

Willa Cather REVIEW

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The Promised
Land

The Meaning
in Common
Things

Ethelbert Nevin
and Cather's
“Grandmither”

Cather and
George Eliot

Willa Cather REVIEW

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On the cover: Childe Hassam, *A Back Road*, 1884. Brooklyn Museum, Caroline H. Polemus Fund.

Photograph of Willa Cather by John A. Bulkley, ca.1888. John E. (Jack) and Irma Cather family collection, National Willa Cather Center.



Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

In her message below, outgoing Board President Glenda Pierce references our vision for the future. In this vein, it seems appropriate to share some important projects and milestones on the horizon for the National Willa Cather Center. Here are just a handful of things we are particularly enthusiastic about.

The Willa Cather Childhood Home will undergo a much-needed restoration and rehabilitation effort. Slated for construction this year, the project will ensure that many original features of this National Historic Landmark are preserved. The structure will be stabilized, new climate control and electrical systems will be added, and the memorable rose-colored wallpaper that Cather hung in her small attic bedroom in the 1880s will be delicately conserved.

Our 67th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, themed “Literary Prizes: Acclaim and Controversy,” will mark the publication centenary of Cather’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *One of Ours*. In addition to the scholarship, exhibits, tours, and camaraderie that make this event memorable, we’re especially looking forward to an invited lecture by Maureen Corrigan. A recognizable voice as book critic on NPR’s *Fresh*

Air, Corrigan will draw upon her experience as a juror for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction to share insights into the behind-the-scenes deliberations that constitute literary awards.

An inaugural National Willa Cather Center Teacher Institute is now inviting applications from K–12 teachers for a retreat-style professional development workshop. A select group of educators will receive a travel stipend, meals, and lodging as part of an immersive study of history and literature in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Archival access, tours, field trips, guest speakers, and other resources will prepare educators to include study of Cather’s literature and Nebraska history in their classrooms.

A larger-than-life bronze statue of Willa Cather will become part of the National Statuary Hall Collection of the U.S. Capitol. This collection consists of one hundred statues, two from all fifty states. Representing Nebraska with Chief Standing Bear, Cather joins only nine other remarkable women represented in the collection. The impressive likeness of Cather created by artist Littleton Alston is sure to be lauded when unveiled for the first time.

In the early 1920s, Cather wrote with concern that the classics and the humanities were in eclipse and having a dark hour. At times it feels a similar threat looms today. It is our hope that the National Willa Cather Center will be a vital source of culture and wisdom for decades to come.



Letter from the President Glenda Pierce

“The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.” —O Pioneers!

Willa Cather’s insightful statement applies equally to the Cather Foundation. Our founding in March 1955 can be traced to the passion of one person: Mildred Bennett. She saw an opportunity and a need to preserve Willa Cather’s world and promote her legacy through education and the arts. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could go back in time and eavesdrop on Mildred Bennett, Willa’s lifelong friend Carrie Miner Sherwood, Willa’s cousin Jennie M. Reiher, and the other founders as they shared their visions and dreams for the “Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial”? That modest organization

would evolve over time into the Willa Cather Foundation and eventually give rise to the National Willa Cather Center.

From the first newsletter published in 1957, and the first two historic sites acquired and restored—the Farmers and Merchants Bank in 1959 and Willa Cather’s childhood home in 1960—countless volunteers, donors, and supporters from Red Cloud and around the world have helped our dedicated and hard-working staff and Board of Governors fulfill and expand our founders’ dreams. Thank you all!

It has been my honor to serve as president of the Board of Governors of the Cather Foundation for the past two years, and I am grateful for your support and friendship. As I pass the president’s “gavel” to long-time board member Bob Thacker, and we welcome new board members and staff, I am confident that, with the help of our donors, our visions for the future will continue to be realized.



Surprisingly Kindred: George Eliot and Willa Cather

Lucy White

Young Willa Cather disliked silly novels by lady novelists. George Eliot felt the same way—she published an anonymous article by that very title in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, the last essay she wrote for that publication. To Eliot, such stories were full of self-satisfied, tedious heroines who somehow all managed to make splendid marriages, although in her reading she found Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Brontë, and Mrs. Gaskell serious enough to be seen as exceptions. Cather, for her part, spent time in early columns describing her own distaste for women authors. In 1894, she wrote that the “feminine mind has a hankering for hobbies and missions, consequently there have been but two real creators among women authors, George Sand and George Eliot” (*Nebraska State Journal*, September 23, 1894, *The Kingdom of Art* 375). She also later referred to them as “the two great Georges” (*Journal* May 3, 1896, *The Kingdom of Art* 158). In 1895 she generously made a little more room for Jane Austen (*Courier* November 23, *The Kingdom of Art* 409). Eliot was one of the few women, Cather thought, who didn’t write as an “escape valve” from the rest of her life, but instead wrote because nothing else could satisfy her drive (*Journal*, May 3, 1896, *The Kingdom of Art* 158). She noted Eliot’s riposte when, asked if she loved to write, “she replied cynically that she was always miserable when she wrote, but she was more miserable when she did not” (*Journal* January 5, 1896, *The Kingdom of Art* 314).

Cather’s respect for Eliot predates her time as a critic. In 1891, when Cather was only seventeen, she wrote to her friend Mariel Gere that she is “lonesome since all you fellows are gone, and am consoling myself with French History, Gorge Eliot, and endless rides over the prairie” (*Selected Letters* 14). It is not surprising that someone as precocious as the young student Cather, given the popularity of Eliot’s novels—especially *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72)—would have been well familiar with her works; but it is somewhat surprising that even though they were writers from different generations, and they lived in disparate worlds, so much of Cather’s personal and professional life paralleled Eliot’s. Given Cather’s early and passionate admiration of Eliot, it is a satisfying discovery that the two women trod similar paths from gifted childhood through their shared roles of reviewer, journalist, magazine editor and, in full maturity, as noted author of fiction. This essay takes up these parallels to point up the coincidental similarities.

Both authors were lauded as among the most important novelists of their day, and they each set their work among characters and settings drawn from deep memories of what are often called “provincial” childhoods. Eliot wove details of life in the villages and market towns of the English Midlands into fiction hailed for its realism and resonance, just as Cather later refashioned settings and personalities drawn from her own youth in Virginia and, especially, in Nebraska. While all authors of fiction use memories—it is an exquisite gift for observation and recall that makes a writer in the first place—few have ever created work so grounded in their own past in ways that manage to be mythic and magnificent while at the same time it is both personal and specific.

A shared example of this are the memories Eliot and Cather each treasured of how much their father enjoyed having his bright young daughter folded into his working day. Robert Evans—a man famed for his decisiveness, professional competence, and physical strength—was the estate manager for various families near Nuneaton in Warwickshire. He supervised a colliery, collected tenant rents, and managed a lumber operation



George Eliot and Willa Cather. Eliot: Drawing by Frederic William Burton; engraved by Paul Adolphe Rajon, 1865; National Library of Wales. Cather: from a 1921 photograph by Rinehart-Marsden, Omaha, Nebraska; Durham Museum Photo Archive.



as well as overseeing livestock and crops. He liked having the person he called “little wench” with him as he worked. The young Mary Anne Evans was allowed to settle herself nearby to read as he went over the accounts with his employers and other estate business. Charles Cather was the softer and dreamier of Cather’s parents, perhaps too trusting to be a great businessman, and likely because of this Cather had vivid memories of riding on her father’s shoulders in Virginia as he drove sheep into the fold at the end of the day (Lewis 5–7). In Nebraska, after Charles Cather had given up farming, his eldest daughter Willa spent as much time as possible reading and writing with him in his Red Cloud office, impressing his clients and other locals with her curiosity and precocity (Brown 19). For her part, Eliot as a little girl announced that “I don’t like to play with children; I like to talk to grown-up people” just as Cather claimed to prefer the company of adults (Hughes 19, Lewis 27). Cather enjoyed drawing adult attention; as Joan Acocella succinctly points out, writing about the young Willa Cather in Red Cloud: “She was one of those genius children—a show-off, an explosion, a pest” (7). On the other hand, Eliot was a guilt-ridden show-off, one who castigated herself for each egotistical performance of academic and moral superiority (Ashton 27, Hughes 33).

In their early letters, both were pretentious, writing in ways meant to display their intellectual sophistication, one masked at the same time by a seemingly light-hearted self-denigration. When her mother’s illness forced her to return home from boarding school at fifteen, Eliot began a series of didactic letters suggesting just what her former teacher Maria Lewis should be reading and, as well, bragging to her friend Martha Jackson of the progress she was making in Latin, Italian, and German (*Selections from George Eliot’s Letters* 8). She listed books she had consumed, and shared her plans for *A Chronological Chart of Ecclesiastical History*, a project so ridiculously ambitious that the memory of it must have inspired the impossibly comprehensive, never to be finished, *Key to All Mythologies* of Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. At eighteen she wrote Martha that “The word classics has a very soaring air, but alas! we must crawl for some time up a rugged steep before we can catch a glimpse of the desired summit. . . . I have now the life of Sir Richard Hill by the Revd Edwin Sidney and Scrope on Deer Stalking in the Highlands . . . I rather think it is interesting” (9). In much the same way, Cather strikes the same heady note at the age of fourteen in a May 1889 letter to her neighbor, Helen Stowell, “I suppose of all the varied emotional phases of human life there is none so exhilarating as that of triumph and it is a caprice of fortune that . . . I am favored with the class honors and bare off the prize for best Latin translations & consequently

I feel rather cheerful.” Later in the same letter she asked, “By the way have you read any of Swinburne’s poetry? Some of it is fine” (*Selected Letters* 8). One imagines it would hardly flatter Scrope to be deemed merely “interesting” by a girl in a Warwickshire village any more than Swinburne would appreciate learning only some of his poetry met the standards of a high-school student in Nebraska.

Both girls were ambitious, devouring a wide array of books and studying languages. Both studied Latin, Greek, French, and German, and Eliot had private Italian lessons when she left boarding school. Cather had the benefits of five years in Lincoln at the university but, as Bernice Slote explains, “in the end, Willa Cather’s formal education does not explain how she happened to know what she did” (Slote 37). It is something of a mystery as to how each managed to not only know more than one would ever believe possible but also have such a strong, critical grasp of their knowledge. Eliot’s private reading was “to form the foundation for one of the greatest self-educations of the century” (Hughes 31).

For each of them, books certainly took precedence over all else, so neither girl showed much interest in developing their feminine charms as traditionally defined. As young women they both had older women attempt to improve their looks, suggesting they change their hair and wear prettier dresses (Hughes 89, O’Brien 140). Eliot was painfully aware she was far from pretty and as a teenager was deliberately disheveled and “expert at looking plain” (Hughes 25). Throughout her life she made preemptive, satiric comments about her looks and abysmal fashion sense and it did not go unnoticed that she dressed badly, even when wealthy and successful (Haight *Life* 373). Her interior designer Owen Jones would not let her attend her own housewarming party unless she improved her appearance which was an “awful mishmash . . . part high fashion, part provincial dowdiness” (Hughes 25). Late in her life, younger friends pointed her toward more fashionable dresses but she never mastered the hat. One woman seeing her at the opera wrote that Eliot “wore a monstrous cross between a hat and a cap” (Haight *Life* 502) while Edmund Gosse found her fashionable Parisian hats incongruous and provincial when paired with her “massive features” and often grim demeanor (Hughes 306).

No one would ever call Cather characteristically grim, since her sparkling eyes and eager engagement in conversation has been well and often noted. During her teenaged years, however, she styled herself “William Cather” and played up her boyish looks, choosing a haircut and wardrobe like her brothers’, perhaps more as a rebellion from her mother’s southern femininity than a desire to be aggressively masculine (Stout 15–16). Cather grew to love sumptuous, feminine clothes, and as her career progressed she





Caroline Bray and Isabelle McClung Hamburg. Bray: Self-portrait, 1830–35; Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, U.K. McClung Hamburg: studio portrait ca. 1916; National Willa Cather Center collection.

could certainly afford them, but she never looked conventional; her bold colors and unusual fashion choices garnered comments from the time she was a child on (Bennett 30–31). Her students in Pittsburgh remembered unusually short skirts, polka-dot stockings, and even spats (Woodress 153). Describing a scene when she settled to dine with Cather in the 1910s, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant imagines hearing a “whistle of surprise” from the headwaiter of Delmonico’s when he removed Cather’s coat to dramatically reveal “a very ornate, luxurious, conspicuous red-embroidered frock. Flirting his napkin, he bowed low, as for Emma Eames or Mary Garden.” Sergeant concludes that “it came to me that she was dressing the woman she felt inside, the woman one had already sensed was not to be obscure,” asking finally as she closes this scene, “But *who was she? Who would she be?*” (Sergeant 51).

Both Eliot and Cather were fortunate to be taken up by families that appreciated their unusual charms and recognized their intellectual strengths. They were each included in a larger social world and provided a home, a refuge, and an opportunity to develop their skills. After Eliot’s father’s retirement, the two moved to a house outside of Coventry where Charles and Cara Bray invited her into the active social life of Rosehill, a house teeming with intellectuals and writers such as Harriet Martineau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herbert Spencer, J. A. Froude, and John Chapman (Ashton 41). Inheriting a local ribbon factory allowed Bray the freedom to be not only a generous host but write about a God who needed no worship; purchase the radical *Coventry Herald*; and fund progressive charities such as a preschool for the children of religious dissenters, a “provident dispensary” for medical aid to the poor, and a sanitation commission (Ashton 42).

The Brays gave Eliot a home after her father’s death when she discovered her siblings to be “people who don’t want me” (Eliot to Sara Hennell, April 11, 1850, *Letters* 73). The friendship of the Brays allowed Eliot to become a confident critic who could argue effectively with a wide circle of new connections about theology, science, literature, and politics and launched her as a critic beginning with contributions to Bray’s *Herald* (Haight 41). Like Cather, Eliot idolized French writers and was able to visit France for the first time thanks to the welcoming embrace of this wealthy family.

In an equally generous gesture, Isabelle McClung invited Cather to leave boarding-house life in Pittsburgh, giving her a room on the top floor of her family’s grand home as a place to write, with the ability to join teas, dinners, and entertainments as she chose. Moving in with McClungs allowed Cather to economize, adding to her savings since as Lewis explains

“Her first years in Pittsburgh were years of constant worry about money” (Lewis xxxi). In 1902, Cather was able to take her first trip abroad along with McClung, thus having with her a close and interested friend and traveling companion. Through this trip Cather was finally able to experience the actual country of France, one she had long reified through after her beloved weekly gatherings at the George and Helen Seibel’s home translating, *en famille*, the work of authors such as Flaubert, de Musset, and Verlaine (Slote 37; see Prenatt).

Eliot and Cather both began their careers as journalists. Both wrote for newspapers named *The Leader* (a greater coincidence than it might seem, since during Eliot’s time there was only one paper in England so named), and both took editorial jobs that led to managing publications in new cities, cities that remained home base for the rest of each woman’s life. Each had been swept up by dynamic, charismatic, and thoroughly impossible men in order to undertake the work. John Chapman, also from the Midlands, brought Eliot to London in 1851 to help relaunch the *Westminster Review*, a relic of the Philosophical Radicals movement begun by Jeremy Bentham in 1823. S. S. McClure, who shared a prairie past with Cather, brought her to New York in 1906 to first help edit, and then manage, *McClure’s Magazine*. The publications gave each woman a solid professional foundation and allowed them to nurture contacts and friendships with a large group of writers, critics, and intellectuals.

After meeting Chapman at the Brays in Coventry, and hearing of his plans to buy the *Westminster Review*, Eliot ghost wrote the prospectus for investors outlining his radical editorial philosophy—an act not unlike Cather’s authorship of McClure’s

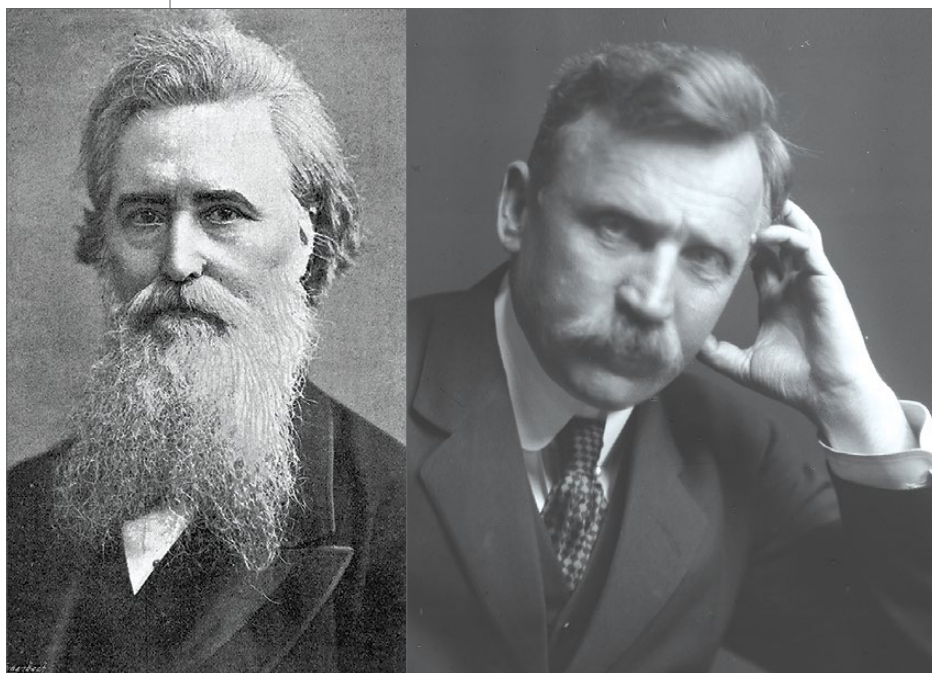
My Autobiography (1914). Chapman asked her to manage the editorial side of the *Review* and they published the first issue in January 1852. Soon she was running it in all but name in return for room and board in the loosely organized boarding house above Chapman's publishing operation and bookshop at 142 Strand. Visiting writers—often Americans such as William Cullen Bryant, Horace Greeley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—moved in and out of a house that also contained Chapman's wife and mistress, two women who bonded over their jealousy of Eliot and her early, short-lived, affair with the "strikingly handsome . . . tall, vigorous, magnetic" Chapman (*Eliot Letters* 55). Messy as this domestic arrangement was, it was the best offer Eliot had to get out of Coventry, so to speak, and she discovered she was highly effective at assigning and writing articles, editing, proofing the pages for the printer while, at the same time, reeling in Chapman's chaotic decision-making.

Just as Eliot had known the Brays could not be expected to welcome her indefinitely, Cather knew that her ambitions would take her farther than high-school teaching in Pittsburgh. Beyond the fact that McClure offered an opportunity to move to the growing center of the publishing world, she was "immediately enraptured" by his personality and energy, even if not infatuated as was Eliot with Chapman (Thacker "McClure's *My Autobiography*" 132). Moving to New York in the spring of 1906, Cather joined a magazine in crisis: it had just lost its key staff, including famed muckraking writers Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Ray Stannard Baker as well as other key employees. They had walked out in frustration over McClure's erratic management style as well as real irritation that the married McClure was "philandering with a third-rate woman poet" (Woodress 186). (For his part, Chapman engaged in similar behavior.) Cather established herself at once as a key editorial presence in the office, then took charge of a crucial feature that had been foundering, and as a result of that work became managing editor of *McClure's Magazine* in 1908.

Beyond the details of Eliot and Cather, Chapman and McClure also had remarkably parallel professional lives themselves. Each began as young salesmen, the young Chapman sold watches and sextants while McClure hawked coffee pots and notions from a wagon; these experiences helped each of them promote expansive visions of their publishing ventures to new investors, ventures that always teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. They characteristically

promised more than they could afford to their readers and investors, as well as their writers and employees. In fact, when Cather arrived to work in New York at the *McClure's* editorial offices on East 23rd Street near Madison Square Park, the magazine was already in a downward spiral. Edith Lewis likened working at *McClure's* to "working in a high wind, often of cyclone magnitude," while Elizabeth Sergeant said it was Cather who kept McClure "afloat on his sea of discovery" (Lewis 60, Sergeant 39). Similarly, Chapman was "described by a contemporary as 'a curious compound, materialistic yet impulsive and for ever drawn to some new thing'" (Ashton 79). Chapman and McClure depended on the steady hands of their managing editors to manage them, as well as their magazines. They were extraordinarily lucky to hire such brilliant yet level-headed women since it took calm heads to focus visionaries who were as enthusiastic as they were disorganized. Ultimately Eliot and Cather found managing their respective publications exhausting and both left their jobs to focus on their fiction.

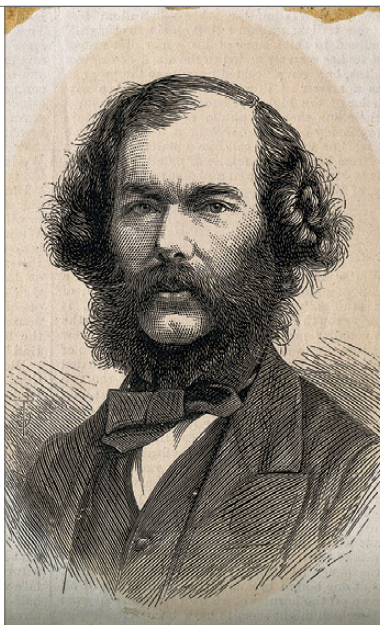
Eliot was thirty-seven years old in 1857 when she published *Scenes of Clerical Life*, her first book of fiction containing three stories. Cather's first book, a collection of lyric poems titled *April Twilights* (1903), appeared when she was twenty-nine, but she followed it with her own collection of stories published by McClure, Phillips & Co. two years later, *The Troll Garden* (1905). She was nearing forty when her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, came out in 1912. Both women received respectful but not exceptional reviews. Cather famously later referred to her very well-received second



John Chapman and S. S. McClure. Chapman: as published in *Westminster Review*, 1895. McClure: by Arnold Genthe ca. 1911; Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913) as her real “first” novel. Floyd Dell, writing in the *Chicago Evening Post* (July 25, 1913), was representative of the positive reviews she garnered, declaring it “touched with genius” and “worthy of being recognized as the most vital, subtle and artistic piece of the year’s fiction” (O’Connor 47). Similarly, it was George Eliot’s second effort, *Adam Bede* (1859), that led an anonymous reviewer (actually E. S. Dallas) in *The Times* (London) to call her a genius “of the highest order.” “It



George Henry Lewes and Edith Lewis. Lewes: Woodcut by S. T., 1878, after photograph by Elliott & Fry; Wellcome Collection. Lewis: U.S. passport photograph, 1920; National Archives and Records Administration.

is a first-rate novel, and its author takes rank at once among the masters of the art.” (April 12, 1859, as quoted by Atkinson).

Contributing to these successes were the pleasure and comfort that Eliot and Cather took in unconventional domestic relationships, coincidentally with homophonic individuals. Eliot lived with George Henry Lewes and Cather with Edith Lewis, two highly competent writers who had their own professional lives eclipsed by the success of their companions. Lewes was a writer, naturalist, playwright, and philosopher, best known for his masterful biography of Goethe, while Lewis was a professional editor who became a pioneering female copywriter in the advertising industry. Lewes’s relationship deepened with Eliot at the *Westminster Review* as she bought articles and reviews from him. Similarly, Cather and Lewis deepened their relationship as Cather explored possibilities in New York from Pittsburgh and, once she had accepted the job at *McClure’s* and came to New York herself, the two shared living space and worked together at the magazine where Lewis was also on the staff. Melissa J. Homestead has persuasively characterized and detailed their relation as a “creative partnership” through which Lewis actively and significantly contributed to Cather’s writing. The two lived together for the rest of Cather’s life.

For his part, Lewes was a logistical whizz, and he organized the London household and expenses of a wife and four children, with whom he did not live, along with managing all the domestic arrangements of his life with Eliot. Lewes provided the support that made Eliot’s writing life possible and he energetically deflected anything potentially upsetting given her bouts of depression and deep sensitivity to criticism. Lewes screened the visitors to their



Sunday afternoon gatherings just as Lewis often provided a buffer between Cather and the outside world and fended off unwanted visitors (O’Brien 355). He was an active editorial consultant to Eliot, business manager, and promoter of her fiction, recognizing that Eliot had far more talent than did he. In a similar way, Edith Lewis provided the domestic organization and companionship that gave Cather a strong sense of security. Lewis made significant collaborative

contributions to Cather’s manuscripts but, like Lewes, she recognized that her contributions, while important and appreciated, would be invisible to the world at large.

Both Eliot and Cather experienced a disastrous meeting with a literary hero. Eliot’s first book was her translation of *Das Leben Jesu*, an influential work by David Friedrich Strauss contending that the gospels were merely historic mythology. Chapman published *The Life of Jesus* to great acclaim in 1846 without revealing Eliot’s identity. Eight years later the unmarried Eliot and George Henry Lewes shocked their friends by leaving on a trip to Germany together, a heady “elopement” that was to include a meeting with Strauss, much anticipated by Eliot since she had devoted three years to her translation. What should have been a thrilling conversation did not go well. Her spoken German wasn’t strong and she suspected that Strauss was as eager to end the uncomfortable conversation as was she. Eliot was devastated to find him “worn and saddened . . . A man for whom life has lost all charm.” It was thoroughly disappointing, what she referred to as a “dumb” experience (Haight *Life* 150–51, 261).

Cather, too, learned that it can be heartbreaking to yearn for a meeting with a literary icon and then feel each side fail to rise to the occasion. Her first trip to Europe in 1902 included an ardent search for A. E. Housman, who was an early and indeed lasting influence on Cather’s work (Thacker “One Knows It Too Well” 302). Her visit to Shropshire itself was exhilarating, “a gauntlet of experiences” as she wrote to Dorothy Canfield, but there was no Housman to be found there (*Selected Letters* 62). Instead, Cather got his address in London from his publisher and she, McClung, and Dorothy Canfield

discovered him in run-down lodgings in Highgate where they were mistaken at the door for his visiting Canadian cousins. Housman invited them in anyway for what turned out to be a painfully stilted conversation; he was unwilling to discuss his poetry with Cather, although he did offer her a manuscript copy of a recent poem, "The Olive." The visit was saved by Canfield's discussion of her doctoral research at the British Museum on Corneille and Racine. "But sitting there in Housman's grimy rooms, Cather felt herself a bumpkin, was frustrated by the way things came off, and after they had left burst into tears on the way back to their hotel" (Thacker 303). Having failed to connect with someone she considered a kindred spirit, she was also devastated to find that her Shropshire lad was not only shabby but (like Eliot's worn and saddened Strauss), "gaunt and grey and embittered," as she described him to Viola Roseboro' in June 1903 (*Selected Letters* 73; Woodress 158–159).

One obvious similarity is the least significant parallel in their lives, their creation of male personas. For Cather, "William Cather" was an affectation and bit of youthful rebellion while "George Eliot" as her authorial name was a calculated marketing decision on Evans's part. Even so, the two shared a habit of renaming themselves as they moved from one phase of their lives to its successor. Born Mary Anne Evans in 1819, Eliot dropped the "e" in 1837 to become the more sophisticated Mary Ann Evans when signing her name. On her first trip abroad she reverted to Marianne in her letters, which she had used for her French essays as a school girl. In 1851, anticipating a new life in London as a journalist, she became Marian Evans. Of course, as a neophyte fiction writer in 1857, she became George Eliot professionally and in 1880 she resurrected Mary Ann Evans in her personal life (Haight *Life* 3). When she and Lewes had lived together unlawfully for six years, and his children called her mother, she wrote to an acquaintance, "I request that any one who has a regard for me will cease to speak of me by my maiden name" (Hughes 252). After the death of Lewes, whom she never married, she legally changed her name to Mary Ann Evans Lewes, partly as a gesture and partly to facilitate probate of his estate (Haight *Life* 79–80). In the final phase of her life, she became Mary Ann Cross in 1880 when she married John Cross, twenty years her junior, infamous for falling (or jumping) into the Grand Canal during their honeymoon in Venice.

It would be difficult to find one place in the vast troves of Cather scholarship that tracks every way in which Cather changed her name, even ignoring the myriad pen names she used in Lincoln and Pittsburgh. Named Wilella Cather after an aunt who had died of diphtheria (and two grandfathers named

William), she preferred Willa and answered to Willie or Billie. When the Cathers moved to Nebraska, she floated the romantic story that she had been named Willa Love Cather, Willa for her mother's Confederate brother William Seibert Boak and Love for the doctor who delivered her. We now know that this was either a misunderstanding or a romantic substitution as there never was a soldier uncle by that name, despite it underpinning both the "Namesake" poem and short story (Romines 7–8). In high school she tried William Cather, Jr. and Wm. Cather, M.D. and was called Billy at the University of Nebraska (Woodress 94). In college she also tried out a "Latinized" middle name, becoming Willa Lova Cather. By the age of twenty-four in Pittsburgh she began to write as Willa Sibert Cather, removing the "e" in Seibert as some branches of her family did, although not her closest family, such as her grandmother Rachel Seibert Boak. In 1920, after beginning her publishing relationship with Alfred A. and Blanche Knopf, she dropped the Sibert and wrote simply as Willa Cather but kept the monogram of W S C on her personal stationery. As Mildred Bennett pointed out during the years just after Cather's death in 1947, she used the middle name in her will (Bennett 235). And not only did the two authors engineer myriad name changes, they were also given oddly similar pet names; those closest to Eliot called her Polly while Cather's great friend Isabelle McClung called her Molly (Christie's Auction Catalogue, June 21, 2010).

Cather and Eliot should be seen together because they shared a belief, as evidenced throughout their fiction, that seemingly unremarkable people can display remarkable strength, wisdom, or generosity of spirit and that work has its own nobility. Obviously only one of them had the chance to read the other, and each



David Friedrich Strauss and A. E. Housman. Strauss: Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University. Housman: by Henry Van der Weyde; Trinity College, Cambridge.



created a distinct literary voice, but it is clear that Cather's early admiration for Eliot never waned, especially her ability to elicit those "simple, elementary emotions and needs that exist beneath the blouse of a laborer, as well as under the gown of a scholar" (*Journal*, May 31, 1896, *The Kingdom of Art* 376). Cather, too, would write about laborers and scholars. When H. L. Mencken wrote in the *Smart Set* that *The Song of the Lark* was "alive with sharp bits of observation, sly touches of humor, gestures of that gentle pity which is the fruit of understanding," it could easily be taken for a nineteenth-century appreciation of *Middlemarch* (Schroeter 7). When a reviewer admires Eliot's ability to create "pathos in depicting ordinary situations" they could easily be talking about *My Ántonia* (Hughes, "Review: Rereading"). These, and many other evaluative lines seem to be marvelously interchangeable. Indeed, there are so many parallels in the personal and professional lives of these two brilliant authors that I very much hope it would have pleased each of them to learn just how her life resembled the other's. In Cather's case, a reader and admirer of the author she so revered, and referred to as *La Grande George*, the pleasure may have been especially poignant (*Journal*, May 31, 1896, *The Kingdom of Art* 375).

Marian Lewes .

Willa Gilbert Cather

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What Gaston Cleric Did for Jim Burden, and How Lena Lingard Helped Him

Scott D. Evans

Gaston Cleric can be read as the most understated character in *My Ántonia*. Beyond teaching Jim Burden Latin, protecting him from Lena Lingard, and smoking his cigarettes, the brilliant and solitary teacher is suggested to have a depth of importance that is never revealed by more than implication. This suggestion is most prominent in his being credited for Jim's entrance into the "world of ideas" (250), an event effusively introduced but becoming problematic in effect as the "new forms" seem to impel Jim toward some sort of intellectual surrender (254). Leaving aside for now whether or how Jim is delivered from this problem, we only note here that during Jim's narrative of his struggle with it Gaston Cleric is conspicuous by his absence. Given his prominence at this stage of Jim's life, we could have expected more explanation of his role in these struggles than the one mere credit for the new forms that the teacher receives.

A fuller reading discerns Gaston Cleric to be active by his influence throughout this period of Jim's intellectual evolution. Understood as the spaces wherein Jim builds his own intellectual commitments, the teacher's absences from the narrative here are more transformative than his actions. As Jim works through his crisis, the questions he raises align to direct a reader toward what Jim really receives from Gaston Cleric: the frame of meaning that so charges his narrative with the sense of the worth and worthiness of his subjects and their world. Ironically, Lena Lingard plays a critical if unwitting part in Jim's answering these questions, but it is Gaston Cleric who leads him to ask them.

This inquiry will examine the novel as it presents itself: an anonymous introduction to a narrative reflection by a mature and sophisticated adult about his prairie childhood and youth. It includes three Jim Burdens: one in the introduction, one the subject of the narration, and one the narrator himself, both of the latter two being realized in first person. Occasionally it will be helpful to distinguish narrator from subject. The question of the verisimilitude of the narrative, how a New York hobby memoirist writes so much like a great novelist, will be glanced at in due course.¹ The intention of Willa Cather with regard to her narrator, her influences, and similar questions will, as interesting as they are, be left to biographers and historians.

I. "everything else fades"

Jim brings to Gaston Cleric a naive intelligence, a receptive disposition, an observant sensibility, and a richness of experience, but it is the teacher who places Jim among the necessary conditions for their transmutation. Primary among these conditions is his induction of Jim into what Jim calls "the world of ideas," about which experience he comments, "when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been," and that "that time of mental awakening" was "one of the happiest in my life" (249–250). The exuberance of the description signifies that Jim considers the event to have defined his conceptual development, a corner turned and a new direction assumed. Gaston Cleric implicitly receives credit for facilitating this change.

As is described in Book III, the teacher sets for Jim an intellectual field both stimulating and challenging, though what he particularly brings to Jim's awareness in this new world is more suggested than described. Jim uses the enigmatic phrase "new forms" to refer to ideas of particular influence, but if a reader tries to associate these forms with Gaston Cleric, the problem arises that nothing that Jim reports the teacher as specifically saying can be considered actually new, however new it is to Jim.² On the contrary, all is old, even archaic. Conversations about "Latin and English poetry" are mentioned (252): it is easy to imagine the two discussing Keats or Donne, but the "newer" of these would have written almost a century before, and as for Latin, Gaston Cleric's disquisition on Virgil's patria is the sole example. The teacher seems more interested in Greco-Roman antiquities. (We know less about the new forms from their association with Gaston Cleric than from their potent effects on Jim, to be considered shortly.)

Credited with providing Jim's formative intellectual environment, Gaston Cleric can be noted for another contribution, indicated in Jim's descriptions of the "peculiar charm and vividness of his talk" and of his lectures, at their best, as "wonderful" (252). Gaston Cleric, we infer, teaches Jim how to be interesting. From the bits that we have, two techniques are exemplified: selectivity and particularization. In the teacher's description of the "solitary day he spent among the sea temples at Paestum," he exemplifies the adroit deployment of particulars:

the soft wind blowing through the roofless columns, the birds flying low over the flowering marsh grasses, the changing



lights on the silver, cloud-hung mountains. He had willfully stayed the short summer night there, wrapped in his coat and rug, watching the constellations on their path down the sky until “the bride of old Tithonus” rose out of the sea, and the mountains stood sharp in the dawn. (253)³

This style, the evocation of a landscape or other complex idea through particular images, depends for its effect on their artful selection. As Jim describes Gaston Cleric’s delivery, pauses seem significant: he “in the heat of personal communication” would “draw his dark brows together, fix his eyes upon some object on the wall or a figure in the carpet, and then flash into the lamplight the very image” conceived (252–253). This seems less like a pause to remember than one to sort, then choose and frame the most apt “image” to make his point vivid. As will later be illustrated, Jim’s narrative from beginning to end shows the thoughtful and descriptive vitality contributed by selectivity and particularization, emphasizes easily imagined to have been absorbed from Gaston Cleric.

II. “some strange way”

However fascinating and productive are Jim’s transactions with the world of ideas, they eventually lead him into some sort of intellectual and emotional conflict. Gaston Cleric is mentioned only indirectly in connection with this episode, and a reader is left to infer if or how he is connected with it. The grounds for such an inference will be better left to determine after examining the event itself. The problem is suggested in the last paragraph of the first chapter of Book III, the resolution in the last two paragraphs of chapter 2.

The new world of ideas challenges Jim’s ordering of value. In the confused and profound last paragraph of chapter 1, Jim records the intellectual contest that the “new forms that Cleric brought up before me” precipitate (254). The struggle is as consequential as it is ambiguously described. At stake are, it is suggested, not just the value of Jim’s prairie memories but the very legitimacy of their being. The new forms exert the force of a “new appeal” to which Jim feels intellectually or even morally responsible to “answer.” The appeal, he thinks, demands some kind of separation and meets some kind of resistance: Jim “begrudged the room that Jake and Otto and Russian Peter took up in [his] memory. . . . But whenever [his] consciousness was quickened, all those early friends were quickened within it, and in some strange way they accompanied” him among the new forms, even though, as the adversative “but” indicates, they were somehow unwelcome. A similar dynamic of appeal and resistance is apparent as Jim describes his “yearning toward the new forms” being interrupted as his “mind plunged away” and

“I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past.” Recording that “they were all I had for an answer to the new appeal,” Jim implies his feeling of their inadequacy. The overall impression of the paragraph is that Jim has found his way into understanding the new appeal to demand his devaluing his “places and people,” if not leaving them behind altogether. Despite willingness to meet the demand, Jim cannot comply with its condition, prevented by the persistent and vital imaginative presence of “my own naked land and the figures scattered upon it” (254).

The ambiguity of Jim’s description of the contest between the new forms and his figures compels scrutiny. This ambiguity can be read merely as an invocation of narrative privacy that subtly gestures toward a resolution to follow. However, Jim’s provocative clues as to the nature of the contest and its consequentiality in relation to his valued memories invite one to follow these clues beyond the simpler reading at least as far as they lead. The most important reason to take a second look at the “new forms” paragraph, though, is that an understanding of its congruency with the resolution of the contest amplifies the understanding of that resolution. The most adequate interpretation of Jim’s intellectual challenge that links together his description of it in the new forms paragraph and its resolution in the penultimate paragraph of chapter 2—the “I could hear them all laughing” paragraph—is that Jim is being tempted to become a philosophical dualist. Disoriented among the new forms, bewildered by unaccustomed abstractions, and losing his bearing on reality, he has, in intending to expand his knowledge, effectively begun to contract it.

The reified “new forms” attack Jim’s intellectual reality. What Jim congenially thinks of as an “appeal” becomes on reconsideration a demand made by the forms that is both radical and reductive. What could be the reason, we ask, that Jim needs to respond to the appeal alone and leave the figures behind? The simplest answer is that among the forms there is no room for them. The forms are “impersonal,” but the figures, “Jake and Otto and Russian Peter,” are people (254). Such personalities have no place among the forms. The attribution of personality implied in the naming of the figures is only superficially a description, but more deeply an attribution of value. The real demand concealed within the appeal, we may discern, is that Jim must distinguish his objects of knowledge from their values, must attenuate people into personae, the result being a dualistic reality conceptually divided between form and value.

If Jim’s intellectual struggles involve notions of value, then understanding those struggles requires an understanding of what he would take the concept to mean. Central to it must be the idea of benefit, and “capacity for benefit” can begin to define “value” for



Designed by W. Brockedon, from a sketch by Capt. Sir George Bank, R.N.

Engraved by R. Brandard.

The Temples of Paestum.

William Brockedon, *The Temples of Paestum*, steel engraving by Robert Brandard, 1858. Printed by Blackie & Son, Glasgow, Edinburgh and London.

locus of value in the valued object. Thus remembering and writing about his friends and experiences in Nebraska, Jim sees them clearly. John J. Murphy supports this articulation in his observation that Jim’s “descriptions, although filtered through memory, are uncolored by sentiment” (53), a statement recognizing that the weight of commendation in Jim’s descriptions does not so much derive from the temperament of the narrator as it focuses attention on the image itself. Both Jim’s sense of the presence of such value in his prairie friends and experiences and his memorial relations with them are endangered by the challenge of the new forms—the new

Jim in the sense that he values his prairie past in light of its benefits described in Books I and II. There can be many modes of such capacity, though, and innumerable benefits, so the basic definition may be too ambiguous to be helpful. Within it, however, is an implicit and specific relational function. If something has value in any specifiable sense, then it must be valuable for some purpose, to someone. To predicate value to an object must therefore imply the value-relation of that object to some valuer.⁴ This relational function of the concept of value is well illustrated in arguably the strongest symbolic assertion of value in the novel, the vision of the plough in Book II. The arresting beauty of the “great black figure” appearing against the “red disc” in the “limpid, gold-washed sky” is stark. It comprises one level of value, but its larger significance is suggested too by the scenic grandeur conveyed through the plough’s appearance within what could be thought a halo, and by being called “picture writing” and “heroic”: the awed tone of the narration creates the vision as a powerful celebration of the friends’ agrarian upbringing and their way of life (237). The scene is an encapsulation of “Cather’s vision of the pioneer spirit,” as Robert Thacker calls it (*Prairie* 168).

Returning to the question, then, of what Jim would understand by “value,” we find an affirmation of a complex relation between valuer and valued that, while it sanctions a subjective sense of appreciation on the receiver’s part, yet finds the

forms that Jim continues to discover and understand more deeply as he writes his retrospective narrative.

What we observe Jim begin to understand as he weighs this challenge is that the distinction between objects and values is only verbal. If “value” roughly equates to potential benefit, then it would be nonsense to say that an experience exists separate from its value. Rather, a certain value attributed to an experience is the experience in a particular expression.⁵ The vision of the plough, for instance, is “heroic in size” (237) because any less of a description would not catch the power of the experience or its manifold significations. However, the phrase presents the whole vision in momentary aspect, not a separate quality of it, and the operative word “heroic” is appropriately a value judgment. The vision does not have value: the vision is its value in that it directly benefits the friends by its existence, benefits the narrator in memory, and benefits the reader vicariously. The reader combines these elements and so appreciates value through new forms.⁶

Escaping dualism through realizing the identity of objects with values requires a change of condition for Jim that Lena Lingard’s visit helps create. As their emotions warm and personalities open, Jim becomes receptive to a line of thought contrary to dualism, thought that blends emotion and logic. As Lena arrives, Jim is studying “listlessly” (255)—distracted, we may think, by his now-troublesome “ideas.” Soon after she leaves,



he is cheered, relieved, and no longer a dualist. The tendency, or condition, or conformity to the demands of the forms, has been chased away, revealed for the illusion it is by merely a laugh. It must be Lena who mediates this deliverance. Her quality of presence in the novel, the combination of strength of character, attractiveness and charm, and erotic fascination shown in Jim's earlier dream recalled here, uniquely suits her to precipitate this awakening for Jim, an awakening in which intuition and emotion inform intellect.

Lena's laugh subverts Jim's dualism. As if to relieve Jim of having to wonder in what sort of "strange way" his "early friends" were present "through all" his "new experiences" (254), Lena arrives in person. That Jim then "led her toward Cleric's chair" renders her presence ironically humorous but also subtly magisterial (257). The meeting is gentle and delightful, the mutual attraction muted but palpable. Afterward Jim, we may understand, contemplates "as naturally as sleep" (18) "something warm and friendly in the lamplight" (262), most intensely "her mellow, easy laugh, that was either very artless or very comprehending, one never quite knew which" (258), "so soft and unexcited and appreciative" (262).⁷ In short, her laugh is Lena herself, in full and essential expression, a gem in one facet. Here we can easily infer Jim at some level comprehending that Lena's modes of presence—the laugh, the personality, the person—manifest one identity, however verbally distinguishable they are. Here is where Jim would have begun to understand, consciously or not, what had confused him before, how the early friends remained "so much alive in me that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how" (254): the answer being that the friends are not abstract copies or imitations but living personalities themselves. Around Lena's laugh gather Jim's emotions and thoughts of her, a coalescence that intellectually excludes and emotionally incinerates the conditions sustaining his dualistic illusion. If the forms require the abstraction of objects of knowledge from their values, say, the "ideas" of people from their "personalities," then the new appeal is not just demanding something that does not exist, but it is categorizing the demand in a way that voids its own meaning. Ultimately, what Jim understands that cures his dualism is that there is no division between being and value, not because being and value are not nominally distinct but because they are actually identical.

III. "I could hear them all laughing"

Realizing the unity of objects of knowledge with their values unblocks for Jim a contemplative impetus both inclusive and expansive: "When I closed my eyes I could hear them all

laughing—the Danish laundry girls and the three Bohemian Marys. Lena had brought them all back to me" (262). What Jim rejects is the false exclusivity he thought was demanded by the new forms, a rejection that adds a dimension to his world of ideas. This dimension is what Jim is referring to later when, trying to put *Ántonia's* personality into words, he says that she "could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things" (342). Here Jim attributes a high gift to *Ántonia*, but it is the same "inestimably precious" thing he had already been equipped to learn by Gaston Cleric and brought to realize by Lena. For what Lena's laugh and his consequent realization of the integrity of experience and value ultimately allow Jim to understand is that, by virtue of their value, there *are* no "common" things.⁸

Enlarging his world of ideas amplifies Jim's understanding of art. As he contemplates the country girls' beauty, spirit, and charm, all expressed in their laughter, Jim spontaneously links them with the Latin poetry that lies before him:

It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry. I understood that clearly, for the first time. This revelation seemed to me inestimably precious. I clung to it as if it might suddenly vanish. (262)

However undoubtedly high Jim's esteem for the country girls had been, the insight he gains here must by virtue of its intensity be considered, in his words, a "revelation" of new understanding, not a return to or recovery of some former feeling.⁹ And in realizing their value "for the first time," he has indeed for the last time felt obligated to reject or demote from his world of ideas those other prairie "figures" the worth of whom he had thought that it was the essence of the new appeal to contest. The relief immanent here is the enabling of Jim's desire to realize value, a human impulse manifested in poetry, that art of condensing human experience into the form of words, put memorably by the narrator in *The Song of the Lark*, "to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself" (335). Just as Keats protested the separation of form from value, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," so also does Lena's laugh deliver Jim from their division and from the sterilization of his art that would follow. Jim's realization of art's capacity to celebrate his experience emerges both from and within the revelation of its authenticity.

IV. "tracings like ripple-marks"

Jim's new vision of forms embraced within values illumines his narration.¹⁰ Throughout the memoir, he emphasizes value through concentrations of meaning, concentrations that are



powerful due both to their narrative intensity and to their setting within the vastness of, in Thacker's phrase, the "great prairie fact," a realm whose potential to frame human value is realized as Jim's narrative sets it "aglow with meaning and understanding" (*Prairie* 161).¹¹ The prairie enhances the display of the whole range of human feeling in the novel, beginning on the negative side with the obliteration felt on Jim's first wagon ride to the Burdens' farm, an obliteration that is also a recognition of potential: if the dark-shrouded prairie were "not a country at all," there was plenty of "material" (7) to make one with—or, a life. Seeming empty at first, the prairie in other lights can appear hypnotically full, sensed in the description of the evening vista seen from Jim's room just before Lena's visit, its aesthetic intensity tonally foreshadowing that portentous event: "On the edge of the prairie, where the sun had gone down, the sky was turquoise blue, like a lake, with gold light throbbing in it" (255). Here the vivid beauty of the colors correlating in "throbbing" vitality suggests beneath the profound aesthetic display another deeply meaningful one. For it is easy to imagine the submerged gold of the sun enlivening the lake of evening sky as, say, Lena's personality inhabits her: in other words, as the sun throbs within its lake, so does value inhabit the valued. Just so do Jim's concentrations of focus, appearing especially in landscapes, the practice of arts, and the personalities of characters, reveal value within his interpretive descriptions, rendering them "strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plough against the sun" (254).¹²

Jim's landscapes concentrate value in particulars. Among notable examples, like the trees "like the gold and silver trees in fairy tales" (21), the prairie afternoon like the "bush that burned with fire and was not consumed" (39), and the magnificent summer thunderstorm (133–134), Jim's description of the ride with *Ántonia* and Yulka in the sleigh that Otto Fuchs made for him stands out as a case in point. The children's good cheer is magnified by contrast with as well as confirmed by the stark but stunning scenery: "The sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding" (61). But then we read: "All about us the snow was crusted in shallow terraces, with tracings like ripple-marks at the edges, curly waves that were the actual impression of the stinging lash in the wind" (62). Beauty crystallized down to this level is not only arresting but confers on us the perspective of direct witness. Its particularity mediates irreducible beauty, conveying the excellence of its subject in putting us right there to see it, and the contrast between the detail of the snow ledges and the vast white prairie background enhances the scene.¹³

Jim's descriptions of artistic practice define value in a gesture. The novel's artists include Lena Lingard, Gaston Cleric, implicitly,

Jim, and Otto Fuchs. (*Ántonia*, embodying "immemorial human attitudes" [342], is in a class by herself.) Jim's memoir constitutes his artistic gesture. For Gaston Cleric, that gesture would be the conversational pause before he would "flash into the lamplight the very image" selected from his memory (253); for Lena Lingard, it is the creative act of "draping folds of satin on a wire figure, with a quite blissful expression of countenance" (270); for Otto, it is when he "filled the house with the exciting, expectant song of the plane" while constructing Mr. Shimerda's coffin (107). Otto reveals throughout the job the mark of the expert: "He handled the tools as if he liked the feel of them" (106)—that is, he makes it look easy. Jim invests the rhythmic gesture of planing with religious ritual: "when he planed, his hands went back and forth over the boards in an eager, beneficent way as if he were blessing them." The narrator knows what the boy yet does not, that, the priest absent, these are Mr. Shimerda's last rites. From this center ripple out other meanings of Otto's craftsmanship: comradeship, community, beauty. "It's a handy thing to know, when you knock about like I've done," Otto explains. "'We'd be hard put to it now, if you didn't know, Otto,' grandmother said" (105). "The boards gave off a sweet smell of pine woods, as the heap of yellow shavings grew higher and higher," Jim observes (106).

Jim's delineation of personality finds its force in relating a person to some specific movement or display of energy. This evaluation by association is illustrated in Jim's collective portrait of the country girls in chapter 9 of "The Hired Girls." He introduces and defines them by their purposeful intentions in town: "to earn a living," "to help the father struggle out of debt," or "to make it possible for the younger children of the family to go to school" (191). The homely activities undertaken in pursuit of these goals make the girls, not drudges, but the opposite. Prepared by their "sacrifices" in the fields, the girls undertake their work "in service" with such "vigor," "positive carriage," and "freedom of movement" that they not only appeared "conspicuous among Black Hawk women" (192) but "were considered a menace to the social order" because "their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background" (195). The town girls are statically depicted in lifeless poses, "cut off below the shoulders" behind school desks (193) and being courted sitting "all evening in a plush parlor where conversation dragged . . ." (196). In contrast, Jim represents the country girls as both appealingly active and uniquely individual: "I can remember something unusual and engaging about each of them" (192). Shining through their humble activities is his conviction that, with their attractiveness illuminated by the dynamic vitality of their work and the moral gravity of their sacrifices, there is nothing more splendid in Jim's world than the country girls.



V. “the meaning in common things”

Allowing Gaston Cleric full credit for assembling the conditions within which Jim the narrator’s artistic vision was developed elevates the teacher as the genius behind Jim’s memoir. Given his association with the creative energy of Jim’s “world of ideas,” with the productive disequilibrium of the “new forms,” and with the result in Jim’s imaginative transformation, a reader may justifiably imagine Gaston Cleric to inhabit such a metanarrative as traced in this essay. As for Lena Lingard’s importance in Jim’s transformation, she reappears at just the right moment in Jim’s life to start the cascade of realizations that the teacher’s world of ideas has equipped Jim to experience. As his memoir constantly illustrates, Jim would not be Jim Burden without having interacted with either of these characters.

However we may imagine it to have been inspired by the teacher, Jim’s deeply evocative narrative prose impresses upon a reader that there are no “common things,” no ordinary people. This prose, so consonant with poetry, answers the novel’s requirement of verisimilitude in that Jim writes like a poet because he was taught to see the world poetically by someone who, however he “narrowly missed being a great poet” (252), was certainly a great teacher. Centrally, though, Jim’s prose enacts the purpose of the novel: to celebrate the world it recreates. If the novel’s motto, “The best days are the first to flee,” is “mournful” in itself (262), it is brightening in effect. For however mournful it is that the *optima dies* is past, every page of the novel testifies to the splendid value of and within Jim’s prairie world. The mournful motto is there, in other words, to elevate that world through contrast: to mourn its absence in time in order to enhance the appreciation of its presence in contemplation.¹⁴ Jim’s prose brings us along as he enacts that presence. And, of course, the frequent resonances that Jim’s world evokes within a reader signify that experiencing the representations of his narrative world refreshes our vision of ours.

NOTES

1. The narrator’s perspective is defined by John J. Murphy relative to Book III, in which Jim “became conditioned to viewing [events] aesthetically.” On this view, Books I and II reflect Jim’s naïve recollections, and Books V and VI are affected by Jim’s acquired habit of viewing events as artistic “set pieces,” evincing “increasing sentimentality and stylistic excesses” as a result (39). My essay agrees with Murphy’s view on the interpretive centrality of Book III but contrasts with it in finding a consistent narrative perspective presented throughout the memoir, a perspective informed and enriched by the artistic and philosophical awakening that Jim describes himself experiencing in Book III—and that it is the business of my essay

to explain. Writing in later adulthood, Jim the narrator employs the same literary sensibility formed by that awakening to interpret all the events of his past. Any differences of tone or treatment among the novel’s events are accounted for by differences in subject: *Antonia*’s children are endearingly described in Book VI, for instance, not only because of sentimentality, but for other more serious reasons obvious in the text.

2. Attempting to solve this issue by accounting for the “new” in “new forms” as “new to Jim” merely sets the question back a step: what was new to Jim about them?

3. Such evocative and particular description is interestingly exemplified by Willa Cather herself in her poem “Paestum”; see Madigan. The mysterious appeal of the archaic in Cather’s poem is paralleled in Jim’s rendering of Gaston Cleric’s awed description, each adding weight to the intriguingly paradoxical suggestion that some measure of the “appeal” of the “new forms” for Jim should be thought to consist in their association with antiquity.

4. This explanation of “value” is indebted to John M. Ellis’s discussion of literary value in *Literary Criticism*, chapter 4.

5. The term “value” is certainly not used in my essay to name some mystical, abstract quantity but to designate particular instances when value is apprehended or experienced or the general type of instances so designated: see George Berkeley: “*universality* [of general terms] . . . not consisting in the absolute, positive nature or conception of anything, but in the relation it bears to the particulars signified or represented by it” (Berkeley 16; emphasis in the original).

6. This explanation is conceptually indebted to Berkeley’s answer to Cartesian dualism, “To be is to be perceived” (Berkeley 25. The operative word is “is,” to be taken literally).

7. Jim’s description exemplifies the deceptive simplicity visible more or less in all of his characters, himself not excepted, in gently putting in question what in Lena’s manner is nature and what art. This tension, never resolved, puts a provocative ambiguity central among “that adumbration of actions, speech, appearance, and presence that make a person herself” (Thacker, “Munro’s Cather” 49).

8. For a broader discussion relating Cather’s elevation of the commonplace to her distinctive departure from the conventions of novelistic modernism, see Richard H. Millington. He notes that her “location of the field of art in the terrain of the everyday” and “the notation of meaning’s local emergence” combine to constitute for Cather “fiction’s supreme subject” (15).

9. Millington concludes that “*My Antonia* turns out to be much more of an anti-maturation narrative than a coming of age story, as Jim Burden recommits himself at the book’s end to the people and values of his childhood” (14). But the redefinition that occurs between Jim and his past that happens in the novel happens here in Book III, a progression and realization, not a regression and recovery.

10. For discussions of the luminous quality of Jim’s narration see Murphy 53–55, Thacker, *Prairie* 158–159, 162–168, 259–260 n. 27. Murphy in particular uses the term “luminous” technically. My use of “illumination” is mostly metaphorical: Jim’s consciousness of the value



of his subjects allows him to create a world through which those values shine through the presenting appearance of its images, not as distinctly reified presences, but as capacities for real benefit to characters and vicarious ones to readers. With apologies to Plato, I note that in *My Antonia* these values elevate the images they inhabit, not subordinate or demean them; see note 6. The question whether and how negative values can also inhabit images richly deserves its own essay.

11. The phrase is an adaptation from Cather's sentence in the first chapter of *O Pioneers!* Thacker explains, "Willa Cather, the most subtle artist to record the landscape, wrote that on the prairie 'the great fact was the land itself'" (*Prairie* 2).

12. In proposing that "to talk descriptively of highly valued literary texts is to talk of their value" (102), Ellis does not directly endorse efforts such as mine in this and following paragraphs to elucidate the value that a certain text commends or how it does so; however, my own endeavors here converge closely enough with his frames and explanations of how such descriptions can work as to cause me to gratefully mention them. See particularly chapters 4 and 6.

13. Directly pertinent to the "snow ledges" image, Millington discusses how "The key moments or events in a Cather text are . . . likely to be acts of heightened or illuminated witnessing" (13), an insight that emphasizes the function of Jim's narrative perspective in revealing the value within his images. Thacker discusses the quality of Jim's narrative as rendered through his "filtering sensibility," a manifestation of Cather's attempt to "do justice to the prairie" which "commingles a romantic fancifulness . . . with its stark realities" (*Prairie* 163, 168; see 158–169).

14. Kathleen Norris posits that the "epigraph . . . epitomizes the elegiac tone of the novel," which "[a] sense of loss permeates" (xviii). Murphy also notes that a "sense of loss . . . pervades [Jim's] memoir" (42). Neither of these readings excludes the affirmative nature of Jim's descriptions, exemplified in my section IV above; in their contrast with his affirmations, in fact, they may enhance them.

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Willa Cather's Use of Psalms in *My Ántonia*

Song (Joseph) Cho

Early on in *My Ántonia*, just as Jim is about to go to bed after his first revelatory day on his grandparents' farm, readers come across a singular biblical reference. Amid the evening prayers Jim's grandfather reads from the Psalms and Jim remembers one verse in particular: "*He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom He loved. Selah*" (Psalm 47 verse 4). Even though this reference remains largely unelaborated by Cather scholars, it merits close critical attention. As he recounts his grandfather's reading, the last word of the verse catches Jim's especial attention as he says with wonderment, "I had no idea what the word meant; perhaps he had not. But, as he uttered it, it became oracular, the most sacred of words" (13). The question arises for the reader: what does this Hebrew word "Selah" (סֵלָה) mean? In his explanatory notes published in the 1994 Penguin edition of the novel, John J. Murphy mentions that "the meaning of Selah is unknown, although its placing at verse endings suggests musical rests or pauses" (281). Many bible scholars believe it was a term used to encourage readers to pause and reflect before proceeding. Is Cather perhaps asking her readers to pause and carefully reflect on this verse before continuing to read on? If so, what is the context of this verse? More specifically, to what does the word "inheritance" refer in the text?

The King James Bible had a profound influence on Cather. In her article on *O Pioneers!* and the Old Testament, Jessica G. Rabin makes mention of several references that underscore the Bible's impact on the author, and Marilyn Arnold writes that she finds "in Cather's work biblical echoes that suggest an important source, or at least a confirmation, of her values. Her grandfather Cather was a devoted reader of the King James Bible, and her grandmother Boak regularly read to young Willa from the Bible" (230–231). James Woodress writes that Cather "absorbed [the Bible] so thoroughly that her writing throughout her life is loaded with biblical quotations and allusions" (23). In her essay "Joseph and His Brothers" in *Not Under Forty*, Cather writes that

The Bible countries along the Mediterranean shore were very familiar to most of us in our childhood. Whether we were born in New Hampshire or Virginia or California, Palestine lay behind us. We took it in unconsciously and unthinkingly perhaps, but we could not escape it. It was all about us, in the pictures on the walls, in the songs we sang in Sunday school, in the "opening exercises" at day school, in the talk of the old people, wherever we lived. And it was in our language—fixedly, indelibly. The effect of the King James translation of the Bible upon English prose has been repeated down through the generations, leaving its mark on the minds of all children who had any but the most sluggish emotional nature.

Summarizing, Cather writes further that "the Book of Genesis lies like a faded tapestry deep in the consciousness of almost every individual who is more than forty years of age" (101–102).

Returning to the aforementioned "inheritance," many scholars believe it refers to the Promised Land. In her study of Psalm 47, Jo-Marí Schäder writes that "'our inheritance' and 'the glory of Jacob' (two parallel aspects) refer to the inheritance that Israel has received, namely, the Promised Land" (82). One popular contemporary translation, the New Living Translation, translates 47.4 as follows: "He chose the Promised Land as our inheritance, the proud possession of Jacob's descendants, whom he loves."

To better appreciate the significance of the Promised Land in Psalm 47.4, it is necessary to examine the biblical figure of Jacob—the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham: "And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17.8). Jacob—whose name was later changed to Israel—had twelve sons who became known as the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Cather describes this biblical figure in the following manner: "Jacob, apparently, was the first of Abraham's descendants who had the power of realizing and experiencing God more and more sharply through all the variations of a life incredibly eventful and long" ("Joseph and His Brothers" 107). Jacob and his family settled in Egypt to escape a terrible famine and their descendants lived in slavery for four hundred years until Moses delivered them to the Promised Land.

Against this background, it is worth mentioning that an allusion is made to this Old Testament lawgiver in *My Ántonia*: "The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed" (39). According to Exodus 3.2, "the angel of the Lord appeared unto [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." Moses leads the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land after wandering in the wilderness for forty years. (Moses himself was not allowed to enter the Promised Land after disobeying God's order). The Bible describes this land as a region "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3.17). God would bless the land in many different ways (through herds, crops, towns, and other things) if they obey his commands (Deuteronomy 28). Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites cross the Jordan River and settle in the long-awaited Promised Land.



The theme of the Promised Land—or American Dream—figures prominently in *My Ántonia*. Historian James Truslow Adams coined the term “American Dream” defining it as “a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (404). *My Ántonia* turns out to be “a commentary on the American experience, the American Dream, and the American reality” (Miller 112). Upon arriving in a new country, the Shimerdas encounter challenges that prevent them from achieving their American Dream. Peter Krajiek, an unscrupulous distant relative of Mrs. Shimerda, exploits the Shimerdas by selling his farm to them at a high price. Mr. Shimerda—homesick and filled with despair—kills himself during his first winter in Nebraska. As a result, Ántonia works in the fields. When asked by Jim

if she would be interested in going to a school where there is “a good teacher,” Ántonia replies: “I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (118). In the face of numerous adversities, Ántonia labors hard to support her struggling family.

As a poor immigrant woman, Ántonia’s choices are limited whereas “Jim’s true burden in the new world is unrestricted freedom of movement and choice” (Holmes 340). Sadly, the novel “does not portray, in any meaningful sense, the fulfillment of the American dream. By and large, the dreams of the pioneers lie shattered, their lives broken by the hardness of wilderness life” (Miller 117). Despite not achieving material success, “Ántonia shapes a new American Dream that does not rely on material success yet celebrates the wealth of opportunity in America for each individual to achieve personal goals” (Harvey 52). In addition to the aforementioned challenges, the land where the Shimerdas are staying is potentially fraught with violence and tragedy (Dillman 238). The fact that Mr. Shimerda dies shortly after Christmas illustrates the harsh realities and inherent challenges of settling in a new country. Cultural and linguistic barriers and feelings of uprootedness greatly diminish their prospects for success.

Significantly, this feeling of uprootedness is reflected in Psalm 137. An allusion to this biblical passage comes into view during a



“He fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while.”

Richard Earlom after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Reunion of Jacob and Joseph*, mezzotint by W. H. Egleton. Printed by Fisher, Son & Co., London and Paris, 1846.

conversation between Mrs. Steavens and Jim as briefly noted by Murphy (“Biblical and Religious Dimensions” 80). Describing Larry Donovan’s abandonment of Ántonia in Denver, Mrs. Steavens shares her sadness: “Jimmy, I sat right down on that bank beside her and made lament” (305). Murphy mentions the first verse of Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.” It is worth pointing out that Cather mentions in passing “the tumult of Rome and Babylon” in her essay “148 Charles Street” (64).

Unmarried and pregnant, Ántonia returns to Black Hawk where she once again works in the fields. Mrs. Steavens continues to share her pain to Jim: “I cried like a young thing. I couldn’t help it. I was just about heart-broke” (305). In Psalm 137, people weep and lament over the destruction of Jerusalem. In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and destroyed the temple, which was the spiritual center of Jewish life. As a result, many were deported to Babylonia and had to adapt to a new way of life. Psalm 137.2–4 reads as follows: “We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” Their Babylonian captors ask them to play a song but they are unable to do so in a foreign land. Instead, they are heartbroken and experience homesickness as they remember Zion with tears.



Similarly, Mr. Shimerda is unable to play music as he finds himself in a foreign land. The theme of exile looms large in Cather's fiction. As Laura Winters puts it, "Almost every major Cather character must, at some point, come to terms with the dilemma of exile from a beloved landscape" (11). *Ántonia* says to Jim: "My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. When I beg him for play, he shake his head no" (86). To which Jim insensitively replies: "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home" (86). *Ántonia* defends her father by pointing out her mother's materialistic ambition: "My *maminka* make him come. All the time she say: 'America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.' My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with



After Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Moses Views the Promised Land*, wood engraving by Dalziel Brothers for Dalziel's Bible Gallery. Printed by Camden Press, ca. 1862–81. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

him. . . . But my mama, she want Ambrosch for be rich, with many cattle" (86). Reflecting on Mr. Shimerda's death, Jim says: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country" (97).

Ántonia, too, experiences homesickness one summer day as she sits under the elder tree near the bank of a river: "It makes me homesick, Jimmy, this flower, this smell. . . . We have this flower very much at home, in the old country. It always grew in our yard and my papa had a green bench and a table under the bushes. In summer, when they were in bloom, he used to sit there with this friend that played the trombone" (228). She goes on to say, "My feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you. I ain't never forgot my own country" (230). A similar imagery is conjured up in Psalm 137 as the exiles sit on the banks of a river weeping and remembering their homeland.

In considering the "inheritance" in Psalm 47, it is of interest to note that it has little to do with material wealth. Rather, it has to do with people of diverse backgrounds coming together to celebrate. At first glance, it might appear that the inheritance is reserved for the children of Israel. However, a close look at the entire chapter reveals that the psalmist is calling *all* nations to praise God. In other words, it has a universal scope. Commenting on this biblical reference, John J. Murphy writes: "Grandfather Burden, the patriarch, reads from the Bible, first from Psalm 47, which extends Yahweh's kingdom over all nations" (*The Road Home* 39). Given its relatively brief length, it's worth quoting Psalm 47 in full:

O clap your hands, all ye people; shout
unto God with the voice of triumph.
For the LORD most high is terrible; he is
a great King over all the earth.
He shall subdue the people under us, and
the nations under our feet.
He shall choose our inheritance for us,
the excellency of Jacob whom he
loved. Selah.
God is gone up with a shout, the LORD
with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing
praises unto our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth: sing
ye praises with understanding.
God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth
upon the throne of his holiness.
The princes of the people are gathered
together, even the people of the God of
Abraham: for the shields of the earth
belong unto God: he is greatly exalted.

The remarkable Christmas scene brings into focus a group of people from different nations gathered together celebrating in unison. It is "one of the novel's most evocative representations of how Cather's sympathetic imagination reconciles disparate, individual experiences by transforming them into something communal, something larger than they were" (Shively 57). As Ann Romines explains, the tree "amalgamates the past and present heritage of the people around it; in Jim's memory, it becomes a transcendent symbol of all that a child would like to believe of the world. The tree is the center of an occasion of love, mutual respect, and celebration, during which the little farmhouse seems an enclosed Eden" ("After the Christmas Tree" 63). In a short article published on the National Willa Cather Center website, Romines describes the tree as a "shining, multicultural vision that they all can share" ("The Burdens' Christmas Tree"). In the novel it is decorated with "gingerbread animals, strings of popcorn, and bits of candle which Fuchs had fitted into pasteboard sockets" (79–80). The tree's "real splendors, however, came from the most unlikely place in the world—from Otto's cowboy trunk" (80). The decorations consist of "brilliantly colored paper figures" that were sent to Otto Fuchs by his mother in Austria. In the tree "there were the three kings, gorgeously appareled, and the ox and the ass and the shepherds; there was the Baby in the manger, and a group of angels, singing; there were camels and leopards, held by the black slaves of the three kings" (80). These paper figures are "full of meaning" (84) for everyone as "Jim looks at them with childlike wonderment; Otto sees in them memories of

his mother; Grandmother Burden makes them symbols of her piety; and Mr. Shimerda contrasts their sacred beauty with the ugliness of his dugout” (Shively 57).

One noteworthy detail here is that these characters recall biblical figures in the Nativity Story that reflect socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical diversity. According to the Gospel of Luke, an angel of the Lord announces the birth of Christ not to kings but to the most unlikely group of people at the time, namely shepherds. A shepherd’s occupation was considered to be of low status at the time. The angel says to them: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, *which shall be to all people*. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2.10–12, my emphasis). The phrase “which shall be to all people” is noteworthy in light of the fact that the wise men, or Magi, who come to visit baby Jesus are from the East and bow before him. Similarly, Catholic Mr. Shimerda from Bohemia—just like the wise men who came from a faraway region—is the only one who bows down in front of the Christmas tree holding the figure of baby Jesus. This makes the Protestant Burden family feel uncomfortable at first. It should be kept in mind that Cather situates her novel during a time when there was widespread xenophobia against Roman Catholics (McNall 26). Nevertheless, Mr. Burden quietly says, “The prayers of all good people are good” (85).

It is no accident that Cather makes mention of Psalm 47.4. In doing so, Cather appears to spur her readers to pause and reflect on what it means to live in the Promised Land. Is the Promised Land primarily about “much money, much land”? Or is it about people from diverse parts of the world coming together and celebrating in unison? Does the Promised Land afford the opportunity to be more open to different religious perspectives so that we can all say, “The prayers of all good people are good”? Indeed, immigrants like Mr. Shimerda face numerous difficulties as they live and work within the unfamiliar cultural environment of a new country. At the same time, it allows everyone present to showcase the best of their humanity as they perform acts of hospitality, selflessness, and unconditional love.

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Simple but Not Cheap: Ethelbert Nevin and Cather's "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget"

Timothy Bintrim and Scott Riner

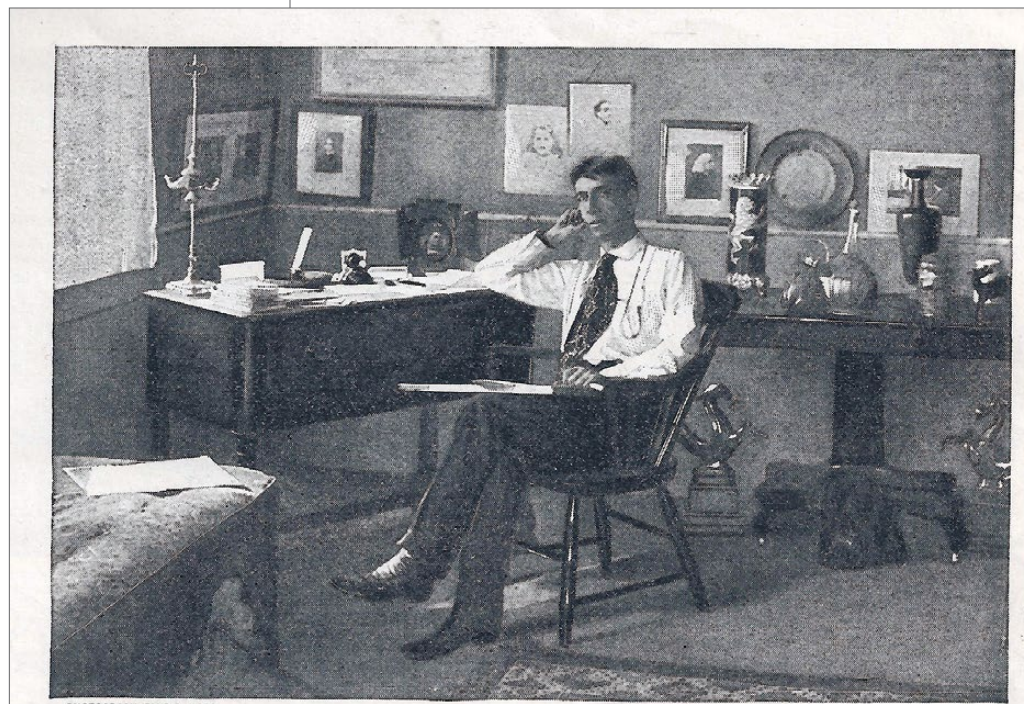
Although Willa Cather counted her friendship with Ethelbert Nevin as one of the highlights of her second year in Pittsburgh (1897–98), James Woodress faulted Nevin for hampering her development as a writer. Ethelbert “as a child had been taught never to be afraid of sentiment,” and to the end of his brief life, he indulged this cheap emotion to excess. In Woodress’s view, Cather’s maudlin short story “Jack-a-Boy,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in March 1901, is proof of Nevin’s “deleterious influence.” While under his spell Cather had not yet learned to “inject sentiment without becoming sentimental,” he complains (149).¹ Instead, following her friend’s example, too often she resorted to a cheap sentimentality that made her discerning readers feel manipulated.

However, at the height of their weekly interactions and just a year before “Jack-a-Boy” appeared—on the last day of March 1900, in fact—there appeared under her byline in *The Pittsburgh Leader* a remarkable poem titled “Grandmither, Think Not I Forget.” Notwithstanding its inauspicious debut in a newspaper, the poem was noticed—appearing as well in *Current Literature* the next month—and for years after was her most-reprinted poem. Evidence suggests it was drafted not that winter in Pittsburgh, but during the previous summer during her vacation in Red Cloud. The point remains that while she was producing sentimental fiction that would sell (in well-paying national magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*), she was also working, at a much slower pace, on poems that enjoyed both popular and critical success. Contemporaneously with its March 31 appearance in the *Leader*, “Grandmither” was published in the April 1900 issue of *The Critic*, on newsstands in late March (Lathrop 64–65). While acknowledging that her fiction of this period was of uneven quality, we part ways with Woodress to stand with two scholars of her poetry,

Bernice Slote and Robert Thacker, who affirm that Nevin’s friendship inspired some of Cather’s best verse.

Slote proposed that Nevin’s death from stroke on February 17, 1901, inspired three elegies in *April Twilights 1903*: “Sleep, Minstrel, Sleep,” “Arcadian Winter,” and “Song” (“Willa Cather and Her First Book,” xx).² The emotions stirred by Nevin’s warm friendship and sudden death, together with her growing love for Isabelle McClung, Thacker credits with fueling her intense poetic creativity between 1898 and 1903 (*Collected Poems*).

Here we argue that Cather’s affiliation with Nevin did not hold her back. To the contrary, his direct style, simple subject matter, valuation of rhythm, contact with his friends who were New York critics, and even the melancholy stories behind his songs were gifts to her as a poet. Specifically, we contend that the germ of “Grandmither, Think Not I Forget” was suggested by American critic Vance Thompson’s notes to “La Pastorella” (“The Shepherdess”), the last of six songs in Nevin’s opus 21, *May in Tuscany* (1895). A versatile critic born in Pittsburgh, Thompson had known Nevin from their



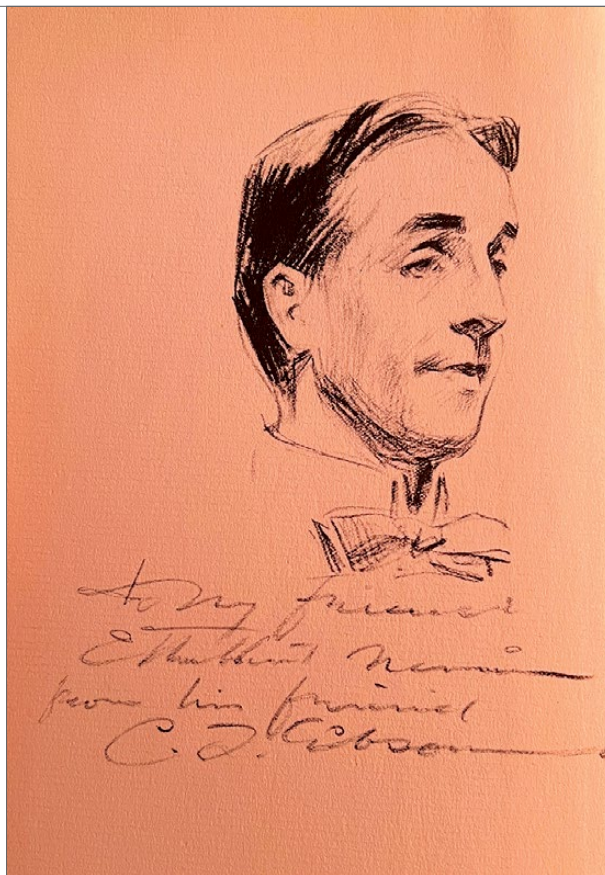
PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARDS

MR. NEVIN IN HIS STUDIO AT WORK ON A COMPOSITION

Ethelbert Nevin in “Queen Anne’s Lodge,” his cottage studio at the family estate in Edgeworth, Pennsylvania. This photograph and others accompanied Cather’s *Ladies’ Home Journal* profile, “The Man Who Wrote ‘Narcissus.’”

student days in Germany. In March 1898, Thompson and his wife, the American dancer Lillian Spencer (who performed under the stage name Madame Severin), collaborated with Nevin and his wife on a pantomime called *Floriane's Dream* that debuted on a Nevin program at the Carnegie Lyceum in New York City (Schwab 94, Howard 301). Thompson wrote the libretto, while Anne Nevin served as business manager. The pantomime was never staged again, but the performance was notable for several reasons. Anne Nevin proved to be an able manager, anticipating the role she would play in managing her husband's legacy after his death. The song that became Nevin's "The Rosary" was first sung that night, and during the same concert, Isadora Duncan, then relatively unknown, danced her interpretation of three of Nevin's *Water Scenes*, including "Narcissus." A quarter century later, in her autobiography *My Life*, Duncan gave herself—not Madame Severin—top billing for the evening, a claim contested by Nevin's biographer Howard (300–305). Carnegie Hall's archived performance records and a brief account of the evening in the *New York Times* tend to support Duncan on this point ("Ethelbert Nevin, Piano," "Review of Carnegie Lyceum Concert").

The extent of Cather's acquaintance with Thompson, who became the music, theater, and art critic for the *Musical Courier* in 1897, has never been determined, but he may have been among the New York drama critics she told Mariel Gere she had met during her time editing the *Home Monthly* (*Complete Letters* no. 0028). Nevin gave her Thompson's notes, which were sometimes reprinted in Nevin's concert programs and given as recitations at concerts, "as the best comment on [the songs in *May in Tuscany*]," and she faithfully reproduced several hundred words of Thompson's synopsis of the Tuscan suite in her review of Nevin's January 12, 1899, homecoming recital at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall (*The World and the Parish*, 535, n. 29; Howard 262).³ Facetiously, she claims in the same review that she had learned not to paint her own "word pictures" of the stories behind music after her mentor "Toby



Charles Dana Gibson's sketch of Nevin ca. 1897–98 was published as the frontispiece to *Ethelbert Nevin* by John Tasker Howard (Crowell, 1935).

Rex" (Dr. Julius Tyndale) accused her of trying "to [turn] musical compositions into literal pictures, and for caring more for the picture than for the composition in itself."⁴ The portion of the notes that are Nevin's and that which are Thompson's is open to question. Reprinting the notes as part of his 1913 *The Life of Ethelbert Nevin*, Thompson claimed he had transcribed the composer's "self-revelation" as he played the songs and narrated the "emotional impulses that lay behind" them (169), but their style matches Thompson's clipped, telegraphic diction in his libretto for *Floriane's Dream*.⁵ Or it may be that Nevin and Thompson, having known each other for so long, had developed the hybridized voice of collaborators.

In January 1897, Cather may well have corresponded with Thompson to confirm that she could borrow his notes to *May in Tuscany* so extensively. Likely she would have welcomed the opportunity to correspond with a New York critic of several arts, one who like herself aspired to create as well as critique literature.

A decade older than Cather, Thompson led a life she may have envied. Son of a Pittsburgh clergyman, he earned his undergraduate degree at Princeton, where he was class poet, then sailed for Germany. At Heidelberg and Jena, he acquired a thorough familiarity with living Continental authors, and, in the words of biographer Arthur Schwab (in his biography of Thompson's friend James Gibbons Huneker), "returned to America with a Ph.D., yellow gloves, long paddock coats . . . and a monocle" (94). Throughout the 1890s, when Thompson and Nevin lived abroad, they were often together; for example, Thompson makes clear that he attended Nevin's lecture-recitals on the works of Wagner in Paris during the 1892 season (Thompson 128; Howard 178). Indeed, reviewing Thompson's biography of Nevin in *The Bookman*, a young Alfred A. Knopf remarked that "almost all his life, [Thompson] knew Ethelbert Nevin intimately" (682–683). Upon returning to New York in 1897, Thompson landed a choice position writing musical, dramatic, and literary criticism for the New York *Commercial Advertiser*.⁶ In this paper and other venues, he became one



of the earliest American advocates and explicators of Continental avant-garde dramatists and poets, especially the French Symbolist poets; in 1900, Thompson published *French Portraits: Being Appreciations of the Writers of Young France* with Richard Badger Press, the same house that would pick up Cather's *April Twilights* three years later.⁷

Cather's February 1898 *Courier* review of Nevin's homecoming concert focuses on what she calls "the latest and best thing he has published," his *May in Tuscany* suite, which she may have heard entire for the first time at the January 12 concert. One of the songs in this cycle, "La Pastorella" or "The Shepherdess," we think gave Cather the idea for what may be her own best poem. According to Thompson, the song was inspired by an ostracized shepherdess whom Ethelbert and Anne Nevin had befriended during the summer of

1896 in a small, traditional village in the Montepiano region of central Italy. That June, Ethelbert and Anne left the sweltering heat of Florence and traveled five hours by mule cart with their two small children, seeking surroundings more conducive to Ethelbert's work. He set up his piano in a converted donkey stable in the mountain village (Thompson 167).⁸ Through the barred window of this rustic studio, Nevin observed the original of "La Pastorella."

As described in Thompson's notes, this young woman anticipates several of Cather's pastoral heroines, but especially *Antonia* Shimerda:

She was a little shepherdess—a woman like a field of clover. It was in Montepiano, in the Apennines. Her soldier lover had been sent away [to Ethiopia] to fight King Menelik. She mourned for the lover whom she had loved too well. She wept at times because she could not go to the priest. She knew that her soul was lost for love's sake and she mourned. Her sheep strayed on the hillside; her staff lay at her feet unheeded; with her face on her knees she thought of her lover; of Menelik's fierce men, and thinking of her lost soul she shuddered and cried aloud. On the grey hillside.

Thompson's *The Life of Ethelbert Nevin* gives more of the backstory of the outcast maiden—in the composer's voice:



Vance Thompson and friend, 1909. Dartmouth College Library. As published in *James Gibbons Huneker: Critic of the Seven Arts* (Stanford University Press, 1963) by Arnold T. Schwab.

"Through the window of my music room I could see the little maid, as she sat on the hillside, guarding her sheep and waiting for her lover to return. In the village no one spoke to her and the peasants mocked her. My wife and I did what we could for her; but what could we do? Her gratitude was touching. One day she came and told us that two lambs had been born at dawn, and asked if she might name them after our little children.

"It is strange how people pass like that, just on the edge of one's life . . . and are seen no more; and afterwards through the years one wonders, wonders why they should have appealed to one with so imperative a voice. They become in a way a part of one's inner life—like the nightingale that sang in my neighbor's garden." (170–71)

In *My Antonia*, of course, Cather's narrator evokes a Bohemian girl last seen in adolescence who comes "to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (xi–xii); to Jim, *Antonia* becomes part of his inner life, "the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women's faces, at the very bottom of my memory" (314).

But long before she contemplated *Antonia*, Cather created in "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget" a miniature drama as simple and poignant as the story of Nevin's shepherdess: a country girl had heeded the seductive song of her lover and, as a consequence, was in trouble. Whether this trouble is unplanned pregnancy, adultery, or loss of respect in her community is not clear; only that the speaker wishes to step out of her tormented self (perhaps by dying) and "creep in an' rest awhile" by her beloved grandmother, who long ago comforted her when she was a child troubled by a bad dream. That she is speaking directly to her grandmother is signaled by quotation marks in the poem's title. The speaker is a mountain girl of Irish ancestry, the sort of articulate but unlettered maiden Willa Cather may have become had she been born a generation earlier to her sheep farming family in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“Grandmither, Think Not I Forget”

Grandmither, think not I forget, when I come back to town, *a*
An' wander the old ways again an' tread them up an' down. *a*
I never smell the clover bloom, nor see the swallows pass, *b*
Without I mind how good ye were unto a little lass. *b*
I never hear the winter rain a-pelting all night through, *c*
Without I think and mind me of how cold it falls on you. *c*
And if I come not often to your bed beneath the thyme, *d*
Mayhap 'tis that I'd change wi' ye, and gie my bed for thine, *d*
Would like to sleep in thine. *d*

I never hear the summer winds among the roses blow, *e*
Without I wonder why it was ye loved the lassie so. *e*
Ye gave me cakes and lollipops and pretty toys a score,— *f*
I never thought I should come back and ask ye now for more. *f*
Grandmither, gie me your still, white hands, that lie upon your breast, *g*
For mine do beat the dark all night and never find me rest; *g*
They grope among the shadows an' they beat the cold black air, *h*
They go seekin' in the darkness, an' they never find him there, *h*
An' they never find him there. *h*

Grandmither, gie me your sightless eyes, that I may never see *i*
His own a-burnin' full o' love that must not shine for me. *i*
Grandmither, gie me your peaceful lips, white as the kirkyard snow, *j*
For mine be red wi' burnin' thirst, an' he must never know. *j*
Grandmither, gie me your clay-stopped ears, that I may never hear *k*
My lad a-singin' in the night when I am sick wi' fear; *k*
A-singin' when the moonlight over a' the land is white— *l*
Aw God! I'll up an' go to him a-singin' in the night, *l*
A-callin' in the night. *l*

Grandmither, gie me your clay-cold heart that has forgot to ache, *m*
For mine be fire within my breast and yet it cannot break. *m*
It beats an' throbs forever for the things that must not be,— *n*
An' can ye not let me creep in an' rest awhile by ye? *n*
A little lass afeard o' dark slept by ye years ago— *o*
Ah, she has found what night can hold 'twixt sunset an' the dawn! *o*
So when I plant the rose an' rue above your grave for ye, *n*
Ye'll know it's under rue an' rose that I would like to be, *n*
That I would like to be. *n*



The speaker's predicament is understated—not exaggerated or sentimentalized. Key to the poem's success is the speaker's carefully rendered dialect, reinforced by its regular meter. Beneath this humble lament pulses an exacting, regular rhythm that scans as four octaves of iambic hexameter. Study of ancient poetry at the University of Nebraska had taught her that rhyming couplets had been the convention of elegiac poems since the Roman classical era; the same meter also characterizes English Renaissance pastoral lyrics such as Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which her "Grandmither" poem seems to take as its implied intertext. Around 1600, Raleigh's worldly Nymph famously clapped back at Christopher Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd*, arguing that—for a shepherdess—"A [lover's] honey tongue, a heart of gall, / is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall." But Cather's human protagonist is less sure of her resolve than is Raleigh's semi-divine Nymph. Cather's maid has already yielded to her lover's seductive song and "found what night can hold 'twixt sunset an' the dawn!" Her humanity dooms her to repeat the error.

Each stanza, built of four rhyming couplets, concludes with a truncated ninth line, echoing the eighth. Within this framework, the poem has four movements, not strictly adhering to the stanzas' borders but aligned instead with patterns of repetition. Within the first movement of eleven lines, the maiden assures her grandmother that she has not forgotten her, only avoided the graveyard because she is sorely tempted to die and remain there. Lines 3–11 establish a regular grammatical pattern: a memorial action is described in a main clause with the verb in the negative. Each sentence is qualified by a prepositional phrase initiated by "without" (once varied as "mayhap"), a first-person pronoun, and a verb of commemoration in the subjunctive mood—the subjunctive being a relic of Latin used to express wishes or states contrary to fact. Isolating just the main verbs and the prepositional

phrases in the subjunctive (italicized below for emphasis) helps elucidate the pattern:

I never smell . . .	<i>b</i>
<i>Without I mind . . .</i>	<i>b</i>
I never hear . . .	<i>c</i>
<i>Without I think . . .</i>	<i>c</i>
And if I come not . . .	<i>d</i>
<i>Mayhap 'tis that I'd change wi' ye, and gie my bed for thine,</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>Would like to sleep in thine.</i>	<i>d</i>
I never hear . . .	<i>e</i>
<i>Without I wonder . . .</i>	<i>e</i>

In four variations, the speaker hearkens back to a lost state of innocence, as if pleading, "If only I had not . . ." The first movement ends with two hinge lines: line 12 continuing the pattern and line 13 acknowledging the many indulgences given the speaker as a young girl (as Cather herself had been the eldest daughter of a loving extended family)—"I never thought I should come back and ask ye now for more." This couplet prepares for a second movement, cataloging the merciful, blunted senses of the dead: "still, white hands," "sightless eyes," "peaceful lips," "clay-stopped ears," "clay-cold heart," which the speaker envies in her fevered state of heartsickness (lines 14–24).

The second movement is interrupted—mid-thought—by the siren call of her lover. And she *will* meet him again. Hearing his song, she must "up an' go to him a-singin' in the night" (line 26)—consequences be damned. Her lack of volition bespeaks her current dilemma.

The final movement of six lines (31–36) petitions the grandmother for the ultimate favor: to share her deathbed. The poem closes with a richly evocative antimetabole—a special case of chiasmus, or "crossing," in which words are repeated in reverse order. In this instance, "Rose an' rue" (line 34) are reversed as "rue an' rose" (line 35). Visually, this crossing

may suggest the grandmother's hands joined in prayer across her chest, placed there by the women attending her after death, but also seemingly alludes to the intertwined graveside rose and briar of "Sir Patrick Spens," "Barbara Allen," and other border ballads about mortal love. Like *My Antonia*, Cather's masterpiece of long-form fiction, the poem disguises its subtle craftsmanship by appearing to be a spontaneous outpouring of emotion. It sounds simple enough, but effects like this do not come cheap.



Rachel Elizabeth Seibert Boak's grave in Red Cloud.
Photo by Tracy Sanford Tucker.



Cather visiting the "Old Sibert Graveyard" in 1896. Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.

Bernice Slote locates the inspiration for the poem in the steadfast love of Cather's own maternal grandmother, Rachel Elizabeth Seibert Boak, who accompanied the family from Virginia to Nebraska, but the poem's setting takes liberties with Rachel Boak's burial place. The descriptions of weather and vegetation seem to fit the Sibert graveyard in Gore, Virginia, better than they describe Grandmother Boak's actual resting place in the Red Cloud Cemetery. As we know from a photograph inscribed in what looks to be Cather's own hand, less than five years before she published "Grandmither," Cather had revisited "the old Sibert graveyard" during her October 1896 bicycle trip to the Gore area.

Further inferences that "Grandmither" is set near Virginia's Blue Ridge, not Nebraska's Divide, can be made by comparing it to Cather's later dialect poem, "Poor Marty," written by early 1931 and placed in counterpoint to "Grandmither," as the last poem in the 1933 edition of *April Twilights*.⁹

"Poor Marty," like so many Cather characters named Martha, Margie, or Marjorie, was modeled on Marjorie Anderson, the "simpleminded" mountain girl who emigrated with the Cather family from Virginia and served faithfully in their Nebraska homes until her death in 1924. Thus, the last two versions of *April Twilights* published during Cather's lifetime are in effect framed by two dialect poems (occurring second and second-to-last) about women beloved to her who are buried in the same plot of the Red Cloud Cemetery—although both tributes and their imagined resting places are moved to Virginia. Publishing "Poor Marty" in the May 1931 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and then including it in subsequent gatherings of *April Twilights and Other Poems*, Cather included an explanatory note to clarify that these servants in "Old Virginia" were not enslaved Blacks, but white servants. The note reads, "A lament for Martha, the old kitchenmaid, by her fellow servant, the stableman. The servants are not Negroes, but 'poor whites' (Old Virginia)" (*April Twilights and Other Poems* 2013, 143). Both dialect poems take place in an imagined time in which her own family had not pulled up stakes and gone to Nebraska.

If "Poor Marty" departs from the particulars of the real Marjorie Anderson's biography to allow the protagonist to die in Fairfax County, Virginia, so may "Grandmither" be set in the more settled country near Gore, with its Eastern barn swallows (not



Marjorie Anderson and Elsie Cather, ca. 1894.

Western cliff swallows) that return on the same date each spring, its perfume of purple or white clover, rather than the smell of tallgrass prairie or newfangled alfalfa, and graves covered by "kirkyard snow" in winter whose stone walls, in summer, enclose memorial plantings of thyme, roses, and rue—not tall red grass scarcely separated from agricultural fields by wire fences as in *O Pioneers!* and "Neighbour Rosicky."

Before we fit the next piece of our argument, linking "Grandmither" to Ethelbert Nevin's own musical experiments in dialect verse, it may be useful to take a closer look at the provenance of Cather's poem. Its placement second (after "Dedicatory") in *April Twilights* 1903 is suitable because, Bernice Slote points out, it was the first poem to appear in "a magazine outside Cather's editorial interests"; that

is, outside a magazine she herself edited (xix). One of her last letters to her brother Roscoe establishes that the poem was in manuscript in August or September 1899, when she took leave from the *Pittsburgh Leader* to vacation in Red Cloud. In this letter, she asked Roscoe if he remembered "that hot afternoon in 'the rose bower' when I first read 'Grandmither' to you" (*Selected Letters* 635). After she read the poem to Roscoe in her wallpapered bedroom, she reminds him, he confirmed her ambition to become an artist.

Although Cather crafted "Grandmither" (and much later "Poor Marty") in an old world dialect of her own ancestors, we may not be far off in hearing in both poems an echo of African American voices. Just weeks before the probable date of composition of "Grandmither," Cather had heard in concert Nevin's "At Home (A June Night in Washington)," a piano piece featuring a vocal interlude evoking African American men calling at dusk to their lovers waiting around a bend of the Potomac River. She reviewed this concert at Pittsburgh's Schenley Hotel using her well-known pseudonym "Sibert," but this review in the *Pittsburgh Leader* has never been reprinted although it can be found in the papers of Bernice Slote ("Nevin's New Song Cycle"). Thacker observes that "Dialects of various ethnic groups were very popular in the prose, poetry, and drama of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries" (*Collected Poems*). While Cather may have emulated any of the then-popular versifiers who made exclusive use of dialect, she also had the immediate example



of Nevin, who during his last years, became increasingly fond of African and African American music. For friends at Dartmouth College, he had adapted a portion of Richard Hovey's vernacular poem, "A June Night in Washington" as "My Love's Waitin'" (1898), and drew from the same Hovey verse again the next year (1899) in his "At Home (A June Night in Washington)." Cather makes a passing positive reference to the former song, "My Love's Waitin,'" in her much-cited profile "An Evening at Vineacre," and demonstrates her familiarity with the later piece, "At Home (A June Night in Washington)," in her March 28, 1900, review of the Schenley Hotel recital noted above. To Cather, "My Love's Waitin'" exemplified Nevin's humility and sincerity, his refusal, despite his elaborate European education as a concert pianist, to either show off his learning or put on airs:

He has no affectations; he is not afraid of simplicity, of directness. . . . To everything he writes, however slight, that rare grace and distinction clings, an aroma of poetry . . . an exhalation of roses and nightingale notes and southern nights. Take for instance, the little Negro melody that he did for the Dartmouth College boys; if anyone else had written it, it would have been cheap. Is it? Try it and see! Even in his children's songs there is the same grace and tenderness. What he touches he dignifies. (*The World and the Parish* 633–34)

Six months later, eulogizing her friend in the *Nebraska State Journal*, she assessed his musical gifts in much the same fashion, but in the past tense:

The chief characteristics of his music are spontaneous melodies . . . remarkable simplicity combined with the most nervous and highly articulate chromatic treatment, unqualified and undisguised sentiment and an utter lack of pedantic affectation. . . . He frequently chose themes that in the hands of any other man might have been trivial, but which were saved from cheapness by the refined and exquisite treatment which he gave to everything he touched. . . . His work is as fragile as it is exquisite, and the charge of lightness which has been made against it was not altogether unjust, but time has sometimes been very tender with those exquisite and fragile things. . . . The most unpretentious art is sometimes the most perfect. . . . (*The World and the Parish* 641)

MIGHTY LAK' A ROSE

By
Ethelbert Nevin.

SONG
 * 30026 HIGH VOICE in A. 50
 * 30027 MEDIUM VOICE in G. 50
 * 30028 LOW VOICE in F. 50
 * 30264 DUET, SOPRANO and ALTO. 50

PIANO
 * 30029 III TRANSCRIPTION (Cady's Davie) 50
 * 30179 III½ WALTZ (Frank W. McKee) 65
 * 30087 III PIANO SOLO (William M. Felton) 35

PART SONGS
 * 35054 SCHOOL CHORUS, TWO-PART, S.A. 10
 * 35052 SCHOOL CHORUS, S.A.B. (Melody in Alto) 15
 * 35094 MIXED VOICES 10
 * 35145 WOMEN'S VOICES, FOUR-PART, S.S.A.A. 12
 * 35183 WOMEN'S VOICES, THREE-PART, S.S.A. 10
 * 35285 MEN'S VOICES 10

VIOLIN AND PIANO
 * 30095 CONCERT ARRANGEMENT (Michael Bannet) 50
 * 30096 FIRST POSITION (Neil Therpe) 50

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Sheet music of Nevin's posthumous bestseller "Mighty Lak' a Rose," based on an African American dialect poem by Frank Lebby Stanton.



John Tasker Howard could not determine from missive and manuscript evidence exactly when in 1898 the Dartmouth College song was published (380), but Cather's recommendation in her "Passing Show" column suggests that "My Love's Waitin'" must have been available in music stores in Pittsburgh as well as Lincoln before she left for the West in mid-June 1899 ("An Evening at Vineacre").

Nevin's interest in African American Vernacular English would eventually produce an "African Love Song" and an art song, "Mighty Lak' a Rose," that were found on his desk when he died in February 1901. Published posthumously, the latter outsold all of his works but "Narcissus" and provided his young family with financial security they did not enjoy during his lifetime.

"Mighty Lak' a Rose" put to music a newspaper verse by Frank Lebby Stanton, a white poet from Atlanta who was equally adept at imitating the speech of poor Black or white Georgians. The lyrics—praising the rose-like beauty of an as-yet-unnamed baby boy—have been adapted by singers of varied genders and ethnicities. It was famously sung by the great Paul Robeson, but it was also recorded by artists as various as Lillian Nordica, Geraldine Farrar, Bing Crosby, and Frank Sinatra.

In her highly fictionalized essay "When I Knew Stephen Crane," signed with the pseudonym Henry Nicklemann in the *Pittsburgh Library*, Cather ascribed to the author of *The Red Badge of Courage* her own "double literary life" as a literary artist and newswoman (Woodress 98–99, Downs 80). She imagined Crane working incessantly, "writing in the first place the matter that pleased himself, and doing it very slowly; in the second place, any sort of stuff that would sell" (*Library* June 23, 1900, p. 17–18; *The World and the Parish* 776). From her earliest days in Pittsburgh, she was doing just that: hastily writing what she thought would sell to national publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Everybody's*, the *New England Magazine*, even magazines she disparaged such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, meanwhile laboring for months or even years over stories such as "Paul's Case" and poems such as "Grandmither." Even in 1899 she knew the difference. "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget" though classified

as a minor work by its length, is an exquisite lyric grounded in classical tradition and refined to an appearance of spontaneous speech. Informed by the aesthetic of her great friend, Ethelbert Nevin, it is a work that is simple, but anything but cheap.

NOTES

1. Nevin's popular "Narcissus," which the composer came to loathe, did seem to mesmerize passersby, as Nevin himself observed when the two servant girls in his Boston home left their washing to listen in the doorway, open-mouthed, as he played an early version on his workroom piano (Howard 156). Following his death, Cather eulogized Nevin in her elegy "Lament for Marsyas," a satyr so gifted that when he challenged Apollo to a music contest, Marsyas won, only to be flayed alive for besting the god. For more about this poem, see Bintrim, "Cather's 'Rosary' and Nevin's Legacy in *April Twilights* (1903)."

2. To the three elegies Slote identifies, we would add "I Have No House for Love to Shelter Him," but that is an argument for another day.

3. William Curtin cut Thompson's notes from the version of Cather's review printed in *The World and the Parish*, but the full review may be downloaded from the *Nebraska Newspapers* database at nebnewspapers.unl.edu. One may also find Thompson's notes reprinted in Howard's expanded 1935 biography, *Ethelbert Nevin*.

4. Cather's usual practice was to recycle her major *Leader* reviews for the Lincoln papers the week following, but in this in case, the delay was unusual: her review of Nevin's January 12 concert did not appear in the *Lincoln Courier* until February 5, 1898, although the review itself refers to the concert "last week." Her review seems to have been held over to coincide with an unsigned, favorable review of a recital by pianist Edith M. (Doolittle) Jones, the wife of the *Nebraska State Journal's* managing editor, Will Owen Jones, that appeared in the "Musical Mention" department in the same number of the *Courier* ("Jones, Will Owen"). Played at the University of Nebraska Chapel the previous Tuesday, February 1, Mrs. Jones's recital included selections from Nevin's *In Arcady* suite ("Musical Mention" 7). Though Cather's account of Nevin's homecoming concert, placed a few pages earlier, was by then stale news, the pairing of the reviews shows the nationwide appeal of Nevin's works.

5. Cather's avowal is certainly facetious because in "An Evening at Vineacre" published just six months later, she imitated Thompson by constructing her own interpretations of the four songs in Nevin's suite *A Day in Venice* (*The World and the Parish* 631). She must have been delighted when the Nevins approved of her word pictures (Anne framed and annotated her copy of "An Evening at Vineacre" that is now part of the Nevin Collection at University of Pittsburgh's Center for American Music), and Vance Thompson subsequently included her interpretations in *The Life of Ethelbert Nevin* (1913). We are unaware if Nevin included Cather's word pictures in later concert programs or if they were recited at concerts.

6. Because Thompson and his friends and fellow critics James Huneker and Rupert Hughes contributed to many New York papers and magazines, it is possible that one of them suggested Cather be hired by the *New York Sun* as substitute theater reviewer for the second week of February 1898. Between 1895 and 1899, with two illustrators, Huneker and Thompson produced the "daring" satirical little magazine, *M'lle New York*, that did much to advance awareness of contemporary European writers in America, while railing against censors and lambasting philistines. During the magazine's heyday, Thompson and Huneker were recognized as two of the most original, entertaining, and versatile critics of the several arts, a fact not lost on the young H. L. Mencken, who devoured each of the nine original issues of *M'lle New York* (Schwab 99, 101). Like Thompson, Huneker was prolific: in addition to his post on the *Musical Courier*, Huneker earned an exorbitant salary from the *New York Morning Advertiser* (the morning edition of Thompson's employer), and also contributed to *Town Topics* and *Vanity Fair* (102). Huneker admitted in his autobiography *Steeplejack* that he often "ran three horses abreast" in multiple publications to cover his alimony and his bar tab. Compared with the self-taught Huneker, who for a time aspired to being a concert pianist, Thompson had a conventional preparation for a life reviewing literature and the sister arts. Huneker's biographer, Arnold T. Schwab, described Thompson as "an insatiably curious student of eccentricities and a practitioner of gorgeous prose" who shared Huneker's delight at outraging moralists and his friend's "tremendous capacity for beer" (94). In the Historical Essay to the Scholarly Edition of *The Song of the Lark*, Ann Moseley has argued that Huneker was Cather's chief prototype for the beer prince Fred Ottenburg; correspondence preserved by both Olive Fremstad and Huneker establishes beyond a doubt that the two had a romantic liaison at Bayreuth in 1896. Moseley could not determine if Cather conversed or corresponded with Huneker, but Cather avidly read his criticism (see especially Moseley's notes 12 and 13 to the Historical Essay, pp. 601–602). Similarly, we have not been able to place Cather in the same room as Thompson, but their free use of each other's word pictures confirms at the least a mutual admiration between a versatile critic in New York and his counterpart in Pittsburgh and Lincoln.

7. Thompson's reputation was sullied in later years by archival scholar Bruce Morrisette's demonstration that he had shamelessly plagiarized the Mallarmé chapter in *French Portraits* and several articles in *M'lle New York* from French author T  odor de Wyzewa.

8. In "The Man Who Wrote 'Narcissus,'" Cather identifies the Tuscan village as "Montepulciano, in the Apenines [sic], where [Nevin] had his piano sent up from Florence, and used a donkey stable for a music-room."

9. After its 1931 first publication, "Poor Marty" became the last poem in *April Twilights and Other Poems* in Knopf's 1933 reissue of that book. Owing to its 1931 first publication date, it had been in the final position in the 1933 issue of *April Twilights and Other Poems* by Knopf, and it stayed in that position in a 1951 reissue. When Cather



did the 1937 collected edition of her works, “Poor Marty” was moved to the penultimate position with “Going Home” the last poem in that collection’s *April Twilights*. The bookending of the 1933 and 1951 issues with two poems in dialect may be more convenience than design, however, as textual editor Kari Ronning reasons that by placing “Poor Marty” near the end of the new issue in 1933 and subsequent printings, the plates of the earlier volume would not need to be broken up. Like “Grandmither,” “Poor Marty” was often reprinted: Thacker calls it Cather’s “major late poem” (*April Twilights and Other Poems* 18). Given the reception of these two verses, we may regret that Cather did not publish more vernacular poetry. Among her other dialect poems are “Ah Lie Me Dead in the Sunrise Land” (1893), “Broncho Bill’s Valedictory” (1900), and “The Swedish Mother” (1923) (*April Twilights and Other Poems* 28, 50–52, 126–28).

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The Jeanne A. Shaffer Collection

Many in the Cather community will remember Jeanne Shaffer, a graduate of Duquesne University and a founding member of the Pittsburgh Cather Circle. A Cather scholar in her own right, Shaffer wrote the preface for Kathleen D. Byrne and Richard C. Snyder's *Chrysalis: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh 1896–1906*. Shaffer was also a crucial collaborator for others with an interest in Willa Cather's decade in Pittsburgh; always willing to make introductions and inquiries, Shaffer became an important link to Cather sites and acquaintances in Pittsburgh in the days before the internet allowed for instant connection. Shaffer passed away in 2012.

In 2021, Shaffer's large Cather collection was delivered to the National Willa Cather Center's archives. Physically, the bulk of the collection is books: Willa Cather's own writings, of course, but also numerous volumes of biography, criticism, and scholarship, totaling nearly one hundred. Additionally, Shaffer's collection included several nice issues of periodicals that published Cather's work: *The Smart Set* featuring "Her Boss" and "Coming, Eden Bower!"; *Atlantic Monthly* with "Poor Marty" and *Atlantic* with "A Chance Meeting"; and *The Borzoi* 1920, which features Cather's "On the Art of Fiction."

Through close proximity and a shared love of Willa Cather, Shaffer became good friends with Helen Cather Southwick over the years, and Southwick gifted Shaffer with a number of Cather objects and photos. The Shaffer collection includes, as a result, three small framed photographs of Cather and a copper printer's



plate for a fourth Cather photograph, labeled as "Willa Cather, author of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*" and bearing Alfred A. Knopf's imprint. Other images, including a signed photo by Lucia Woods, date to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial era and demonstrate Shaffer's long involvement with Cather studies and our organization.

The collection also includes a pressboard filing box, labeled "Business Papers – W.S.C." in Cather's handwriting. Within the box were two documents detailing value and actions taken on behalf of Trust #2275, Union Trust Company, addressed to Willa Cather in care of her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. Cather was unhappy with the performance of this

investment and wrote to her brother Roscoe several times about it, finally asking in 1939, "Can you, as a banker, tell me any way to get my money out of this trust?"

As we have processed this collection, however, it's been a pleasant surprise to sort through the many boxes of correspondence, memorabilia, and notes that Shaffer kept over the years; through these supporting documents, a reader can see the burgeoning scholarly interest in Cather's life in Pittsburgh. Shaffer read early drafts of research, shared photos and historical documents, and assisted with exhibit development on the subject. Shaffer retained the correspondence between Kathleen Byrne and Cather's students, who had shared their recollections of Willa Cather, the high school teacher, for Byrne's and Snyder's book. Shaffer also knew Robert and Betty Mertz, the owners of 1180 Murray Hill Avenue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood, and facilitated many scholarly visits to the small attic room where Willa Cather wrote while she lived with the McClung family.

We're very grateful to the Shaffer family for their work in collecting and transporting the Jeanne A. Shaffer Collection to Red Cloud, and for their generosity in continuing to make Jeanne's work available to the Cather community. If you'd like to know more about the Shaffer Collection or arrange to use the collection, please contact archivist Tracy Tucker at ttucker@willacather.org for an appointment.

Tracy Sanford Tucker



Antonette Willa Skupa Turner: “I Am the Granddaughter of Antonia”

“My name is Antonette. Willa. Skupa. Turner. And I am the granddaughter of Antonia.”

She started all of her talks with this sentence, it seemed. This sentence, with its slow, careful enunciation, is our first indelible memory of her, a small lady with a big laugh and a bigger smile. It always seems a bit silly when authors describe their characters as having eyes that twinkled, but this woman’s eyes *did* twinkle, and there was something magical when she stood before a crowd, which she did often over the last sixty years, sharing her recollections of her grandmother, Anna Sadilek Pavelka—the woman who would be known the world over as Antonia.

In Cather’s novel *My Antonia*, we don’t learn Antonia’s story directly; instead, it’s told through Jim Burden’s words, and in turn we hear Jim’s story from an unnamed friend who shares his small-town pedigree and his appreciation for the vivacious Antonia. The two friends call their sharing “a kind of freemasonry.” Cather’s anonymous narrator believes Jim knows Antonia much better than she, and, as a result, Jim’s memories of Antonia form the narrative of the novel. Tracy knew Antonette better than Daryl, but we agree with Cather that some people are so important it takes two narrators to remember them properly.

When we sat down with Antonette for three days of conversation in December 2016 and January 2017, we too shared the sort of freemasonry that Cather describes in that opening; our connection wasn’t growing up in the same small town, but instead the stories and language of the novel that Willa Cather had given to us, and we believe, like Cather’s narrator, that Antonette and her memories could give us the essence of Anna. She did that, and more; as we wrote at the time, we discovered that “Antonette is a natural teacher, a raconteur of public history, a family historian, a lively spokesperson for Czech culture, a warm hostess, a deeply religious person with a gift for spontaneous prayer, and more than anything else a storyteller from a long line of storytellers.” (See the Winter 2018 issue of this publication.)

Antonette Willa Skupa was born on the farm near Campbell, to Julia Pavelka and her husband Johnny Skupa on June 9, 1920. Antonette never met Willa Cather, but as she grew, her mother’s stories were full of the famous Nebraska author who gave Antonette her coral beads, the woman who had made them all famous. They still spoke Czech at home, and Antonette

started school without a word of English; when she spoke of her grandmother, her recollections were sprinkled with Czech, like *posypka* over *kolače*. In 1943 Antonette married Carroll Turner, of Bladen; their engagement party was held at the home of Anna Pavelka. The war years brought Antonette and Anna closer than ever. In 1950 and 1951, celebrated *Life* magazine photographer David Scherman arrived in Webster County, focusing his attention on Willa Cather but also revealing the identity of Antonia to the entire country with a lively portrait of Anna sporting the cameo pin Willa Cather had given her. Antonette remembered this visit, how it galvanized her interest in her grandmother’s story. When she shared her stories with groups, Antonette always wore the prized pin.



On August 13, 2021, Antonette died in McCook, Nebraska. She had gone to live in McCook to be nearer her daughter Alana and other family in the fall of 2019. It was hard to realize that we wouldn’t have Antonette dropping by the National Willa Cather Center to say hello, or that we wouldn’t run into her at the café.

In Bladen, Antonette had stayed in the home she and Carroll had shared, with her good friend Geneva Lewis just down the street in G. P. and Myrtle Cather’s old house. When Geneva died within a few weeks of Antonette’s move to McCook, we recalled that during our 2017 visit, the two women spoke several times a day; they read the papers and the *Willa Cather Review* together, got lunch, ran errands. Antonette without Geneva—particularly at the height of Covid—was inconceivable.

On June 9, 2020, we missed celebrating Antonette’s 100th birthday together, something we had looked forward to since we concluded the 2018 *My Antonia* celebrations. Though much was shuttered at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tracy was glad to talk with Antonette on the phone and hear that she was as busy as ever in her new place—joining clubs and getting to see a lot of her family, even if the visits were through a glass door. She was still making new friends and telling them about her grandmother. It was comforting to know that she had others around. Antonette did love a gathering!

Antonette’s death gave us pause. In a moment when the entire world was awash in the loss and grief of a global pandemic, her passing felt intimately painful, sending us back to those



2017 conversations. We reflected and reconsidered how Antonette would be remembered—how she would *want* to be remembered. We found ourselves celebrating her extraordinary life in the same way she had celebrated her grandmother's: through memory.

We remember just how often our conversations—and Antonette's memories of her grandmother—were set around a table. So many times it was around a table at Spring Conference, but when we met with Antonette for the 2018 story, we gathered around her kitchen and dining room tables. She had filled the dining room table with her scrapbooks of clippings and photos of her speaking engagements, interviews, posters, awards—memories of a different order—and reserved the small kitchen table for talking. Antonette had been involved

with the Cather community for much longer than either of us, and her clippings and photos and stories filled in gaps for us from those earlier days of Cather happenings. But Antonette's memories of the people and their relationships and motivations—that's what gave them life.

To talk with Antonette was to do some of the memory work necessary to understand the collections at the National Willa Cather Center, an added benefit that we honestly didn't expect when we took on the project. But that sense of personal context—the kind of round-the-kitchen-table talk that gave Antonette her energy—is what audiences picked up on. Antonette made you feel like an insider—or she made us feel that way, at least.

Tracy remembers Antonette always in a crowd. If you didn't know where she was, you looked for a small crowd, and that's where she would be, talking and laughing and selfie-ing and hugging. When I first met Antonette, I was supposed to photograph her with the first winner of the Antonette Willa Skupa Turner scholarship, an award that she had endowed. I'm not sure I ever got that photo. And that scene would be repeated at every conference, every group tour. If I asked Antonette to join my group, it was no longer my group—she could captivate an audience like no one I ever met.

Daryl remembers meeting Antonette sitting by herself at one of those community center lunches at a Spring Conference. There



she was, all by herself! I suspect she had finally found a quiet moment after a long morning, and then I showed up. I said something inane like, “Are you really Anna's granddaughter?” Her eyes really did twinkle, and she handed me one of her business cards. After her contact information, the card announced, *Granddaughter of “My Antonia.”* Then Antonette invited me to have lunch with her and remember. She always saved a place at her table for anyone interested in memories.

We remember that three days of chatting with Antonette didn't feel like enough. We always wanted to follow up. Our task at that time was to document Cather connections as we celebrated Antonette's service to her grandmother's memory. And this was one of the ways we could celebrate the 2018 centenary of *My Antonia*. In hindsight, we fear that

some important pieces went unsaid. For instance, Antonette told us (and her audiences) about her mother Julia, Julia's stories about knowing Willa Cather, the gift of the coral beads. Antonette also told us about her relationship with Anna, getting to know her grandmother at the end of her grandmother's life. Antonette had announced her engagement at a dinner at Anna's house, and Anna had baked the groom's cake for the wedding, welcoming Carrol into the family. But Antonette didn't talk about Julia's early death or of spending the week of her first wedding anniversary with her mother in the hospital, and all of it happening against a backdrop of World War II. But we sense a thread there, taut between these chapters, that links mothers, daughters, and loss. When Antonette spoke of feeling strengthened and inspired by her grandmother's resilience, we wish we had asked for a little more.

More than anything, we remember feeling a profound sense of abundance and gratitude in Antonette's company. Every time we sat down at the kitchen table to share food, Antonette asked us to pray. We never felt pressured to participate. There was no talk of beliefs. Antonette was simply opening up a space to tell a story of gratitude for the day, the food, our company, naming us as she did so. It felt like grace, rooted in the past, smiling at the future.

Tracy Sanford Tucker and Daryl W. Palmer



John P. Anders

John Piland Anders encountered Cather in the mid-1970s while working on his master's thesis, "Walt Whitman's Art of Tallying," at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Upon reading *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, his westward journey began. He arrived in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1984 to pursue a Ph.D. in Cather studies at the University of Nebraska, with guidance from Susan J. Rosowski.

John completed his doctoral degree in 1993. The book that grew out of his dissertation was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1999: *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*. "Intended as a work of advocacy, it is not meant to be sexual politics," John wrote. "I emphasize instead a new aestheticism." One reviewer deemed it a work of "grace and generosity" and "a major contribution to the study of Cather's aesthetics, to gender studies in literature, and to studies in homosexual fiction."

Born January 28, 1948, John grew up in Havelock, North Carolina. He majored in English and minored in history at Atlantic Christian College in Wilson, North Carolina, receiving his B.A. in 1970. After serving in the U.S. Army he pursued graduate study at East Carolina University, receiving M.A. degrees in English, 1981, and adult education, 1984.

During his thirty-two years in Lincoln, John formed many friendships in the Cather community and among book dealers, librarians, fellow gardeners, and those who worked at establishments he patronized. Just as his friendships were diverse, his reading was broad and eclectic, encompassing Austen, Hardy (his high school favorite), and James Herriot, historical fiction, early works on gay themes, biographies, novels for children and young adults, English light fiction.

He enjoyed opera but truly adored the music of Luis Miguel.

As an independent scholar, John presented papers at academic conferences, taught at Doane College, and did research for Cynthia Griffin Wolff's work on a Cather biography. Further, he was employed by various individuals to provide gardening assistance, home care and companionship. One who enlisted John's gardening help recalled, "I learned so much from him: to pay attention to detail, to nurture and not discard plants that do not thrive, to notice the different blades of grass and every irregularity in the terrain."

Well along in his Nebraska years, John began to revel in the literature of his native state. His unpublished "Cather and the Carolinas" explores Cather connections through the lens of three North Carolina writers: Inglis Fletcher, Bernice Kelly Harris, and Elizabeth Lawrence. "I came to them, as I did to Cather, on my own, when I needed them," he wrote, "and in their own ways they have given me both consolation and joy."

John returned to North Carolina in 2016, after suffering a stroke. He died of cancer at his home in Swansboro on August 10, 2021. He is survived by his brother, Jay Anders, and several cousins. A memorial service with military honors was held in Morehead City, North Carolina. Growing up, John enjoyed a close bond with his maternal grandmother, who sparked his love of gardens and gardening and to whose memory he dedicated his book: "think not I forget." John's cremated remains were dispersed on his grandparents' and mother's graves in Blackwell Cemetery, Oriental, North Carolina.

The family designated memorial donations to the Willa Cather Foundation or a charity of one's choice.

Will Fellows



John Anders at home, Christmastime 1993.

Contributors to this Issue

Timothy W. Bintrim, a professor of English at Saint Francis University, is coeditor with James Jaap and Kim Vanderlaan of *Cather Studies 13: Willa Cather's Pittsburgh* (2021). Meeting Scott Riner and recognizing his potential as a scholar, Tim invited Scott to join in archival research before his freshman year. Three years later, his goal is for Scott to tour Catherland before he graduates.

Song (Joseph) Cho is assistant professor of Spanish at Hampton University. He has published on biblical allusions in the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Flannery O'Connor. His research interests also include Korean popular culture and anime/manga. He is currently pursuing an M.A. in English.

Scott D. Evans has been reading *My Antonia* with high school students at Tempe Preparatory Academy for almost twenty years. His favorite question to ask students about the novel is, "They live such simple lives—why is no one in the novel ever bored?" Dr. Evans has previously taught at Arizona State University and is the author of *Samuel Johnson's "General Nature": Tradition and Transition in Eighteenth-Century Discourse* (Delaware 1999).

Will Fellows is a longtime member of the Willa Cather Foundation and author of three books from University of Wisconsin Press: *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*; *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of*

Culture; and *Gay Bar: The Fabulous, True Story of a Daring Woman and Her Boys in the 1950s*.

Daryl W. Palmer is professor of English at Regis University. His essays on Willa Cather and other authors of the American West have appeared in *American Literary Realism*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, *Western American Literature*, and other journals, including this one. His *Becoming Willa Cather* was published by the University of Nevada Press in 2019.

Scott Riner is a junior English major at Saint Francis University with a concentration in writing and minors in communications and theater. As Cather did, Scott edits the campus newspaper and is active in theater, most recently stage managing a production of *Our Town*. Next year his original nativity play set during America's Great Depression will debut. He has presented at two virtual Spring Conferences but can't wait to visit Red Cloud.

Tracy Sanford Tucker is education director of the Willa Cather Foundation and a certified archivist. She presents and publishes regularly on topics related to Willa Cather, Great Plains literature, and the environment.

Lucy White is a marketing consultant to law firms, investment banks, and publishing companies. She was lucky to study Cather's work under the late and much-missed David Porter, professor and former president of Skidmore College and also a longtime board member and treasurer of the Willa Cather Foundation.

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as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook*.

Direct essays and inquiries to Ann Romines at annrom3@verizon.net.

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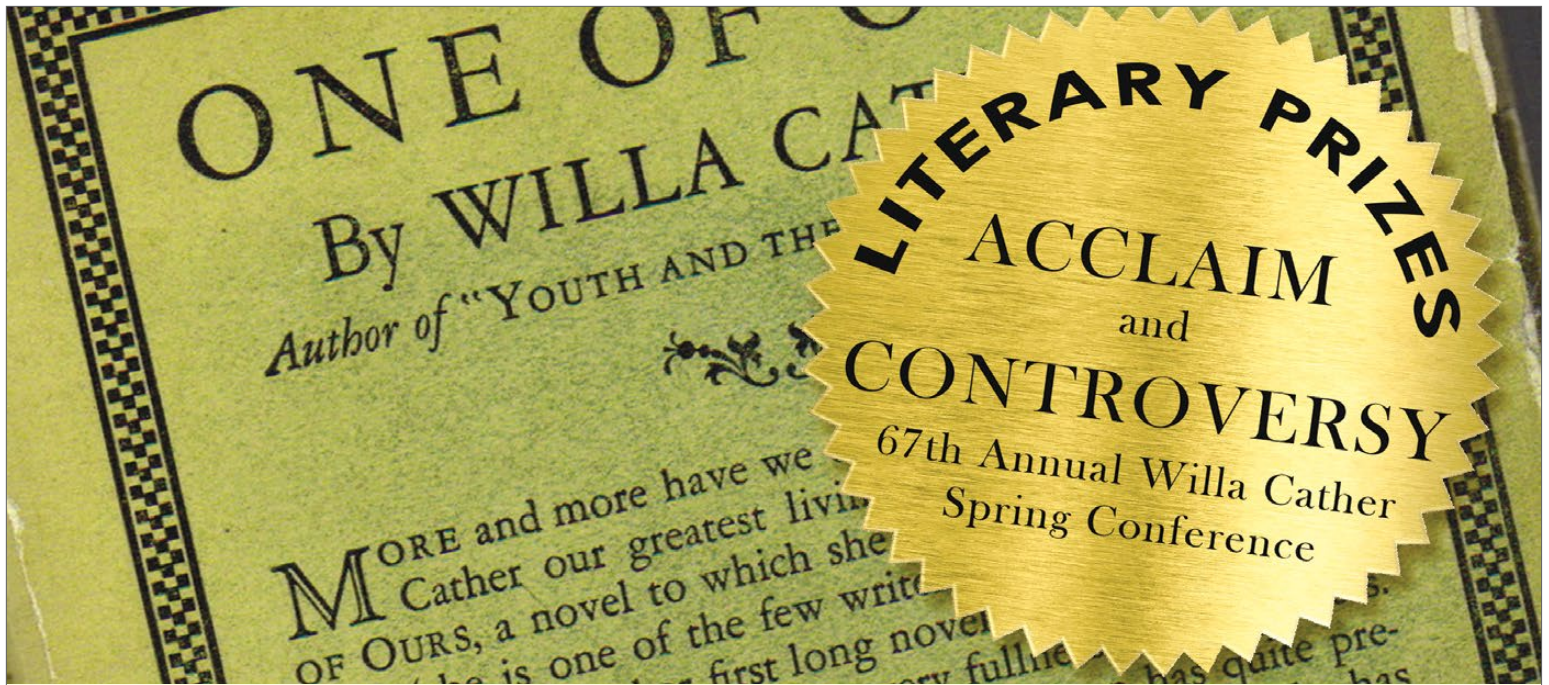
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The 67th annual Spring Conference, to be held June 2–4, 2022, will explore the landscape of literary prizes and mark the publication centenary of Willa Cather’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *One of Ours*.

“Literary Prizes: Acclaim and Controversy” will examine the distinctly modern phenomenon of cultural prizes. Dr. James F. English, author of *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, will give an invited lecture as we consider the impacts of the literary award industry on authors’ lives and legacies, their books, and their readers.

Maureen Corrigan, book critic on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, will present “All The Glittering Prizes,” a talk highlighting the backstage deliberations and decisions behind literary awards, informed by her time as a juror for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

A scholarly symposium will be a part of the three-day schedule, with Dr. Melissa Homestead, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, serving as academic director of this year’s conference.

Invited Speakers



Maureen Corrigan is one of America’s foremost book critics. Her distinctive voice is like that of a well-read friend who always sends you home with a good book to read.

The book critic for NPR’s *Fresh Air* for more than twenty years, she is also a columnist for the *Washington Post* and the Nicky and Jamie Grant Distinguished Professor of the Practice in Literary

Criticism at Georgetown University. She is author of two books of her own, *Leave me Alone, I’m Reading* and *So We Read On: How the Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why It Endures*.

Corrigan has also written reviews for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Nation*, among others. She has served as a juror for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.



James F. English is John Welsh Centennial Professor of English and founding director of the Price Lab for Digital Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania. His books include *The Economy of Prestige*, *Comic Transactions*, and *The Global Future of English Studies*. His current projects include a book about rating and ranking systems in literature and the arts and an edited volume of essays on *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Nebraska Chamber Players



Composer Christian Ellenwood’s new composition, *Children of the Moon*, will be presented by the Nebraska Chamber Players on Saturday, June 4, in the Red Cloud Opera House. Tickets are sold in addition to conference registration. The piece is scored for baritone voice, flute, clarinet, viola, cello, and piano and features text from

Cather’s *One of Ours*. Ellenwood will be in Red Cloud to discuss his work.



Visit us at www.WillaCather.org for conference updates.