family from dock working and



Fragments of a dustjacket to the 1914 *My Autobiography*. National Willa Cather Center collection.

housecleaning in the ghetto of East Boston. Outsider status propelled Kennedy’s ambition, and largely through banking, investments, and the aid of the Democratic Party he journeyed from East Boston to the Court of St. James (a real coup for an Irish Catholic) and, of course, got a son elected to the White House. Yet Kennedy always saw himself as the outsider who became the insider and divided the world between us and them, Irish Catholics and “them”—“Protestants constituted the bulk of the ‘them’ category” (Nasaw 583). Similarly, the shadow cast over *My Mortal Enemy* is that of John Driscoll, Myra Henshawe’s Irish uncle, a Protestant-hating and “coarse old codger” (11) who through exploitative labor contracting in the Missouri swamps lifted himself from poverty to

become an insider which, for him, meant a bank presidency and a mansion in southern Illinois.

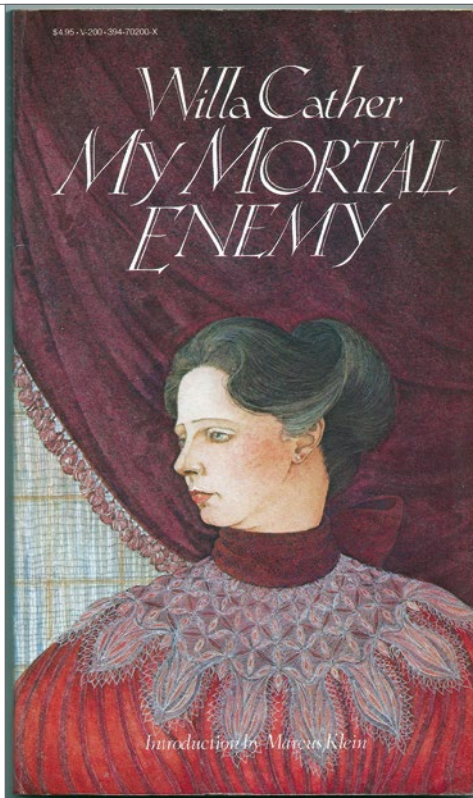
The accord between Myra and this uncle who raises and supports her in luxury—she “had everything: dresses and jewels, a fine riding horse, a Steinway piano”—was deep. He “was picturesque, and Myra appreciated it. . . . Indeed, she was a good deal like him; the blood tie was very strong.” He “took her back to Ireland with him, one summer, and had her painted by a famous painter” (10–11). But discord occurs when she becomes involved with Oswald Henshawe, the son of an Ulster Protestant, “a wandering schoolmaster” “whom Driscoll detested.” An “old grudge of some kind between the two men” (11) is mentioned but never specified. Involvement with an Ulster Protestant family alone is enough to bait Driscoll’s fury and confront Myra with an ultimatum: “If she married young Henshawe, he would cut her off without a penny” (12). Cather was quite aware of the impact of Myra’s rejection of her uncle and church. She had written the following in her McClure volume: “There had been very few instances of intermarriage between the Scotch Protestant colonists and the Irish Catholics who were the original inhabitants of the Province of Ulster. Among both Protestants and Catholics the feeling against intermarriage was so strong that, when such a marriage occurred, even in my time,” McClure told Cather, “it was considered a terrible misfortune as well as a disgrace” (*Autobiography* 2).



In Driscoll's mind and in Myra's, marriage to Henshawe (a civil one to boot) amounts to breaking with Catholicism, with what defines her as Irish, which is suggested in her being replaced in her uncle's mansion by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, by "chanting and devotions and discipline" (15). When old and impoverished, Myra is haunted by this excommunication: "I broke with the Church when I broke with everything else and ran away with a German free-thinker," she laments (70). Oswald tells narrator Nellie, "It is one of her delusions that I separated her from the Church. I never meant to" (80); however, he was the occasion of this break, which Myra attempts to heal through Father Fay, and which is tantamount to her return in spirit to John Driscoll. "She's Myra Driscoll" (63; emphasis mine), Oswald admits, and she acknowledges that she "should have stayed with my uncle": "if he'd lived till now, I'd go back to him and ask his pardon" (62, 67). When Nellie tries to defend Oswald, Myra dismisses her angrily with one of her Irishisms. "It's owing to me infirmities, dear Mrs. Casey; that I'll not be able to go as far as me door wid ye" (73). The ebony crucifix she clutches in death is, in its way, a return to her Irish roots.

Cather's "Two Friends" is the story of an Irish banker whose insider status is validated in his companionship with "a big cattleman" from an old Buffalo family, an establishment figure with "a high sense of honour" and "a better tradition, more background" (*Obscure Destinies* 163, 164) than the Irishman. Banking seems to have been a vehicle for social-climbing Irish Americans, pursued partially because withheld. Joseph Kennedy's wife, Rose, tells of an encounter her father, Boston Mayor John Francis Fitzgerald, had with an old-line Yankee Boston banker: "You have plenty of Irish depositors," her father commented. "Why don't you have some Irishmen on your board of directors?" The banker replied, "Well, a couple of our tellers are Irish." "Yes," said my father . . . "and I suppose the charwomen are too" (quoted in Nasaw 32). Cather's story reads like a Kansan version of the Kennedys and Fitzgeralds approaching the level of the Adamses and the Lodges, threatening the establishment, but, in Dillon's case, then getting dumped by it.

Cather suggests such a reading in introducing R. E. Dillon, named for the early Irish nationalist Robert Emmet



Myra Henshawe as imagined by illustrator J. K. Lambert. Vintage Books edition, 1974.

(1778–1803), a member of the radical Society of United Irishmen and expelled from Trinity College because of it, who led an armed revolt against the English Protestant-dominated Irish government, and was arrested and hanged. Emmet, like Dillon, was "excessively talkative" ("Robert Emmet"). Dillon's surname also connects him to the Irish struggle: John Blake Dillon (1814–66), his son John (1851–1927), and a grandson, James (1902–86), were all Irish patriots—James elected to the Irish Parliament in 1932, the year Cather's story was published. R. E. Dillon's Catholicism is also emphasized in "Two Friends": "Mr. Dillon was a family man and a good Catholic. . . . His sister was Mother Superior of a convent [in St. Joseph, Missouri], and he went to see her often. The nuns made much of him. . . . His two daughters [went] to the convent school . . ." (178–79). In spite of

this tradition, perhaps because of it, Dillon becomes a rich man, a success through banking and retail, and an insider through friendship with J. H. Trueman, who confirms and steadies Dillon's insider status. While Dillon carries on in his "cool, sparkling" voice, one that is "interested, encouraging, deliberative, humorous, satisfied, admiring, cold, critical, haughty, contemptuous" (171–72), Trueman remains a man of few words: "There was a curious attitude in men of his class and time, that of being rather above speech" (171). "His countenance was as unmistakably American as Dillon's was not,—but American of that period, not of this" (163). He is the Republican to Dillon's Democrat, represents the status quo, and disapproves of his friend's dissatisfaction with it: "Mustn't be a reformer, R. E. Nothing in it. That's the only time you ever get off on the wrong foot. Life is what it always has been, always will be" (178). (Catholics were said, of course, to "dig with the wrong foot.") Trueman's girth and slow movement suggest the apparent stationary moon to Dillon's mercurial star, its journey behind the moon the limited period of the Irishman's insider status.

In spite of his general silence, Trueman reveals a kind of imperiousness and need to protect his own status from usurpers: his ring depicts the head of a Roman soldier, he refused to travel further east than St. Joseph, Missouri, dismissing Chicago as "too big" (181), no doubt because of its immigrants—Chicago by the late nineteenth century being one of seven U.S. cities with the

largest Irish immigrant population (Johnson 111); and he finds Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the drama of a king being deposed by his subjects, "a little too tragic" (180) for his taste. His gambling and supposed affairs with questionable women friends in St. Joe is expected to be, and is, tolerated by his friend: "Mr. Dillon must have shut his ears to these rumours,—a measure of the great value he put on Trueman's companionship" (179). But Dillon's companionship obviously lacks similar value, and Trueman is intolerant of Dillon's active support of the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan, and is so provoked by Dillon's comment that with currency reform the "under dog is going to have a chance," that he rises from his chair on the sidewalk, announces "No use talking to you while your Irish is up" (184), and walks away. The rift is complete when he discovers Dillon's contribution to Bryan's campaign fund and withdraws his money from Dillon's bank. Bitterness collapses the equilibrium cherished by the narrator and necessary for the nation. Dillon "seemed like another man" (187), what I would call an outsider in this context, and dies a few years later. Trueman moves as far west as possible, dying nine years later in a San Francisco hotel.

There are similarities, at least in effects, between Dillon's fall from grace and Myra Henshawe's. In Dillon's case, after Trueman's withdrawal and Bryan's defeat, he "seemed to me sarcastic and sharp all the time now" (187). Without the privileged status her uncle struggled to achieve, Myra grows haughty and condescending. She resents having to socialize with the "moneyed" friends Oswald must kowtow to for survival in business and "took on her loftiest and most challenging manner" with them (32–33). During a drive with Nellie through Central Park in a hired hansom, they are greeted by a "handsome woman" in her carriage to whom Myra bows "stiffly, with a condescending smile," announcing to Nellie, "that's the last woman I'd care to have splashing past me, and me in a hansom cab!" She relieves her resentment by bestowing an exorbitant tip on the driver, savoring his "Thank you, thank you, my lady!" as he snatches off his hat. "It's very nasty, being poor!" she whispers to Nellie, who confides to us, "I glimpsed what seemed to me insane ambition" (33–34). Perhaps as well this is the lament of all the Irish in America, people from, or descended from, a nation long deprived. Myra merely echoes her uncle's warning: "It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money. I've tried both ways, and I know" (13).

Coda

Ireland is tagged a land of saints and scholars, but it is also one of kings. "In Ireland there were as many kings as counts elsewhere," claims a twelfth century *chanson de geste*" (Johnson 13). Probably

this and centuries under British rule keep the Irish enchanted or bedeviled by aristocracy and royalty. Cather clearly illustrates this in her portraits of Myra and John Driscoll, who, like Joseph Kennedy, almost vindictively try to outdo the peerage. Myra's interest in Shakespearean histories and her identification with Bellini's Norma, a Druid high priestess and virtual princess, are of a piece with her imperious behavior. Irish immigrants and their offspring tend to harbor mixed feelings for the British royals. My grandmother frequently remembered a day out of school when Victoria died and followed the saga of Elizabeth II. I have a friend whose parents emigrated from Ireland to Boston in the 1920s, when Irish need not apply. Their interest in the royals passed to their son, who continues their collection of commemorative plates, cups, and bowls dating from Victorian times. However, the deprived past of Ireland can have starkly different responses. We once entertained an Irish couple who were enraged by a commemorative towel hanging in our kitchen, depicting Queen Mum at one hundred. The burly husband reddened, exclaiming "If I could get it up that high, I'd piss on her," concluding with a litany of harsh anti-British epithets.

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The Bohemian Girl and Lucy Gayheart: Cather's Valediction to Opera

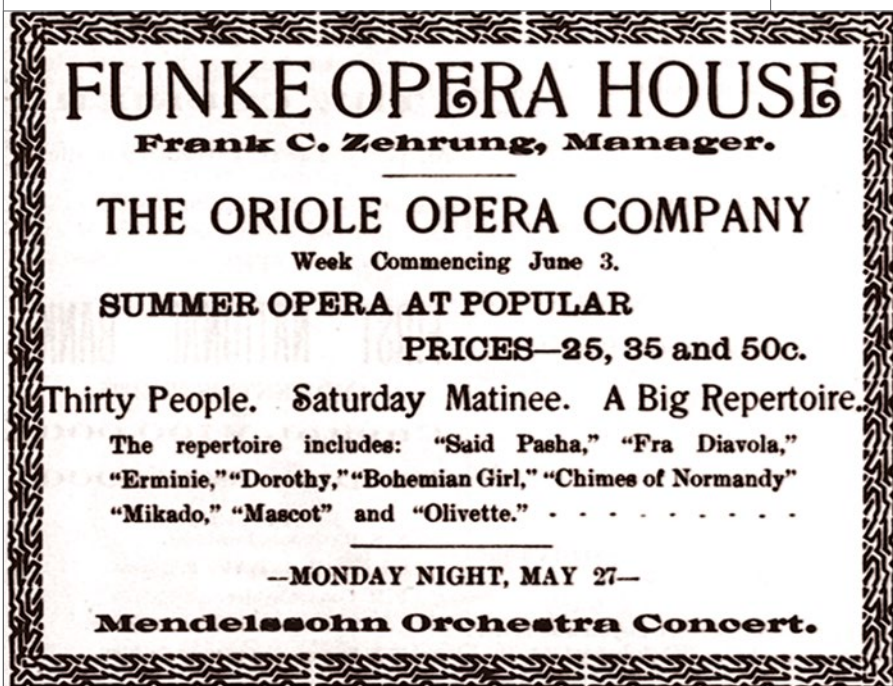
John H. Flannigan

In October 1929, Willa Cather wrote to her friend Harvey E. Newbranch, editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, a nostalgic letter that the paper published two days before Wall Street's Black Tuesday.¹ Her letter carries added meaning in 2020, too, as audiences around the world have been deprived of all live entertainment during a pandemic. "When I go about among little Nebraska towns," Cather wrote, "the thing I miss most is the opera house. No number of filling stations or moving picture theatres can console me for the loss of the opera house" (*Willa Cather in Person* 184–85). Cather missed, too, the touring companies that entertained Nebraskans in her youth: "What good luck for a country child to hear those tuneful old operas sung by people who were doing their best: *The Bohemian Girl*, *The Chimes of Normandy*, *Martha*, *The Mikado*. Nothing takes hold of a child like living people" (185). The four operas Cather mentioned here were important in her life and writings. All were English-language works popular during Cather's youth (Robert Planquette's *Les cloches de Corneville*, or *The Chimes of Normandy* [1877], and Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha* [1847] in translations from their original French and German texts).

All would eventually appear in Cather's fiction.² And all, except Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), have vanished from American opera stages, as have the small opera houses Cather mourned (see illustration below).

Michael William Balfe's opera *The Bohemian Girl* (1843) was particularly important for Cather, who borrowed its title, plot, and music for her 1912 short story "The Bohemian Girl" and described a performance of the opera in a crucial scene in her penultimate novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). Devastated by Clement Sebastian's death, Lucy returns to Haverford, Nebraska, from Chicago, and, reminded of her broken friendship with Harry Gordon, falls into despair. During a performance of Balfe's work by a touring company, she becomes interested in the "far from young" soprano whose voice, "worn, to be sure, like her face," still possessed "a sympathy, a tolerant understanding. She gave the old songs, even the most hackneyed, their full value. When she sang: 'I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls,' she . . . gave freshness to the foolish old words" (191). Lucy is "very nearly saved" by hearing Balfe's aria (189), and, in the weeks after the performance, she resolves to return to Chicago and resume her career as an accompanist but dies tragically before fulfilling her plan.

Richard Giannone has analyzed the spiritual power of Balfe's opera in Cather's novel while Andrea Mariani criticizes Cather's use of *The Bohemian Girl* and other music in *Lucy Gayheart* for lacking "a precise expressive function" (186). Here I wish to consider, however, the social and historical implications of Balfe's work and to link them to the possibility that, in *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather addressed a concern, alluded to in her letter to Newbranch, that opera was losing its audience and therefore used a once-ubiquitous but eventually extinct work, *The Bohemian Girl*, to exemplify the art form's fall from grace. The declining prestige of Balfe's work, already underway in Cather's novel, draws attention to the abyss separating Book II, set in 1901–02, from Book III, set in 1927. Moreover, the dissonance between *The Bohemian Girl*'s heartfelt performance in Book II and the sterility of Book III, which lacks any mention of opera, underscores the likelihood that doubts about opera's viability as an enduring art



Advertisement in the [Lincoln] *Courier*, May 25, 1895, for the Oriole Opera Company of Fremont, Nebraska performing at the Funke Opera House in Lincoln. Cather's unsigned review of the "thoroughly conscientious" Oriole Company's performances of *The Chimes of Normandy* and Lecocq's *Giroflé-Girofla* appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal*, June 7, 1895. A review by Cather's friend Dr. Julius H. Tyndale ("Toby Rex") of the same company's "good old 'Bohemian Girl'" was published in the *Lincoln Evening News*, June 8, 1895.

form influenced Cather to craft *Lucy Gayheart* as her personal valediction to opera.

In bidding farewell to opera, one of the most powerful animating forces for her early writing, Cather also was responding to growing doubts about the ability of opera or any other art form to repair the losses and disappointments that clouded her life. David Porter has suggested how, in *The Professor's House* (1925) and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), she had portrayed characters who are painfully reminded of their past happiness when hearing Thomas's *Mignon* and Bellini's *Norma* and are further distanced from their loved ones as a result (281–82). Like these characters, Cather, too, probably had been flooded by powerful memories while attending concerts and opera performances—memories that, after 1927, when she began to experience “a storm of personal losses” (Porter 273), only increased her feelings of estrangement from the world around her. Lucy's cruel death only weeks after a “foolish” aria “very nearly saved” her thus illustrates how Cather perhaps came to see opera—even all art—as an isolating, illusory detour around her own inevitable mortality and explains why, in Book III of *Lucy Gayheart*, she imagines a world that forsakes opera altogether.


In the 1881–82 version of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman included a brief poem, “Italian Music in Dakota,” that celebrates the introduction in Dakota Territory of opera and imagines a military band there playing music from Vincenzo Bellini's *La sonnambula* and *Norma* (both 1831) and Gaetano Donizetti's *Poliuto* (1838):

While Nature, sovereign of this gnarl'd realm,
Lurking in hidden barbaric grim recesses,
Acknowledging rapport however far remov'd,
(As some old root or soil of earth its last-born flower or fruit,
Listens well pleas'd.

(Lines 13–17; *Walt Whitman Archive*)

Whitman accurately predicted that European operas would flourish in the American hinterland, as evidenced by Cather's own experiences with opera while living in Red Cloud, in the 1880s. And few operas were more warmly embraced in Nebraska and elsewhere than Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* (Dizikes 93–96). Born in Dublin, Balfe (1808–1870) was an accomplished violinist, baritone, conductor, and impresario as well as “the dominant British operatic composer of the Victorian era” (Walsh 2). His most popular opera, *The Bohemian Girl*, with an English libretto by Alfred Bunn, effectively combines Italian and French operatic styles and, according to critic Edward Rothstein, “overflows with melodic invention, including lovely, Irish-style ballads” (Rothstein).

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Advertisement in the *Cairo [Illinois] Bulletin*, Jan. 26, 1913, for the Aborn Opera Company's appearance at the Cairo Opera House. The Aborn Company's touring production of Balfe's opera emphasized spectacle and featured acrobats, a ballet (“The Dance of the Hours”) interpolated from Ponchielli's opera *La Gioconda* (1876), and live horses, dogs, geese, chickens, and pigs. The same company's aborted revival of *The Bohemian Girl* in New York in July 1933 is the work's most recent staging there.

The plot of *The Bohemian Girl* is improbable even by nineteenth-century standards. In Act I, the child Arline, daughter of Count Arnheim, is kidnapped by a band of gypsies who have sheltered Thaddeus, a Polish revolutionary nobleman loved by the Queen of the Gypsies. Arline has no memory of her privileged childhood, but, in Act II, twelve years after her abduction, she tells Thaddeus of a dream in which she once “dwelt in marble halls.” In Act III, she is given permission to marry Thaddeus. The Queen of the Gypsies entraps Arline with a false accusation of theft, Arline is acquitted and reunited with her father, and the Queen tries to shoot Arline but is herself killed by Devilshoof, the gypsy leader. All ends happily. At its London premiere, *The Bohemian Girl* was praised for Balfe's charming mixture of musical styles—“it is always the Irishman struggling with the Italian,” according to one critic—and particularly for Arline's aria, “I dreamt that



I dwelt in marble halls," which, according to the same critic, was "a gem of the first water" that would insure the opera's popularity ("The Theatres").

In fact, it is difficult today to grasp how extraordinarily popular *The Bohemian Girl* became. According to John Dizikes, American audiences were captivated by the "immediate, contagious, singableness" of Balfe's tunes (95). Moreover, the plot of *The Bohemian Girl* "represented the absurdity of that European history many American immigrants had escaped from. . . . Without an intentionally satiric note in music or libretto, [*The Bohemian Girl*] worked for American audiences (English too) as parody" (96). Dizikes concludes: "For countless Americans, both those already familiar with opera as well as those for whom it was new, *The Bohemian Girl* represented just what an opera was" (96).

The Bohemian Girl's heyday overlapped the formative years of Willa Cather. She saw it in Red Cloud in her teens (*Willa Cather in Person* 185), and, between 1892 and 1895, while she attended the University of Nebraska, five different opera companies presented *The Bohemian Girl* in Lincoln in fully staged productions. In the ten years Cather lived in Pittsburgh, between 1896 and 1906, eleven companies mounted twelve productions of it at various theaters there, an impressive record that hardly could have gone unnoticed by Cather, an avid theatergoer.³ She also may have seen Balfe's work in a production by the Ralph Dunbar English Opera Company of Chicago at the Besse Auditorium in Red Cloud in October 1921 (March 77).⁴

In time, the opera grew too popular: audiences became so saturated with its music that it was fashionable to ridicule it, just as Lucy Gayheart does. Moreover, *The Bohemian Girl* was dogged by a stodgy English libretto with "foolish old words," and the text's archaic language became a stumbling block for twentieth-century audiences ("Dmitri Ostrov Has New 'Bohemian Girl'"). Ironically, the fact that Bunn's libretto was in English even became a drawback. According to Joseph Horowitz, "the more glamorous and costly opera became" in nineteenth century

America, "the more would opera in English become marginalized, relegated to secondary houses and to touring troupes" (147) like those Cather depicts in *Lucy Gayheart*.

Already old-fashioned when Lucy sees it in December 1901, *The Bohemian Girl* gradually vanished from stages after 1905. Productions of it became extremely rare after World War I, perhaps due to postwar cynicism, perhaps because its gentle parody of European society became meaningless after its storybook Austrian setting had disappeared along with the "kingdoms . . . and the old beliefs of men" claimed by the war (*Lucy Gayheart* 231). Since 1913, *The Bohemian Girl* has not been staged in New York City except for one ill-fated production. After much advance publicity, the Milton Aborn Opera Company revived it at the Majestic Theater on July 27, 1933, but, four days later, the management yielded to "an avalanche of requests from patrons" and replaced it with Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* ("Pirates' to Rescue").

Interestingly, in June 1934, as Cather worked on *Lucy Gayheart*, Balfe's opera made news again when producer Dmitri Ostrov and the American Civic Opera Company reshaped *The Bohemian Girl* into a Broadway musical, retaining Balfe's melodies but updating the libretto and lyrics to the 1930s. The setting was shifted to Westchester County, Arline became the daughter of an American millionaire, and Thaddeus, renamed "Trusty," was an imprisoned communist sympathizer. Popular dances, including the rhumba, and Cuban percussion instruments were added, too ("Old Operetta Given Dose of Whoopee"). Retitled *Gypsy Blonde*, it opened at the Lyric Theatre on June 25, 1934, but it was panned by critics (Pollock, Mantle) and closed after twenty-four performances ("Gypsy Blonde"). Hal Roach's filmed version of *The Bohemian Girl*, released in February 1936 and showcasing comedians Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, retained the opera's title and most of Balfe's score "in one state or another," according to critic Bane S. Nugent, but music lovers, sure to be distracted by "the antic lunacies of the screen's popular dimwits," were advised to avoid the film (Nugent).

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Advertisement in the *Lincoln Evening News*, July 8, 1889, for the Bostonians' performance that night of *The Bohemian Girl*, "the most popular English opera ever written," to be staged with "magnificent costumes, correct historical appointments, Gypsy dances, festivals, etc."

Balfe's work received its first complete recording in 1991 and was presented in a concert version in New York in November 1993 (Rothstein). In 2002, a production of it by University of Nebraska–Lincoln Opera was highly praised and traveled to Ireland's Waterford Festival later that year (Korbelik). On *YouTube*, one can find many performers of Arline's famous aria, from Dame Joan Sutherland and Jessye Norman to Enya, Sinéad O'Connor, Celtic Woman, and others. Yet productions of *The Bohemian Girl* are now so rare that it is practically impossible to see Balfe's opera in the kind of setting Cather created in *Lucy Gayheart*.

I believe, however, that Cather intended to make Lucy's world seem bygone and remote for her readers, and the creakiness of Balfe's opera therefore was part of her purpose. Critics, however, saw things differently. Any 1930s novel that treated *The Bohemian Girl* seriously was sure to invite criticism that it was as "hackneyed" and "foolish" as Balfe's opera. For example, William Plomer found *Lucy Gayheart* "hopelessly ill-adapted to the tastes of any fairly alert contemporary reader" (quoted in Porter 316). And according to Clifton Fadiman, "the trouble . . . is not that [Cather] is writing about 1902 but that she is writing about 1902 somewhat in the manner of 1902" (quoted in Porter 317).

Nevertheless, *Lucy Gayheart* is, as James Woodress claims, "a story of death and blasted hopes . . . a novel revealing its author's darkening vision" (449). And like the soprano who treats the words of Balfe's aria "as if they were pressed flowers which might fall apart if roughly handled," contemporary readers must cultivate "a sympathy, a tolerant understanding" (*Lucy Gayheart* 191) for the novel's characters and situations to appreciate the sternly elegiac qualities behind an apparent quaintness. Moreover, because it depends on its characters' powers of memory to create conflict and to heighten the tragedy of Lucy's death and Harry's complicity in it, *Lucy Gayheart* rightly focuses on *The Bohemian Girl*, a once-much-loved but soon-to-be-forgotten memento from another era, as a sharp reminder of time's speed and ruthlessness in erasing the novel's own past. By making Balfe's opera the focus of a dramatic scene near the end of Lucy's brief life and then jolting the reader twenty-five years ahead into a very different future, Cather dramatizes this speed and ruthlessness. Balfe's opera, on the brink of oblivion in 1901, also foreshadows how Lucy and her family, too, will face "complete oblivion" at the novel's conclusion (217).

The things Cather elegizes in *Lucy Gayheart* are not only intimate and local—Lucy's short life and Harry's missed opportunities for happiness—but also cultural and global, and Balfe's opera underscores the latter. *The Bohemian Girl* signals a jarring shift in the novel from Books I and II, "literally immersed

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in the world of music," according to Mariani (186), to Book III, from which music disappears. Book I, full of the music of Schubert, Massenet, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Verdi, and Book II, featuring Mozart sonatas played by Lucy and her father, Lucy's private piano recital for Mrs. Ramsay, and the performance of *The Bohemian Girl*, contrast sharply with Book III's silence. After being surrounded by music for most of the novel, readers suddenly find themselves dropped into an alien world made even more alien by the narrator's ironic aside, "these are modern times, 1927" (215).

The distance Cather creates between the performance of *The Bohemian Girl* and the silence of the novel's last pages corresponds to a break between the charming world of Books I and II and the brutal modernity of Book III emphasizing Harry Gordon's loneliness and remoteness from his own past. In the final paragraphs of *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather creates a sonic vacuum imprisoning not only middle-aged Harry, trapped in a childless, loveless marriage, as he stares at Lucy's youthful footprints



preserved in the concrete sidewalk, but also readers, who watch Harry and his mechanical, soundless movements. No other Cather novel ends on so enervated or silent a note. Giannone claims that the absence of music in Book III “serves a spiritual end to chasten Harry’s soul” and encourages readers “to listen closely so that we can feel what we cannot hear in Harry’s hushed voice” (141). But it seems equally possible that contemporary readers and Harry alike are chastened by this silence, especially because we have been scarred by other cataclysms since 1927 of which Harry is unaware and from which we, too, cannot escape. And although Harry seems unaffected by music’s absence in his life in 1927, Cather forces readers to consider the possibility that among the things rejected in “modern times” is the music that graced many of the novel’s earlier pages, a loss that many contemporary readers feel more acutely than does Harry.

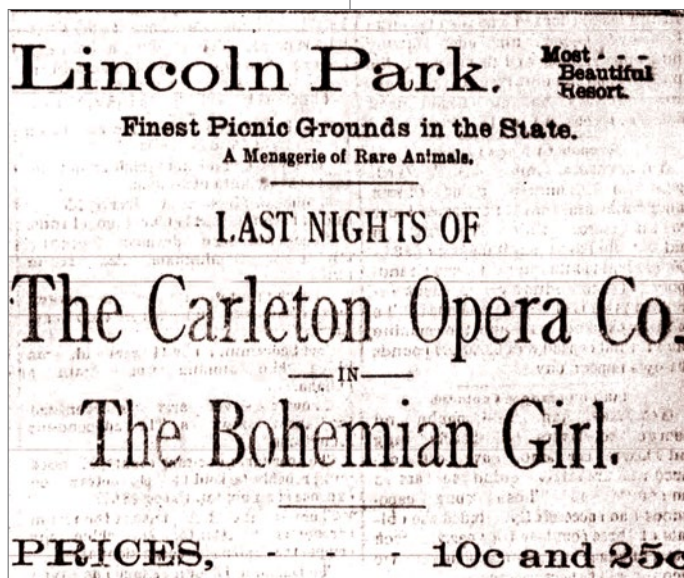
The bleakness of the novel’s ending not only confirms the pessimism that crept into Cather’s works after her world “broke in two” around 1922 but also points to a larger crisis in the operatic world of which Cather surely was aware and to which she perhaps gestures in *Lucy Gayheart*. In her 1923 essay “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” Cather observed that “the classics, the humanities, are having their dark hour. They are in eclipse” (“Nebraska”). I suspect that Cather thought the situation in the world of opera was no better and that her choice of 1927 for the time setting of Book III of *Lucy Gayheart* should be considered in the light of that period’s opera culture. Someone as aware of opera history as Cather was could not have missed the significance of an event at Milan’s La Scala Opera House in April 1926: the premiere of *Turandot*, the final, unfinished opera of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924). Cather would have understood, too, the validity of what Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker claim in their *History of Opera*: that, before 1926 there had been an “unproblematic sense of an operatic tradition, an unbroken, unending procession” of works that found favor with audiences, a rich, “unceasing march of opera” (527). After *Turandot*, however, “opera’s great procession fragmented irremediably” (528). And although successful operas have been written since

1926, Abbate and Parker’s conclusion seems irrefutable: “the twentieth century was in many senses the richest and most complex in opera’s four-century history, yet it also witnessed opera’s final mutations into a thing of the past” (519).

Perhaps Cather envisioned the predicament noted by Abbate and Parker. She surely knew that, without small-town venues, touring companies, and an infusion of accessible new works to reinvigorate the operatic canon, opera’s mass appeal would decline. And in a reversal of Whitman’s optimistic poem, opera did become increasingly elite, marginalized entertainment in twentieth-century American life. The eclipse of English-language operas in the United States not only had suppressed the development of an indigenous American operatic tradition (Horowitz 145), but also it probably threatened the enduring popularity of operas in foreign languages, too. Cather herself demonstrates the advantage of having been introduced to light operas in English as an adolescent before developing a taste for heavier,

foreign works, a luxury denied later generations. As a result, audiences deprived of more accessible operatic entertainment probably became less likely to develop a taste for Mozart, Wagner, or Verdi’s works, too—a disastrous development given that American opera companies still rely on such operas to attract audiences (Woolfe).

Finally, the Great Depression dealt a heavy blow to all forms of entertainment, including opera. The venerable Metropolitan Opera only narrowly avoided bankruptcy in 1933 (Mayer 177), and, in 1935, Cather easily could have foreseen a time such as our own when an aging audience, periodic economic slumps, the rise of motion pictures and other media, and resistance to works that eschew melody threaten opera’s viability. The extinction of small-town opera houses early in the twentieth century foreshadowed, too, the closing of established opera companies in large American cities early in the twenty-first.⁵ Moreover, not only opera companies but all arts organizations today, reeling from devastating financial losses caused by canceled events, face uncertain futures after lockdowns to fight the spread of a virus are lifted and patrons emerge from isolation.



Advertisement in the *Lincoln Evening News*, Aug. 6, 1895, for the Carleton Company’s “last nights” of *The Bohemian Girl* at Lincoln Park, the “Finest Picnic Grounds in the State,” where one might also enjoy the “Menagerie of Rare Animals.”

Perhaps Cather never completely lost faith in opera, however, nor should current audiences, for there are encouraging signs. Today there is a wealth of excellent, well-trained singers and musicians, and artistic standards at major companies perhaps never have been so high. New operas in English are being written all the time, some with librettos inspired by Cather's texts.⁶ The canon is expanding to include neglected masterpieces from the Baroque era and more recent past, and works by Mozart, Rossini, Wagner, Verdi, Bizet, Puccini, Strauss, and Britten still attract audiences. And even the long-shuttered Red Cloud Opera House (1885) recently has been beautifully restored and now functions again, as it did during Cather's childhood, as a vibrant center of music and theater.

Still, the operatic art form is undergoing seismic changes. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* notes that, in the U.S., "opera companies are turning to smaller-scale, more unusual works to supplement or even replace the traditional repertoire" (Williams). It is therefore interesting to ponder what Cather would have made of a 1903 remark by composer Claude Debussy, an admirer of Wagner's music, that Wagner was "a beautiful sunset that has been mistaken for a sunrise" (Debussy 83). If Wagner's dramas were merely another "blasted hope" and signaled the end, not the beginning, of a rich operatic tradition, Cather, a fervent Wagnerite, had good reason in 1935 to salute a vanishing musical past and, in *Lucy Gayheart*, to dramatize a loss of confidence in once-unshakable landmarks of nineteenth-century culture.

Such a loss of confidence in operatic masterworks reinforces the case made by David Porter that, in her 1932 preface to *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather sounds as "dry and preoccupied" as she believed her heroine Thea Kronborg to be (285–86). It also confirms David Stouck's observation that, "in her last books Willa Cather took up the question which confronts every artist—that is, whether or not art is valid as a way of life" (2). Certainly, by the 1930s, Cather was everywhere reminded of how people and things she once embraced were slipping away and that antidotes to her increasing loneliness were unlikely to be found in opera houses or concert halls, making *Lucy Gayheart* a work "in which doubts are expressed as to art's redemptive power and in which life values are given supremacy" (4). At the very least, her novel reminds us that beloved operas by Balfe, even by Wagner, can become victims of time, changing tastes, or pandemics, and that someday their once-treasured scores, like *Lucy Gayheart's* music collection, may be filed away to gather dust in a tomb-like room.

NOTES

1. This essay focuses more narrowly on issues raised in my essay "Cather's Evolving Ear: Music Reheard in the Late Fiction" (*Cather Studies 12: Willa Cather and the Arts*, pp. 68–88).

2. In "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), Hillary and Victoria Templeton hear "a company of strolling players" sing Planquette's work (*Obscure Destinies* 141). In "Paul's Case" (1905), Paul enjoys orchestral performances of the overture to *Martha* (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 215), and Mrs. Harling plays Flotow's opera on the piano in *My Ántonia* (1918) (170). In *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), Hilda Burgoyne jokes that an honorific Bartley Alexander has received from the Emperor of Japan belongs to a character from *The Mikado* (42). See below for Cather's use of Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* in her fiction.

3. Various newspaper databases, including *Newspapers.com*, confirm that *The Bohemian Girl* was produced in Lincoln between 1892 and 1895 by the following companies: The Winston Opera Company, October 1892 (Lansing); Calhoun Comic Opera Company, June 1893 (Lansing); Ideal Opera Company, July 1893 (Lincoln Park); Oriole Opera Company, June 1895 (Funke Opera House); Carleton Opera Company, August 1895 (Lincoln Park). It was presented in Pittsburgh between 1896 and 1906 by the following companies: Casino Comic Opera Company, July 1896 (Casino Theater, Schenley Park); Metropolitan Grand English Opera Company, November 1896 (Alvin); The Bostonians, January 1897 (Alvin); W. T. Carleton Opera Company, November 1897 (Adams's East End) and July 1905 (Nixon); Castle Square Opera Company, March 1898 (Bijou); Jaxon Opera Company, May 1899 (Alvin); Duquesne Garden Company, July 1900 (Duquesne Garden); Boston Lyric Opera Company, February 1902 (Empire); Duquesne Garden Opera Company, June 1903 (Duquesne Garden); Savage English Grand Opera Company, June 1904 (Nixon); Nixon Theater Opera Company, July 1906 (Nixon).

4. John March suggests that the star of the Dunbar Company, Lorna Doone Jackson, sang the role of Arline at this performance and possibly was Cather's model for the soprano in *Lucy Gayheart* even though Jackson was a contralto (77). Jackson did sing the lead in Bizet's *Carmen* during this tour but never appeared in Balfe's opera at all despite misleading advertisements that she would sing the role of Arline (Shipman). The role probably was sung in Red Cloud, as it was elsewhere on the Dunbar Company's tour, by soprano Louise Gilbert. During a performance of *The Bohemian Girl* in Salina, Kansas, according to a local reviewer, Gilbert "sang better than she looked for she makes unpleasant faces as she sings" (Shipman).

5. In the last decade, several established American companies have ceased operations: Baltimore Opera Company (2009), Connecticut Opera (Hartford) (2009), Opera Pacific (Santa Ana, California) (2008), and Opera Orlando (2009), in part because of economic stress associated with the financial crash of 2008 (Singer). Recently, however, opera companies have resurfaced in Baltimore and Orlando but with shorter seasons and in smaller venues.

6. For example, Libby Larsen's *Eric Hermannson's Soul* (1998), based on the 1900 short story; Philip Westin's *Marie's Orchard* (2011), a retelling of the doomed romance between Marie Shabata



and Emil Bergson in *O Pioneers!* (1913); and Gregory Spears's *Paul's Case* (2013).

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Throwing the Furniture Out of the Window: Ulster Protestant Plain Style and Cather's Aesthetic

Willa Murphy

*... as we grow old we become more and more the
stuff our forbears put into us.*

—*My Mortal Enemy* (1926)

Willa Cather's aesthetic manifesto "The Novel Demeublé" (1922) ends with a violent image of defenestration—that is, the act of throwing a person or thing out a window. Contemptuous of the clutter of much contemporary fiction, with its heavily upholstered accounts of feelings, manners, dress, and interiors, Cather declares:

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended.... (51)

This passage is of course familiar to Cather scholars and critics, and has been used to explore the author's connections to certain strains of modernism. Phyllis Rose argues that Cather's "hard-won simplicities" can be read as part of "a modernist urge to simplify." For Rose, Cather's Great Plains novels allow readers to experience "the exhilarating potential of clear blank spaces. Few novels," she insists, "are less cluttered than these" (Rose 123–24). Modernism in its various forms is among other things a crisis over language, a tension between its possibilities and its limits, an anxiety over what it can and cannot do.¹ Modernist responses to this crisis veer from the expansive, devouring style of, say, Joyce, to the leanness of Hemingway. The later Beckett is, arguably, the logical extension of this linguistic spareness. Cather's commitment to plain style is frequently understood in terms of this movement toward simplicity and distillation.²

What is equally striking about Cather's image, however, is its resonance not just with modernism but with events in early modern Europe: to throw the furniture out of the window is a deeply Protestant gesture, echoing the Reformation's stripping of the altars, and the Defenestrations of Prague. With its allusion to the Pentecost, the passage shares something in common with the Protestant impulse to break the image, to cleanse the world of Popish clutter and corruption, to return to the plain and simple spirit of the gospel. This is not, of course, to suggest an

anti-Catholic agenda in Cather. As many Cather scholars have demonstrated, a Catholic sympathy and spirit of ecumenism is present in her novels, which, at the level of content, articulate a deep fascination with the culture of Catholicism.³ But to dwell on the presence of missions and miracles, bishops and the Blessed Virgin, in the pages of Cather's texts can sometimes lead to a too-easy equation between the furniture of Catholic devotion and whatever it might mean to be a "Catholic writer." Content analysis only gets us so far.

Rather, this essay will explore Cather's distinctive plain style and its affinity with a Protestant aesthetic, and more specifically an Ulster Protestant one. Cather's ancestors emigrated from the Irish province of Ulster, where Scottish Presbyterians in the seventeenth century had settled during the "plantation of Ulster," the source of much violence and political unrest in past and recent history.⁴ Cather never visited Ireland and, except for correspondence with a distant cousin in County Donegal, showed no sustained interest in her Ulster heritage.⁵ Indeed, the word "ulster" mainly appears in her work to describe a type of long double-breasted overcoat.⁶ But she did spend her early childhood in an area of Virginia largely settled by Ulster Protestants (Presbyterians who often, like the Cathers, became Baptists in America), and her novels show a deep familiarity—and sometimes irritation—with this low church Protestant atmosphere.⁷ This essay will explore the persistent presence of an Ulster Protestant sensibility or aesthetic in her work, beginning with her ghostwriting of the autobiography of Ulsterman S. S. McClure, her mentor and the editor of *McClure's Magazine*, where she worked from 1906–1912.⁸ Cather's defenestrating aesthetic finds a counterpart in the culture of Protestant Ulster expressed in the *Autobiography*.

Robert Thacker describes the relationship between Cather and McClure as "a complex one, even a symbiotic one" and insists that her ghostwriting of McClure's *My Autobiography* (1914, and later known as *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*) deserves further critical attention: "Cather's work on the autobiography," he argues, "advanced her movement toward the writing that would make her famous. It allowed her to experiment with voice, form, and the presentation of a particular construction of character" (Thacker vi, ix). Reviews of the *Autobiography* repeatedly remark on its style, "so vigorous and simple in the telling," said the *Chicago Tribune*,



“that in reading it one is transported . . . as if it were a living thing enacted before the eyes.” The *Tribune* goes on to call it “classic in its directness, its simplicity, its complete actuality” (quoted in Thacker xi-xii). *The Washington Star* describes it “as clean-cut, as simple, as symmetrical, as classic as an elm tree”; *The Spectator*, “a plain and unvarnished record of a life of ceaseless effort” (Thacker xii). If the *Autobiography* helped to develop Cather’s writing in terms of character and voice, it also offers another lens through which to view her commitment to a distinctive plain style. With its elevation of order and simplicity, and its rejection of metaphor or excess matter, the *Autobiography* points to an aesthetic of plainness and perspicuity that is to be found also in Cather’s fiction.

Samuel McClure was born in County Antrim, and after the death of his father his mother moved the impoverished family to America in hopes of a more secure life. His is the great American story of the poor, barefoot immigrant boy turned self-made man, whose boundless energy and work ethic find a natural home in a young, expanding country. Arriving in Hebron, Indiana on the Fourth of July and amidst all the pageantry of that day, the young McClure is moved by the unchecked vastness of the American Midwest, in contrast to the cramped fields and limited lives of his native Ulster:

I could see off across the country, as far as my eye could reach, a great stretch of unfenced prairie in place of the little hedge-fenced fields I had always known. My heart swelled with the swelling periods of the orator. I felt that, as he said, here was something big and free—that a boy might make his mark on those prairies. (34)

Country Antrim, McClure’s birthplace and the setting of the early chapters of the *Autobiography*, might be described as the heartland or epicenter of Ulster Protestant culture, and in particular that culture’s association with a plain style of preaching and worship (see photograph on page 50). Even today Antrim is referred to as “the Bible Belt of Ireland,” the most densely Protestant region in the North, thick with Presbyterians, evangelicals, and Pentecostals.⁹ It was the site of the famous 1859 Ulster revival (Ulster’s version of the Second Great Awakening), when the province, bursting with charismatic preachers and outdoor revival meetings, was the scene of emotional conversions and an explosion of new sects.¹⁰ McClure’s parents were caught up in the movement, as the *Autobiography* explains:

My father and mother had once been Presbyterians, but in 1859 a revival swept over the northern part of Ireland, and they were converted to the new sect, which had *no name* and which strove to return to the simple teachings of the early church and to use the New Testament as a book of conduct, *abolishing every sort of form*. These believers had no houses of worship. Our congregation met sometimes in an upper chamber of the minister’s house in Ballymena. (19, emphasis mine)

The “new sect” McClure refers to here is the Plymouth Brethren, formed by a group of disaffected Church of Ireland clergy in the late 1820s who tried to shake off the rituals of the established church and return to the type of worship they read about in the New Testament—that is to say, no church buildings, no clerical class, no set liturgies or forms of words, no infant baptism. Meeting in the “upper chamber” of a house was a clear invocation of the energies of Pentecost. The 1859 Ulster revival gave a great boost to the Brethren, who were, in the words of McClure’s biographer Peter Lyon,

a joyless group, stern and exclusive, abjuring even the simplest forms of service, condemning such lighthearted pleasures as dancing or music, and wholly persuaded that those who had not found their particular salvation were doomed to the eternal torments of a quite literal Hell. It was a faith to match their toilsome life. (5)

H. L. Mencken’s famous quip about Puritanism—the suspicion that someone, somewhere, might be



A contemporary woodcut illustrating the 1618 Defenestration of Prague, a catalyst for the Thirty Years’ War.

happy—could be usefully applied to this sect that formed the backdrop to McClure’s early life.

My Autobiography, particularly in its early chapters, is a fascinating articulation of Ulster’s low church Protestant culture, which makes a virtue of plainness and simplicity in all aspects of living. “It was no hardship to use the kitchen as a sitting-room,” he explains: “The cooking was so simple that, after the meal was over, there was no smell of food” (6). The text also calls attention to the virtues of domestic order and cleanliness: “the house was warm and comfortable, and my mother kept it exceedingly neat. The yard about the house and the stable was paved with stone, so that even in the wet, soggy winters the place was never muddy, and the barnyard was always kept clean.” (6). This emphasis

on cleanliness is evident again in the young Sam’s “distress at being put next to some very dirty children” at the National School. Indeed, the young McClure associates studying with an escape from dirt and disorder: “I saw that if I learned my letters fast I would soon be able to get away from the dirty children with whom I had to sit” (10–11). Later in the text, when Sam returns to Antrim, now a nineteen-year-old American, we get a fascinating description of the landscape also in terms of hygiene:

It was a beautiful day late in June, with brilliant sunshine and a sky intensely blue, and everywhere the wonderful green of Ireland, like no other green in the world. I could see, as it were, the *cleanness* of the grass, *washed* by so many rains. The whole countryside presented the look of *neatness* and *tidiness* that I had always missed in Indiana or Illinois. (73, emphasis mine)

This passage quite remarkably transforms fertility into sterility, so that even the rain is understood as participating in the project of national sanitation. Ireland is so green, in other words, because it’s so clean. Here also we find an interesting reversal of the younger Sam’s celebration of the boundless American prairie. The hedged-in fields of Ireland are now a sign of neatness rather than narrowness. Tidiness is next to godliness in this culture, and Sam describes his family as “poor, but . . . of the well-to-do poor. We were always properly dressed on Sundays” (8). The allergy to anything cluttered, excessive, or ornamental extends



S. S. McClure as he was shown in the January 1903 first issue of the *Booklovers Magazine*.

from Samuel’s lack of a middle name (“Sidney” was added later, when he realized his American schoolmates all had three names), to the McClure’s household library, which consisted of just three books—the Bible, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (18).¹¹ This standard library of the Ulster Protestant home was to be found in the Cather home too, and formed part of Willa Cather’s early reading.¹² *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, it is worth remembering, contains extensive woodcuts of the Reformation’s purification of the corrupt Roman church. McClure’s attraction to the world of publishing, and his idea for syndicating fiction came, he tells us in the *Autobiography*, through remembering his “hunger, as a boy, for something to read” (42).

With its elevation of order, home, hard work, and plain style, and

its rejection of “forms,” “names,” metaphor, or excess matter, the culture of evangelical Ulster expressed in the *Autobiography* offers a compelling counterpart to Willa Cather’s own aesthetic project. Accounts of Cather’s relationship with McClure describe a deep affinity and mutual understanding: “he believed,” wrote Edith Lewis, “absolutely in her integrity” (71); and almost instantly after their first meeting, according to James Woodress, she became “his captive for life” (quoted in Thacker vi). Thacker has argued that McClure was the model for several characters in Cather’s fiction (xiv), and Charles Johanningsmeier has argued convincingly that McClure and his wife Hattie are the models for Oswald and Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*.¹³

Cather’s fiction might also contain models of the kind of symbiotic relationship Cather experienced with McClure. Father Latour’s first meeting with Kit Carson in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for example, is described in terms of an immediate and mutual sense of recognition and trust:

The Bishop felt a quick glow of pleasure in looking at the man. As he stood there in his buckskin clothes one felt in him standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words but which is instantly felt when two men who live by it come together by chance. (80)

The deep understanding between McClure and Cather may find its source, in part, in their common Ulster heritage and its



values of order, plainness, and perspicuity. Jim Burden's phrase for the shared knowledge of those who have grown up on the Great Plains—"a kind of freemasonry"—might usefully be applied to this mutual set of Ulster values and codes. I began this essay by talking about "The Novel *Démeublé*," and I would like to return to that text, with its declaration that "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically *named* there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the *thing not named* . . ." (50, emphasis mine). Such an anxiety over naming and forms is evident also in the introduction to *My Antonia*, when Jim Burden comments on his manuscript, "I suppose it hasn't any *form*. It hasn't any *title*, either" (xiii, emphasis mine). It is difficult not to hear echoes of the description of McClure's upbringing in a sect "which had no name" and which strove to "abolish every sort of form."

The design historian David Brett has explored the existence of a "protestant aesthetic," meaning "a characteristic attitude toward materials and language and workmanship" (9) which produced a manner of building, furnishing, speech, and music, based on plainness and perspicuity. This aesthetic, with its commitment to hard work and independent inquiry, has been linked with the development of capitalism and technology. But Brett considers another legacy: "what is the effect upon cognition of the destruction of pictorial memory and its replacement by habits of abstract and diagrammatic memory, which was one of the main aims of Reformation education" (11). If images are replaced by the word, *sola scriptura*, if one's only image is, as it were, textual, what is the effect on a culture? In his 1597 text *The Golden Chain*, William Perkins calls for the

destruction not only of physical forms and images, but mental ones too: "All reliques and monuments of idols, for these (after the idols themselves) must be razed out of all memory" (quoted in Brett 54). Idols are to be thrown not only out of the window but out of the mind, what John Calvin called a "factory of idols" (Calvin 8). We might well remind ourselves here of Cather's story "Paul's Case" (1905), in which the disturbed would-be dandy attempts to run away from the flavorless, colorless mass of his low church upbringing, epitomized by the portrait of John Calvin looming above his bed. But when he throws himself in front of a speeding train, the description of Paul's death contains echoes of Calvin's conception of the human mind as a factory of idols: "then, because the picture making mechanism was crushed, the disturbing visions flashed into black, and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 234).

The Protestant plain style of preaching is a linguistic counterpart to the breaking of the image or idol: for the Word to be heard clearly it must be spoken clearly. Or, as John Jewel in 1548 states, "Truth is indeed clear and simple; it has small need of the argument of the tongue or of eloquence. If it is perspicuous and plain, it has enough support in itself; it does not require flowers of artful speech" (quoted in Brett 52). Jewel became the model of the reformed style of preaching and writing, rejecting eloquence as obfuscation, poetry as dangerous overindulgence. The aim of the plain style of preaching was transparency, "so that the idea could come, like light, clear through the utterance into the recipient's mind." (51). We find a similar model of transparent

communication in Cather's story "Two Friends": "perhaps whatever is seen by the narrator as he speaks is sensed by the listener, quite irrespective of words . . . [a] transference of experience" (*Obscure Destinies* 181). This passage resonates with Cather's belief in the presence on the page of the thing not named, and both find parallels with the logic and assumptions of plain style preaching.

The transference of ideas, irrespective of words, finds an interesting parallel in what Charles Mignon calls Cather's "reading fields," that is, her interest in typography, typeface, margins, and spacing as sites of meaning and interpretation. What is felt upon the page, in other words, is as much about the white space and



The austere farmhouse in County Antrim believed to have been the childhood home of S. S. McClure.

typeface as it is about the words themselves (Mignon 140). In addition to her strong views on the importance of print design, however, Cather makes repeated use of print metaphors in her fiction. Such images, I believe, can be usefully connected with the aesthetic of the plain style and its replacement of the image with the word.¹⁴ In the Christmas episode in *My Ántonia*, when Mr. Shimerda kneels before the colors and lights and images of the Christmas tree, the Baptist Burden family becomes uneasy at this Catholic gesture. Significantly, Cather reaches for a typographic image to describe the Bohemian's sensuous, ritualized behavior: "his long body formed a letter 'S.'" Moments later Grandfather is described as "Protestantizing the atmosphere" (84). The flesh is made word here, as Mr. Shimerda's picture-making faith is transformed into a typographic sign. Earlier in the novel, Jim describes the rattlesnake he and Antonia encounter as "lying in long loose waves, like a letter 'W.'" For Jim, the snake is "a circus monstrosity. . . . His abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick. . . . He seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil" (43–46). Again, at a moment of anxiety, in the face of this excessive flesh, Jim reaches for a letter, a nonpictorial image, comforting perhaps in its black-and-white clarity and simplicity. Similarly, in *One of Ours*, Claude Wheeler, distressed by the traumatic news from the Western Front, comforts himself with the idea of the letter "r" in Marne: "The fact that the river had a pronounceable name, with a hard Western 'r' standing like a keystone in the middle of it, somehow gave one's imagination a firmer hold on the situation" (232–33).

It might be helpful here to recall the way young Sam McClure associates learning his letters with escaping from the dirty children at school, another example of the nonpictorial text providing security in moments of anxiety and disorder. And it is worth looking again at another passage quoted earlier, describing McClure's arrival in a strange new land after weeks of hard travel over sea and land: "My heart swelled with the swelling periods of the orator." Here, McClure, or Cather's version of him, aligns and expresses his feelings with the punctuation marks on the pages of a political speech. Indeed, Cather's interest in hieroglyphics, emblems, and masonic symbols might be further understood in terms of this Protestant aesthetic, whereby physical bodies and sensations are translated into letters, or images from print culture.¹⁵ In such moments in Cather's texts, flesh becomes word.

If the simple, definite shape of a typeface letter or punctuation mark can offer a stay against confusion and disorder, so too, in Cather's fiction, can a clean, well-ordered space. Mrs. Wheeler,

"when the war news was bad . . . set to cleaning house or overhauling the closets, thankful to be able to put some little thing to rights in such a disordered world" (235). In *The Song of the Lark* Thea Kronborg's retreat to Panther Canyon is described in similar terms: "All the houses in the canyon were clean with the cleanness of sun-baked, wind-swept places . . ." (328). The phrase "clean with the cleanness of" performs what it pronounces, sweeping away complex metaphors to offer instead simplicity and plainness, the repetition of "clean" reproducing the structure of a biblical idiom. In this cleanest of clean places Thea's mind is similarly cleared out:

Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. And here she must throw this lumber away. . . . Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. (337)

"Tom Outland's Story" in *The Professor's House* offers a similar elevation of tidiness: the ancient pueblo is described as "open and clean" with "little rubbish or disorder" where "wind and sun are good housekeepers" (206). The mesa itself becomes for Tom "a religious emotion" and his piety is expressed in "tidying up the ruins" after the mess left behind by the German relic dealer (250).

In Father Latour of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather creates a Catholic priest with what might be described as an Ulster Protestant allergy to disorder, and an elevation of the plain style in all things. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Latour is impressed with the order and cleanliness of the landscape, the rock mesas that are "not crowded together in disorder, but placed in wide spaces, long vistas between" (99). Such spaces have their domestic counterparts. At Hidden Water, "From the moment he entered this room with its thick whitewashed adobe walls, Father Latour had felt a kind of peace about it. In its bareness and simplicity there was something comely . . ." (25). He remarks on the pueblos that are "washed white and clean." In Snake Root, at Jacinta's house, "The room into which he descended was long and narrow, smoothly whitewashed, and clean, to the eye, at least, because of its very bareness" (127). Latour becomes most anxious and disturbed when he finds himself in untidy, chaotic spaces. The relaxed household management of Father Martinez horrifies the bishop:

The disorder was almost more than his fastidious taste could bear. The Padre's study table was sprinkled with snuff, and piled so high with books that they almost hid the crucifix hanging behind it. Books were heaped on chairs and tables all over the house,—and the books and the floors were deep in the dust of spring sand-storms. Father Martinez's boots and



hats lay about in corners, his coats and cassocks were hung on pegs and draped over pieces of furniture. Yet the place seemed overrun by serving-women, young and old,—and by large yellow cats with full soft fur . . . their master fed them carelessly from his plate. (150–51)

It is worth noting that this is a house with many more than three books, and the passage dwells nervously on the excessive and disordered volumes in Martinez’s cluttered study. Father Latour is uneasy in the house, or as the text has it, “uncertain” (156) and is kept awake by the excessive giggling of women and the snoring of the Padre. The choice of the word *uncertain* here is worth considering. If truth is clear and simple, plain and transparent, uncertainty is far from godliness. The clutter of Martinez’s household suggests a correspondent obscuring of meaning, not a situation Latour is comfortable inhabiting.¹⁶ The scene climaxes with the exasperated Bishop getting up to shut the Padre’s door:

As the night wind blew into the room, a little dark shadow fluttered from the wall across the floor; a mouse, perhaps. But no, it was a bunch of woman’s hair that had been indolently tossed into a corner when some slovenly female toilet was made in this room. This discovery annoyed the Bishop exceedingly. (156–57)

Latour’s conflation of disorder, excess, and the female body is telling. The “little dark shadow” is an unreadable, slippery sign, alarmingly uncertain and changeable. That the shadow turns out to be “a bunch of woman’s hair” only increases Latour’s anxiety and annoyance, presenting him with yet another experience of excessive physicality, liminality and ambiguity.

I began with Cather’s violent image of throwing the furniture out of the window, and “The Legend of Fray Baltazar” offers another defenestration of sorts, in which the extravagant, corrupt and tyrannical priest, suggestive of the fleshly excesses of Rome, is thrown off the rock by the Acoma people: They “swung him out over the rock-edge and back a few times . . . and, after a few feints, dropped him in mid-air.” “So did they rid their rock of their tyrant” (121). Here again, in this Catholic novel, we find a deeply Protestant gesture.

Cather’s love affair with the blank spaces of the Great Plains also finds parallels with the Protestant plain style aesthetic. These landscapes without detail, without image, blank as sheet iron, seem to offer the mind a space emptied of the pictorial. It is almost as if Cather is moving toward an aesthetic emptied out even of the word itself. The description of Kit Carson moving ever westward suggests such a post-print landscape: he “had got ahead of books, gone where the printing-press could not follow him” (82). The blank page, the unwritten landscape, seems the logical extension of Cather’s almost zealous commitment to plain

style. If for modernism art itself becomes a religious experience, a kind of order amidst a disordered world, a momentary stay of confusion, it has something in common also with the Calvinist God, best described perhaps by Perry Miller:

It is the essence of [Calvinist] theology that God, the force, the power, the life of the universe, remains to men hidden, unknowable, unpredictable. He is the ultimate secret, the awful mystery. . . . This system of thought rests, in the final analysis, upon something that cannot really be systematized at all, upon an unchained force, an incalculable essence. (51–52)

Cather’s move away from the picture-making mechanism of the mind toward what is nameless, without form, a matter of feeling over expression, shares something in common with this immeasurable essence of Calvinist belief. Art is that unchained force that refuses names and forms, and Thea Kronborg’s epiphany at Panther Canyon articulates this vision:

what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. (334–35)

And art, like that unknowable, demanding Calvinist God, allows the believer to find a second, secret self, or become a new creation.¹⁶

Cather’s clean, well-lighted style can be understood in part as a response to what she increasingly took to be a broken, disordered world in decline. Across the Atlantic, the sinking of the Titanic and the coming slaughter at the Somme would lead many Ulster Protestants to similarly equate modernity with a collapse of order, and a need to cling onto past certainties.¹⁷ In moments of distress and uncertainty, Cather, like some of her characters, and evoking the plain style aesthetic of her Ulster Protestant heritage, reaches for the familiar shape of the word.

NOTES

1. See Raymond Williams for a discussion of the modernist bending, breaking, and reshaping of language (45–47). See also Fredric Jameson for a discussion of modernism’s linguistic crises, and its concern with endowing “the aesthetic with a transcendental value” (162).

2. For further discussion of Cather’s connections to modernism, see *Cather Studies 11: Willa Cather at the Modernist Crux* and *Willa Cather and Aestheticism: From Romanticism to Modernism*.

3. See, for instance, Mildred Bennett (1988), Catherine M. McLay (1975), and John J. Murphy (1992, 2002, 2012).



4. See Woodress for a discussion of Cather's Ulster ancestry. For a history of the plantation of Ulster and its aftermath, see Colm Lennon (196–219).

5. Edith Lewis claims, "A distant cousin of Willa Cather, Mrs. Annie Cather Darragh, was still living in Donegal County up to the time of Willa Cather's death, and the two often corresponded" (3). In a 1908 letter to her father (*Complete Letters* no. 1900), Willa Cather asks for information on her great grandfather, and discusses her correspondence with other Cathers on the family connection to Ulster.

6. In "The Sculptor's Funeral," for example, "The express messenger appeared in the doorway, accompanied by a young man in a long ulster and travelling cap" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 252). The only exception to this is in *My Mortal Enemy*, where Oswald Henshawe is described as "the son of a German girl of good family, and an Ulster Protestant whom Driscoll detested; there was an old grudge of some kind between the two men. This Ulsterman was poor and impractical, a wandering schoolmaster . . ." (20–21).

7. See Mark A. Noll, Chapter 3, "The Churches Become American," for an account of the Baptists' successful ministry to local populations, and its "wildfire" growth in the new republic (62–71). James Woodress describes the people of Back Creek, Virginia, where Cather was born and raised until the age of nine, as "predominantly Protestant, a mixture of Calvinists from Northern Ireland [sic] and German Lutherans," and insists that the "orderliness and continuity" of her early life "left their mark on her values and personality" (12, 25).

8. See Robert Thacker's Introduction for an account of the circumstances of Cather's ghostwriting.

9. A good example of contemporary Pentecostal culture in Antrim is Green Pastures Church, modeled on American Pentecostal megachurches (see gpastures.co.uk).

10. For further discussion of the 1859 Ulster revival see A. R. Holmes.

11. Willa Cather was not given a middle name either, and added "Sibert" later, after experiments with the name "Love" (Woodress 21).

12. Cather's early reading, points out Janis P. Stout, "included such religious standards as *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Protestant Bible" (Stout 9). Woodress insists that Bunyan's allegory made a "deep impression" on Cather, and Cather interestingly describes *Pilgrim's Progress* as a book where "little is said but much is felt and communicated" (quoted in Woodress 23).

13. Deborah Lindsay Williams has also explored the Cather-McClure connection.

14. Walter Ong has explored the transformation from a culture based on speech and hearing to one based on typography.

15. Joseph C. Murphy has explored Cather's interest in hieroglyphics.

16. David Stouck and Steven B. Shively have explored Cather's conflation of religion and art. A letter of August 4, 1896 articulates the author's conviction that "there is no God but one God and Art is his revealer" (*Complete Letters* no. 0028).

17. See Joe Cleary for a useful discussion of the way modernity "gave rise to a cultural posture of defensive siege, to a sense of the need to hold on to the glories of the nineteenth-century past" in unionist Northern Ireland and Britain more generally (87).

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“I walked from Larne to the Giant’s Causeway down the rugged coast, nearly always keeping the ocean in view. . . .” —*The Autobiography of S. S. McClure*

New to the Collection

In recent months, our Campaign for the Future has enabled the Willa Cather Foundation to begin restoration work on selected sites, including our historic Burlington Depot. It's been exciting to see the progress of exterior restoration, but we were also surprised and a little shocked to find, behind the trim boards, a ticket for an open-air Ku Klux Klan lecture. "Americanism and The Ku Klux Klan," archival research tells us, made a circuit through hundreds of small-town Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa towns in the early 1920s. According to newspaper accounts, the lectures were given by "national Klan speakers" with the support of local clergy; flyers announcing the events were posted overnight, sometimes with cross burnings for extra publicity. We've been unable to confirm that an event like this was held in Red Cloud, but this ticket—and its hiding spot for the past 100 years—reminds us that the railroad was a vehicle not only for people, but for ideas as well. While we work to restore the physical structure of the depot, just as importantly, we'll soon tackle the work of the stories we tell within its walls. This discovery reveals something new about Cather's Red Cloud, and we're tasked with providing a thoughtful space for making meaning. Like many cultural



organizations, we feel strongly that history can teach us a great deal about our current cultural moment. We look forward to being a part of that conversation. To learn more about our campaign, please visit us at www.WillaCather.org/announcing-our-campaign-future.



Further cataloging work of the John E. (Jack) and Irma Cather family collection brings to light these delightful photographs. The first, showing a young Willa Cather around 1888, was created by photographer John A. Bulkley. Bulkley operated his studio in Red Cloud for only a few years beginning in summer of 1888. The postcard image of Red Cloud's high school football team, featuring Cather's youngest brother Jack at center, is circa 1909, created by an unknown photographer. We are always interested in receiving or digitizing historical images of Red Cloud; please email archivist Tracy Tucker at ttucker@WillaCather.org with inquiries.



Contributors to this Issue

Paul Davies, reader emeritus at Ulster University, has published widely on Beckett. He also specializes in romantic studies and ecocritical theory.

John H. Flannigan is a retired professor of English at Prairie State College, Chicago Heights, Illinois. His essays on Cather and opera have appeared in *Cather Studies*, the *Willa Cather Review*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*.

Richard C. Harris is the John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities and assistant dean at Webb Institute on Long Island. He has published numerous articles on Cather and is particularly interested in the ways in which she used various literary, artistic, and musical sources in the creation of her fiction. He was the volume editor for the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *One of Ours* (2006) and is a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Mark J. Madigan is a professor of English at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. He is the volume editor of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* in the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition (2009) and author of numerous articles on Cather. In 1974, he sailed aboard the SS *Camberra* on a Caribbean cruise with his parents. It was his first and only trip on an ocean liner—so far.

John J. Murphy is professor emeritus, Brigham Young University. He edited the Cather Scholarly Editions of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1999) and *Shadows on the Rock* (2005) and the Big Read edition of Penguin's *My Antonia*, and has directed or codirected three international Cather seminars. His list of Cather publications dates back to 1963, and his enthusiasm for having a Cather seminar in Ireland derived from its direction by his daughter Willa in the Irish province where his beloved grandmother, Mary Ann McGahern, was born in 1882.

Joseph C. Murphy is associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei. He has published widely on Cather and writes the annual review of Cather criticism for *American Literary Scholarship*. His current research focuses on Cather and the culture of spectacle in the Progressive Era.

Willa Murphy is a lecturer in English at Ulster University. She has published on eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Irish writing, particularly on the intersection of religion and literature.

Diane Prenatt is professor of English emerita at Marian University. She has published essays on Cather in the *Willa Cather Review* and *Cather Studies*; an essay on translation in *My Antonia* appeared in *Something Complete and Great: The Centennial Study of My Antonia*. She is now at work on the biography of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

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Ashley Olson, Executive Director

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The *Willa Cather Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook*.

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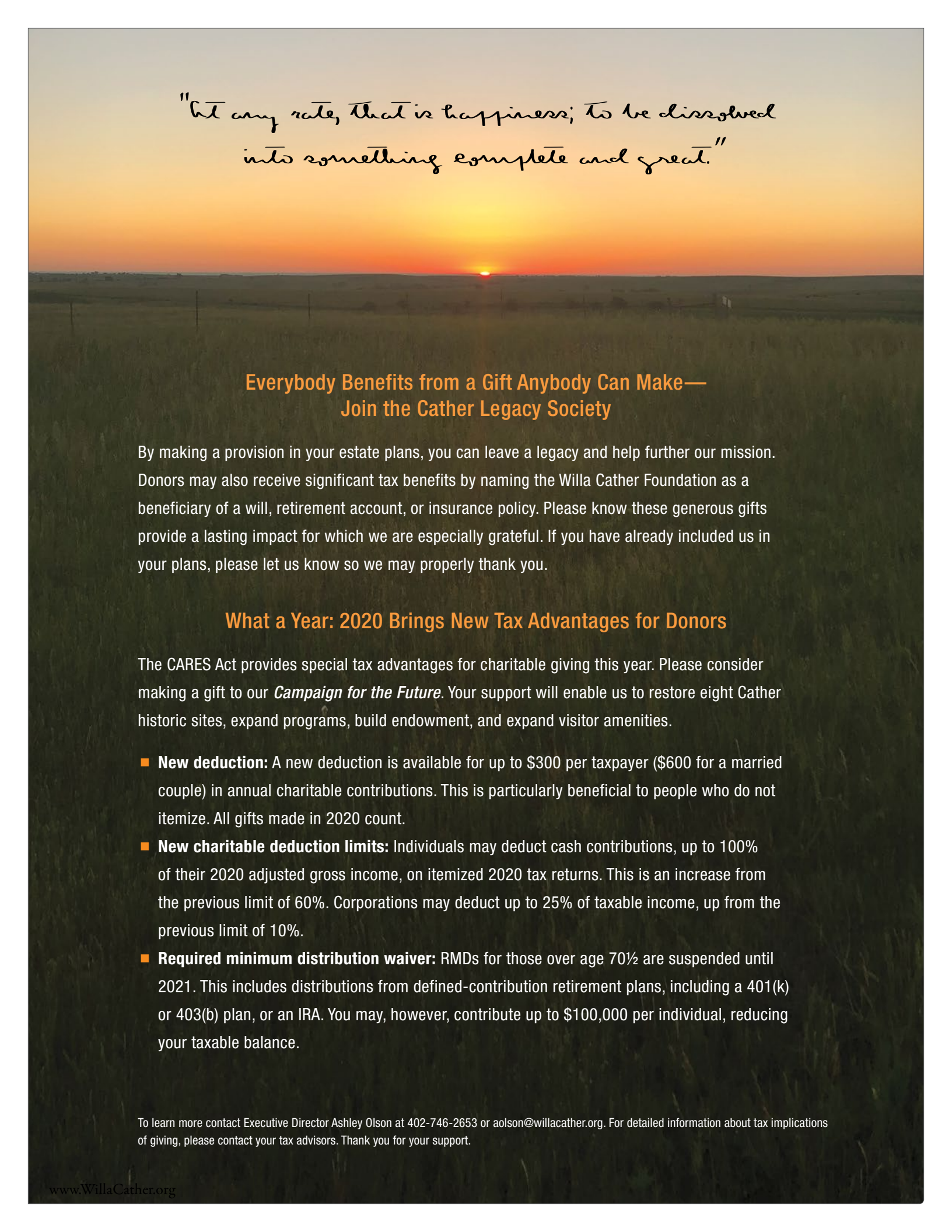
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A sunset over a field with a quote in cursive script.

"At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved
into something complete and great."

Everybody Benefits from a Gift Anybody Can Make— Join the Cather Legacy Society

By making a provision in your estate plans, you can leave a legacy and help further our mission. Donors may also receive significant tax benefits by naming the Willa Cather Foundation as a beneficiary of a will, retirement account, or insurance policy. Please know these generous gifts provide a lasting impact for which we are especially grateful. If you have already included us in your plans, please let us know so we may properly thank you.

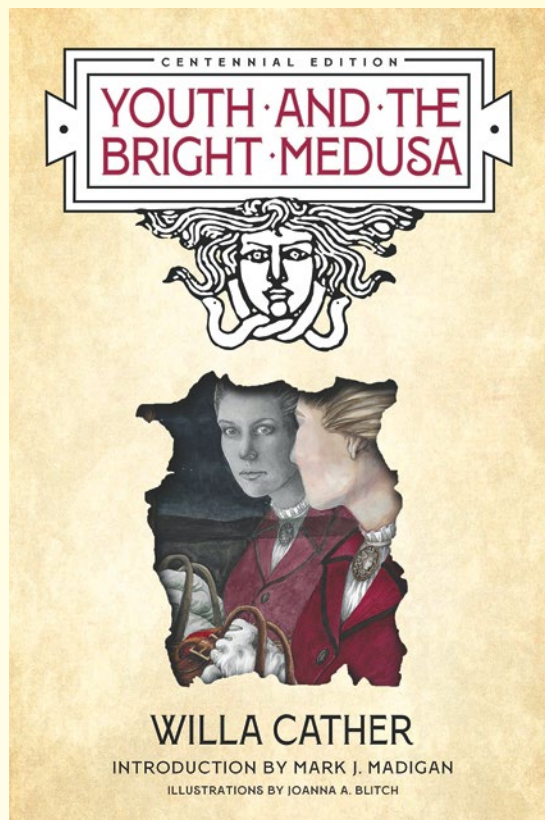
What a Year: 2020 Brings New Tax Advantages for Donors

The CARES Act provides special tax advantages for charitable giving this year. Please consider making a gift to our *Campaign for the Future*. Your support will enable us to restore eight Cather historic sites, expand programs, build endowment, and expand visitor amenities.

- **New deduction:** A new deduction is available for up to \$300 per taxpayer (\$600 for a married couple) in annual charitable contributions. This is particularly beneficial to people who do not itemize. All gifts made in 2020 count.
- **New charitable deduction limits:** Individuals may deduct cash contributions, up to 100% of their 2020 adjusted gross income, on itemized 2020 tax returns. This is an increase from the previous limit of 60%. Corporations may deduct up to 25% of taxable income, up from the previous limit of 10%.
- **Required minimum distribution waiver:** RMDs for those over age 70½ are suspended until 2021. This includes distributions from defined-contribution retirement plans, including a 401(k) or 403(b) plan, or an IRA. You may, however, contribute up to \$100,000 per individual, reducing your taxable balance.

To learn more contact Executive Director Ashley Olson at 402-746-2653 or aolson@willacather.org. For detailed information about tax implications of giving, please contact your tax advisors. Thank you for your support.

Youth and the Bright Medusa — The Centennial Edition



This special edition of Willa Cather's *Youth and the Bright Medusa* marks the book's publication centenary in 2020. A new introduction by Cather scholar Mark J. Madigan conveys the significance of this work in Cather's career and offers readers context for the unforgettable characters and enchanting settings found within the eight stories that make up the book. Joanna A. Blitch's classic and well-researched illustrations are an added treat, offering a visual reference to key moments from each story. A century after its publication, both young adults and more seasoned readers will find lasting allure in this volume.

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