Willa Cather REVIEW

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On the cover: **Little Rented House**

Too small for the family
the little rented house
rests in the stillness
and dreams of its many rooms

Digital illustration by Tom Gallagher from an original photograph by Tracy Sanford Tucker showing the Willa Cather Childhood Home at the start of restoration in August 2022. See story on page 26. Our title poem draws from Cather's story "Old Mrs. Harris."

Letter from the Executive Director
Ashley Olson

At the end of 1922, Willa Cather had a good deal to be grateful for as she came home to Red Cloud for an extended visit. *One of Ours* had sold over 30,000 copies, the Cather family celebrated her parents' golden wedding anniversary, and *A Lost Lady* was set to be serialized in *Century* magazine the following spring.

The visit to Red Cloud was meaningful in many ways. Cather spent time with her siblings, nieces, and nephews. She followed the lives of friends and acquaintances as her father drove her all over the country. During the visit, Cather pronounced to Blanche Knopf, "I get more thrills to the square mile out of this cornfield country than I can out of any other country in the world."

In Cather's announcement of her parents' golden wedding anniversary, she wrote that each of the widely scattered Cather siblings still called Red Cloud "home." To Cather, "home" was much more than a house—her parents had long ago moved out of the house where she spent her childhood. Home was the town, the countryside, and the stirring of memories and emotions one experiences when returning to a familiar place after a long absence.

Willa Cather's correspondence from this visit affirms that she much enjoyed spending the winter in a "little prairie town." She observed that the "blinding sunlight" and "crystal moonlight" were wonderfully thrilling. Views of the open horizon and the clear night sky were amusements of home—pleasures her city life did not afford.

However you define home, we hope you will find yourself surrounded by friends or family in familiar places that stir remembrances and offer tranquility. As 2022 draws to a close, we're reminded of just how quickly the years pass us by. Thank you for making the work of the National Willa Cather Center a part of your life, and do take some time to enjoy this issue as you round out the year.

Letter from the President
Robert Thacker

Without doubt, 1923 was a signal year for Willa Cather personally *and* professionally. She turned fifty that year and, as she later wrote, the world had broken in two just about then, but by then too her writing career was really clicking. Her new arrangements with Alfred and Blanche Knopf were confirmed and deepening: their means of selling her work, far superior to Houghton Mifflin's and featuring her direct engagement, had been confirmed in the success of *One of Ours*—and its Pulitzer Prize, which Cather learned of while again in France in 1923. That year also saw the publication, as a fine-art book designed by the later-renowned Elmer Adler of *April Twilights and Other Poems*, Cather's re-shaping and re-presenting herself as a poet twenty years after her first book, a slim volume of lyrics from an unknown. At about the same moment in 1923, *A Lost Lady* began running serially in *Century* magazine and then appeared as a Knopf title in September. That month also saw Cather essaying the very view found in that novel, a recognition of the passing of Nebraska's pioneer era in her analytical statement, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," in the *Nation* as part of its "These United States" series. So during 1923, turning fifty, Willa Cather was busy indeed, continuing to make herself born as a major American writer of that tumultuous time, a decade during which she would go on to further assert her presence with three more novels in 1925, 1926, and 1927.

Just as Cather in the 1920s, so too a century later the National Willa Cather Center. Having now successfully completed our major "Campaign for the Future" and so seeing all about Red Cloud and environs its fruits through the finished renovations to the Burlington Depot, the Garber Bank, and the Pavelka Farmstead, we are now beginning the long-anticipated work renovating the Cather Childhood Home and breaking ground on the construction of the Hotel Garber. In the midst of all this will be the unveiling of Littleton Alston's statue of Willa Cather in the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Cather's eminence again reconfirmed by Nebraskans.

In view of all this, we have much to celebrate as 2022 yields to the new year and to the sesquicentennial of Willa Cather's birth. We're still experiencing the glow of this past June's in-person spring conference focused on literary prizes. There *One of Ours* played a prominent a role, as it should, and its centennial year began the parade of Cather centennials to come in 2023 and subsequent years. *A Lost Lady*, arguably Cather's most perfect novel, will serve as a focus of next year's conference, and just as its decade, the 1920s, was fraught in myriad ways so too will her "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" complicate understandings of Cather, her work, and the time during which she lived and wrote. Leading the way for a succession of centennial celebrations in the years to come—celebrations of *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—these discussions will take place amid evidences of the Foundation's accomplishments in renovating our properties and expanding our programs. The Cather Childhood Home will be restored and the Hotel Garber will be welcoming guests to Red Cloud to see and savor Willa Cather's world—these are times to celebrate for us all.

Willa Cather's Ties to Kearney, Nebraska

Nathan Tye

Kearney, Nebraska, sits at the center of the Platte Valley. Now a city of some size (by Nebraska standards), it was just another ambitious county seat in the early twentieth century, one of those "little towns . . . buried in wheat and corn" (*My Ántonia* ix). These towns shared a culture and climate buffeted by "dust and heat, the burning wind" (ix). Seemingly similar, each town was bound by distinctive rituals and networks all their own. These communities were, Jim Burden and Willa Cather agreed, "a kind of freemasonry" (x). From the Platte River's bank, Kearney rises north into the rolling prairie that foreshadows the Sandhills. The character of this landscape was known to Cather: "there's no air like the Platte valley," Mrs. Ramsay informed Lucy Gayheart. "Denver's too high, and Chicago's too low. There are no autumns like ours, anywhere" (173).

Willa Cather was intimately bound up with Red Cloud and, to a lesser degree, Lincoln. These places oriented her Nebraska. "Red Cloud was always the compass rose," notes Daryl Palmer (12). Looking farther afield from these locales, however, reveals connections and confluences elsewhere in the state, as suggested by Elsa Skocpol's account of her family's recollections of Willa Cather in Wilber (151–52). Nebraska was not (and is not) monolithic, a characteristic Cather understood, for she went, as she wrote in 1929 to Harvey Newbranch, an old Lincoln friend, "among little Nebraska towns (and the little towns, not the big cities, are the people)" ("Willa Cather Mourns Opera House" 184). Nebraska places and people beyond Red Cloud, including Kearney, shaped her life and literature. Located some fifty-two miles northwest of Red Cloud (seventy miles by car), Kearney was home to Cather's brother James and his family in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and was where one of her earliest mentors, Eva J. Case, lived her final years. These Cathers, as well as Case, reemerged in *Shadows on the Rock* and "The Best Years." Kearney was also the hometown and burial place of Bishop George Allen Beecher, who maintained a decades-long correspondence with Cather and confirmed her and her parents into the Episcopal Church. Willa Cather visited Kearney at least twice, probably in 1927 and again in 1931. Only the latter trip is fully documented. In addition, Cather likely traveled through Kearney on some of her many railroad trips west, and she and Edith Lewis may have talked about Lewis's memories of Kearney. Melissa Homestead reports that Lewis and her family lived in Kearney from 1895 until 1896 when her father was receiver of two failed banks and an investor in area irrigation projects (28–30). While living in Kearney, Edith Lewis attended Kearney High School and played her violin in occasional music programs. Cather's connections to Kearney place it among the "little Nebraska towns" that shaped her vision of the state. Excavating Willa Cather's ties to this community illuminates her relationship with her immediate family and points to influences on *Shadows on the Rock, Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and "The Best Years."

Kearney was a commercial and transportation hub along the Platte River during the period in question. Founded in 1873, it was named for Fort Kearny, a United States military outpost established south of the present town to support overland migration in 1848. Only a short train ride from Red Cloud or Lincoln, Kearney grew around the Union Pacific's transcontinental line, and a Burlington and Missouri Railroad branch (later the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy) linked it to Hastings. By the early years of the twentieth century the city experienced sustained growth. In 1905, the Nebraska State Normal School, where Eva J. Case worked at the end of her life, opened. Kearney was also the first seat of the Episcopal Church's Missionary District of Western Nebraska, led by Bishop Beecher beginning in 1910. For a decade Cather's brother James was part of the downtown business community, and his wife Ethel was active in the town's social scene.

Bishop George Allen Beecher's Hometown

Absent from existing studies of Willa Cather's relationship with Bishop George Allen Beecher (1868–1951) are discussions of the latter's own relationship to home. Born, raised, and buried in Kearney, George Beecher did not intend to make a life there. After being ordained a priest in Kearney's St. Luke's Episcopal Church in 1892 and marrying Florence George there in 1893, Beecher served for eleven years in Sidney and North Platte, parishes farther west. After three failed attempts by Kearney's Episcopal parish to solicit his services, however, Beecher returned and served Kearney from 1903 through 1904. In his memoir, *A Bishop of the Great Plains*, Beecher opens the chapter on his brief rectorship of Kearney's St. Luke's parish with a reflection on laboring in one's hometown: "somehow it seems unnatural for a man to be called to any responsible public position in the old town where he lived as a boy" (131). Nevertheless, he found comfort knowing he labored in a place bound up with his own past. Born to a devout Baptist family, Beecher came under the tutelage and mentorship of Kearney's Episcopal priest, Rev. Dr. Robert W. Oliver. In 1888,

Beecher's father passed away suddenly, and Beecher abandoned his university studies in Lincoln and returned home to Kearney. He became, by his own admission, "a stranded youth" in search of guidance (207). He turned to Dr. Oliver, who became "father to me when I was fatherless" (136). It was Dr. Oliver's support, in part, that brought him to Kearney's Episcopal parish, which soon became the site of transformational moments in his life. He was confirmed there, his ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood occurred at the same altar, and there he courted his wife, Florence George, a schoolteacher. "All the experiences of our courtship were centered there, and it was there we made plans together for the future," he recalled (132). They planned their future in Kearney but did not intend for it to occur there. When the couple returned to Kearney in 1903 after more than a decade in Western Nebraska, they soon realized "It was, in many respects, a period of transition" for both their family and the community (142). The city was changing, and his ministry was taking him farther afield from parish duties. After only a year, the Beechers left at the first opportunity, a call to become dean of Trinity Cathedral in Omaha.

Rev. George Beecher, ca. 1892, probably at the time of his ordination. Photograph by Solomon D. Butcher. History Nebraska, nbhips 10017.

After becoming Bishop of the Missionary District of Western Nebraska in 1910, Beecher returned again to Kearney but soon moved his seat to Hastings. Relocating there mitigated any lasting misgivings about public life in Kearney. He grew into his labors, writing to Florence that after five years as a bishop, "I love my work in Western Nebraska more and more—the more I can tell the people about it—the more interesting it all seems to me!" Beecher's statements parallel Harry Gordon's belated acceptance of home in another Platte River community in *Lucy Gayheart*: "What was a man's 'home town,' anyway, but the place where he had had disappointments and had learned to bear them?" (242).

Bishop Beecher's diocese included Grace Church in Red Cloud, where he confirmed Willa Cather and her parents and presided over a memorial service for Willa Cather on All Saint's Day in 1947. He corresponded with Cather from at least 1920 until her death (see "A Missed Connection" on page 10). The relationship was not limited to the Bishop, for Cather always asked after Florence and called on her while her husband was out of town, as Cather warmly recounted in a sympathy letter to Bishop Beecher after Florence's death in January 1947 (*Complete Letters* no. 1754). George Beecher was a frequent visitor to the parish in Red Cloud, so much so that Cather could rightly declare that "He has shared so many joys and sorrows with us there that he has become a part of the life of the town, quite as if he lived there always," in a public letter commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of his installation as bishop ("Miss Cather Writes"). Privately, Cather wrote Bishop Beecher in 1939, "I do feel almost as if there were blood kinship between us" even as she recognized "the great affection that is felt for you throughout your diocese" (*Complete Letters* no.1437).

Cather's connections to Beecher likely seeped into her portrayal of pioneer Bishop Jean Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. While Latour's real-life prototype, Jean Baptiste Lamy, is primary, L. Brent Bohlke has argued that "Willa Cather's success in creating a genuine American saint undoubtedly stemmed in part from her admiration and love for two pioneer Nebraska clergymen," one of whom was Beecher (265). Bohlke suggests that Beecher's friendship with Buffalo Bill Cody parallels Latour's friendship with Kit Carson, and that both Beecher and Latour are at times sympathetic to Native Americans (266). Significantly, Beecher was overseeing the building of a magnificent cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska, at the time Cather was writing her novel.

Thunder, rain, and hail tempered but did not stop the laying of the cornerstone for the State Normal School in Kearney on October 17, 1904. A parade was canceled and some activities moved to an evening celebration at the Kearney Opera House, but hundreds still attended the Masonic ceremony on site. As chaplain, Beecher was among the Grand Lodge officers who led the ceremony, which the *Kearney Daily Hub* called "doubly impressive by reason of the stern environments" ("Corner Stone Is Laid"). Presumably, Beecher prayed for the school's future success, but George and Florence Beecher left Kearney before the school formally opened in the fall of 1905. In its early years the State Normal School consisted of only a handful of buildings, including a repurposed hotel-turned-residence hall known as Green Terrace. The first preceptress of this residence hall was another of Willa Cather's mentors, Eva J. Case.

Eva J. Case of Red Cloud and Kearney

Willa Cather considered Eva J. Case to be "the first person whom I ever cared a great deal for outside of my own family" (*Complete Letters* no. 0159). It was a sentiment she disclosed to others. Edith Lewis listed Case among the "very unusual teachers" who "first taught [Cather] to think, first helped her to find her way in the world of imaginative thought, and that she owed to them the early ideals of scholarship and art that gave direction to her own life and work" (19). To the first students at the Nebraska State Normal School (now the University of Nebraska at Kearney), "she commanded the love and admiration" of the student body (Danly n.p.). Case worked as an educator her entire life, initially as an elementary teacher in Red Cloud, later the Webster County Superintendent, and then the Red Cloud Superintendent. In 1905 she became the preceptress at the Nebraska State Normal School, where she was in charge of the school's sole dormitory, Green Terrace.[1] She remained there until her death in 1907. Cather enshrined Eva Case in two texts, a 1909 letter read to the Red Cloud High School graduating class and her final short story, "The Best Years."

Cather wrote the letter to Edwin J. Overing, Jr., president of the Red Cloud board of education, after he invited her to speak at the commencement ceremony. Cather was unable to attend due to a trip to London for S. S. McClure, but her letter was read to the graduates by a student (*Complete Letters* no. 0159). Cather shared that Eva King, later Case, interviewed her when she enrolled in school fresh off the farm. In Cather's second year, King became her teacher and principal at South Ward School. Soon, Cather realized "I wanted more than anything else in the world to please her" and that King inspired her to overcome any mistakes. When Case became Webster County Superintendent she continued to mentor and tutor Cather through high school. Midway through her time in Lincoln, Cather told the graduates, she reestablished her relationship with King, now married to a local attorney, O. C. Case, and learned to "care for [him] almost as much as for his wife." In 1921 Cather disclosed that it was the Cases' "timely counsel" that helped her leave Red Cloud after college. The Cases "gave her new courage and led her to go on with her plans for self-improvement" (Edson 27).

Eva J. Case, 1906. College of Education, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Cather's public sentiments in 1909 were shaped by the celebratory nature of the occasion and the Cases' absence; O. C. Case had died in 1904 and Eva Case in 1907. The letter serves, consciously or not, as a eulogy for both. By underscoring her connection with the Cases, sparked early and continuing past college, Cather reanimates a spirit which "revived time and again" the courage of Red Cloud's students (*Complete Letters* no. 0159). Her affection and respect for Eva Case is weighty indeed and explains, in part, why Cather reimagined Case as Evangeline Knightly in "The Best Years." The story stands as evidence of the durability of memory and friendship. After all, the story was, as Cather acknowledged in a letter to her sister-in-law Meta at the time of her brother Roscoe's death, "about our childhood" (*Complete Letters* no. 2273).

How did Case's move to Kearney shape these texts? When Case resigned as city superintendent in June 1905 the *Red Cloud Chief* noted that "Her many friends will regret to learn of her decision to leave Red Cloud" ("Mrs. Case Resigns"). Tragically, between Case's resignation and the fall semester in Kearney, her brother Frank Case died by suicide in Lawrence, a small community in neighboring Nuckolls County. Eva Case had just arrived in Red Cloud after visiting family in Lawrence, and Frank had driven her to the station himself the night before ("Suicide at Lawrence"). Upon her arrival, she received a telephone message with the news of his death. The *Webster County Argus* reported that he had hanged himself from a Missouri Pacific bridge near the family farm ("Story of Frank King's Death"). Eva Case's return to Red Cloud by rail and then receiving the shattering news of an unexpected death suggests Evangeline Knightly's return to MacAlpin from Lincoln and learning from the train conductor the news of Lesley Ferguesson's death in "The Best Years" (387). Coincidentally, Frank King's suicide occurred three months after the publication of "Paul's Case" in *McClure's Magazine*, which also concludes with a railroad-related suicide.

During a short but successful tenure as preceptress of the State Normal School, Case suffered from frequent bouts of illness throughout the spring and fall semesters of 1907. By late fall she was too ill to work, so much so that President A. O. Thomas informed the State Board of Education that she was "dangerously ill" in October ("Report of President Thomas"). Case was

initially nursed at Green Terrace and later moved to President Thomas's home, "during which time all possible aid was given her" recorded the *Blue and Gold* yearbook (Danly n.p.).[2] She was then transferred to Omaha's Presbyterian Hospital, where doctors discovered advanced liver cancer during a procedure to remove gall stones. The *Kearney Daily Hub* reported that "the operation was abandoned and all hope of her recovery given up" ("Mrs. Eva Case Passes Away"). Case's sudden death shocked the student body, which passed a resolution grieving "a kind friend and a loving counsellor" ("Resolutions of Student Body"). Declarations of praise for Case and mourning for her loss also came from the residents of Green Terrace and from the Normal College Board of Education.

The building originally known as "Green Terrace" became the State Normal School's first dormitory, with Eva J. Case as its first "preceptress." J. Bowers Photographic Co., ca. 1907.

A memorial service was organized in the school's chapel and classes canceled to allow every student to attend. The school librarian, Anna Jennings, eulogized her friend and colleague. Drawing on "thoughts and sentiments of several members of the faculty," Jennings highlighted Case's "unselfishness,—her thoughtfulness for others. She was never too busy, nor too weary to have a thought for some one else." In her remarks Jennings unknowingly foreshadowed the feelings Cather expressed in her 1909 letter to Red Cloud graduates as well as her characterization of Evangeline Knightly in "The Best Years."

In "The Best Years," Evangeline Thorndike *née* Knightly returns after having been away for twenty years to MacAlpin, another variation on Red Cloud, "more prosperous, more worldly," to visit the grave of Lesley Ferguesson (389). Given the frequency of homecomings in Cather's work, the return is unsurprising; Cheryll Burgess observes, "One motif that recurs throughout Cather's fiction with the rhythmic regularity of a smoothly running train is the motif of homecoming" (50). The early part of the story resonates with examples of then–County Superintendent Miss Knightly's kindness and wisdom as Cather pays tribute to a beloved mentor. Cather also provides a nostalgic recollection of Cather family life in Red Cloud. The Ferguesson children lived in "their very own world" in the attic, open save for a singular room where Lesley slept (381). The story's conclusion is set in a second, grander, and more comfortable home, an evocation of the large home the Cather family moved to after the older children moved away. Despite her sons' successes, Mrs. Ferguesson discloses, "I know at the bottom of their hearts they wish they was back in the old house, down by the depot, sleeping in the attic" (393). In the story, Thorndike lays flowers from her own garden at Lesley Ferguesson's gravesite. With Mrs. Thorndike Cather provides Eva Case the living homecoming she never received in life. Case's body was brought from Omaha to Red Cloud and buried beside her husband. Thorndike's floral gesture echoes a similar tribute recorded in Anna Jennings's campus eulogy: "The love and respect that the school children of Red Cloud have for her was shown in their beautiful floral tribute." Colleagues from Kearney attended the service, including President A. O. Thomas ("Attending Mrs. Case's Funeral").

Although Case was only at the Normal School for a short time, her legacy was cherished by the students and the institution. The 1908 *Blue and Gold* yearbook included an "In Memoriam" piece praising her as "a true friend and wise counsellor of the young ladies of the school." Twenty-three years after her death, the Normal School's successor, the Nebraska State Teachers College, named its first purpose-built women's residence hall in her honor in 1930.[3] Eva J. Case Hall was demolished in 2006. Cather's sentiments were not isolated assessments of Case; rather, they reinforce the remembrances of Normal students and faculty as well as people in Red Cloud. These posthumous tributes align with Cather's 1909 reflections and her resurrection of Case in "The Best Years."

The Kearney Cathers

Kearney was the home of Cather's brother, James ("Jim"), his wife Ethel Garber Cather, and their two children, Helen Louise and Charles, from 1924 until they moved to California in 1934.[4] The family lived in a small home at 106 East 27th Street, which still stands. Jim Cather was a salesman at the Olson and Johnson clothing store, a position that precipitated their move from Red Cloud in 1924. Jim was "an experienced man in the clothing business," according to his hiring announcement in the *Kearney Daily Hub* ("Local Brevities"). Willa Cather's fondness for her niece and nephew is well documented; her letters to them were frequent, and both later served as her literary executors after the death of Edith Lewis.

Jim and Ethel Cather's ties to the famous author were known in town, thus making Ethel something of an authority on her sister-in-law's work. She was a member, and later president of, Kearney's Delphian Society, a women's literary and educational organization ("Mrs. Cather Delphian President"). In 1929 the group's program was a Willa Cather party. The evening opened with the hostess reading glowing comments on Cather's work by James Norman Hall, presumably the section on Cather in his book *Mid-Pacific*. A high point of the gathering was Ethel Cather reading from *Death Comes for The Archbishop* ("Gives Willa Cather Party").

Willa Cather stopped in Kearney on at least two occasions. The *Kearney Daily Hub* noted that in 1931 she visited for the first time in three years ("Willa Cather Regrets Visit Here Is Brief"). Earlier, in June 1927, Helen Louise, then living in Kearney, accompanied her when she went on a two-week trip to Wyoming to visit Roscoe Cather and his family as well as to flee the "noise and confusion" of subway construction that prompted Cather and Edith Lewis to move from their Bank Street apartment (*Complete Letters* no. 0887). In a letter to Roscoe on June 9, 1927, Cather indicated she planned to pick up Helen Louise in Hastings (*Complete Letters* no. 2088). Her letters, when read alongside the later article in the *Hub*, suggest some possibilities for the first visit: she and Helen may have returned from Wyoming via the Union Pacific Railroad to Kearney, or Willa Cather may have visited Kearney during her lengthy stay in Red Cloud after their return from Wyoming. She may also have come to Kearney while in Red Cloud for Christmas later that year, or she may have visited around the time of the funeral for her father, Charles Cather, who died on March 3, 1928.

The 1927 trip to Wyoming was Helen's "first really far off journey," according to a description and letter fragment preserved in her baby book, a volume begun in 1918. Ethel accompanied her daughter from Kearney to Hastings, where Helen and Willa Cather then departed aboard the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad's Denver Limited on June 14, 1927 (Helen Cather Southwick's Baby Book). After three weeks in Wyoming, Willa Cather extended her trip in Red Cloud. Her return to New York was delayed when her father suffered a heart attack, and she remained in Red Cloud until he recovered. Helen was also in Red Cloud at least part of this time. The *Guide Rock Signal* reported that Helen and Willa Cather traveled by train to visit the Crary family in Guide Rock on August 12; Helen returned to Red Cloud, and Willa continued her journey home to New York City.

Although the precise date of her initial visit to Jim's family in Kearney remains unclear, the time she spent with them on a three-month trip to Red Cloud starting in December 1927 yielded material for memorable scenes in *Shadows on the Rock*. Charles and Virginia Cather celebrated their wedding anniversary early in the month. Between the anniversary and Christmas, Cather wrote Blanche Knopf that she enjoyed "the house full of nieces and nephews, my brothers from Wyoming and California dashing on for a few days" (*Complete Letters* no. 0916). Jim's young son Charles assisted with Christmas decorating and according to Mildred Bennett, Charles wanted his toy cow included in the nativity scene. "Willa hesitated, not wishing to deprive him of his treasure, but he insisted on giving it to 'the Little Jesus'" (*World of Willa Cather* 38). Cather reimagined this scene in *Shadows* when Jacques makes a gift of his precious carved wooden beaver to the Auclair household's *crèche* (131–32). The link between Charles and Jacques is further reinforced when Cécile and Jacques enjoy an afternoon of sledding, which ends with Cécile happily pulling Jacques up a hill: "She put the sled-rope under her arms, gave her weight to it, and began to climb. A feeling came over her that there would never be anything better in the world for her than this; to be pulling Jacques on her sled" (123). In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher right after her 1931 visit to Kearney and shortly before the novel was released to the public, Cather remembers when she and Charles were together "all that beautiful winter before Father died—he was only five (5) then." She reports that during the 1931 visit Charles had remembered their sledding times in 1927: "'I guess I liked when you used to pull me up the hill on my sled the best of all,' he said softly. Such a faithful, loving little heart! Those late afternoon sled-rides were dear to me, too" (*Complete Letters* no. 1054).

That second visit to Kearney, June 1–2, 1931, was shorter but better documented than the 1927 visit. For three years, according to James Woodress, Cather claimed "she was practically living on transcontinental trains" between New York and California to see her ill mother (420). The weight of the turmoil was put aptly by Edith Lewis: "the year 1931 was a very hard one—it took something permanently from her vital force" (163). Amongst these tribulations Cather made time to see her relatives in Kearney. In a letter to Carrie Miner Sherwood after her return to New York City, Cather confided, "I had only one day to spare, and I had to see Jim. He has been unfortunate" (*Complete Letters* no. 1055).[5]

The Fort Kearney Hotel in a postcard view ca. 1936. Willa Cather was a guest at a breakfast meeting of the Kearney Woman's Club here on June 2, 1931.

Willa Cather arrived on the evening of June 1 and left the following afternoon. Rumor of her presence soon spread. The *Kearney Daily Hub* reported, "She refused to see anyone else during her short stay, wishing to devote her whole time to her brother and his family" ("Willa Cather Regrets Visit Here Is Brief"). Although the community became aware of Cather's presence, she was swiftly overshadowed by Amelia Earhart's stopover later that afternoon on a transcontinental flight ("Earhart Lands Autogiro Here"). The celebrities' overlapping visits to the same small town made multiple editions of the *Omaha World-Herald* ("Amelia Earhart and Willa Cather Both in Kearney").

The following morning, June 2, Cather attended a breakfast meeting of the Kearney Woman's Club at the Hotel Fort Kearney. Presumably there as Ethel Cather's guest, Cather's attendance was highlighted by the *Kearney Weekly Tribune*'s account of the meeting:

> The ladies present at this breakfast were given an additional pleasure and honor by the presence in their midst of Miss Willa Cather, one of Nebraska's best known and beloved authors. No one who has read her famous stories could be without a thrill, when the actual presence of the author was known. Upon her introduction to the guests by Mrs. Wirsig, Miss Cather greeted the club saying that while at the time she had dropped in to see her little niece dance, she was very glad to be as she felt among neighbors and friends for she felt all Nebraskans were her home people. She said, "I hope you are really enjoying life, that you take time to enjoy life and do the things you like. It takes courage to be simple and sincere. In pretended liking of false and superficial things there is no satisfaction. Real happiness is found in liking and being with people with whom you have a common bond of interest in affairs of your own locality." Miss Cather regretted that being on an important business trip, she would be unable to stop at Red Cloud, her home town. However their loss was felt to be their gain by the club women, and her presence added an important link to the memories chain of the 1931 Inter Club breakfast." ("Woman's Club Holds Annual Breakfast")

Not to be outdone, the *Kearney Daily Hub*'s reporter spoke to Willa Cather in the hotel afterward. Cather informed the reporter that Kearney was her only stop on a coast-to-coast journey: "It makes me very sad to think that I can not see my old friends [in Red Cloud] when I am so close and I am afraid some of them will feel hurt too, but it is a pressing business engagement that takes me to New York at this time" ("Willa Cather Regrets Visit Here Is Brief").

The swiftness of this journey, Cather told the *Hub*, was due to her forthcoming novel, *Shadows on the Rock*. Alfred A. Knopf hired a French translator and she had to meet with him before he steamed out of New York on Friday. While she may have had business matters to deal with in New York City, the primary reason for her quick return was to receive the first honorary degree awarded to a woman by Princeton University. Cather had told no family and almost nobody else about the ceremony, which was held on June 16, 1931. Cather's award was received warmly by the audience and the press. "It would be worth breaking almost any tradition to do honor to Miss Cather," argued the *Princeton Herald*'s editors ("Rain Could Not Mar"). She enjoyed the event herself, according to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (246) and confirmed by comments in letters to family and friends. News of Cather's award appeared after the fact, suggesting her translation explanation was a deflection as to her trip's true purpose.

Coverage of Willa Cather's trip through Kearney further contextualizes her letter to the Pavelka boys sent after the Princeton ceremony: "It made me very sad to hurry through Nebraska and not see any of you, but I am coming to see you all before another year goes by" (*Complete Letters* no. 1058). Hurry Cather did, nearly missing the eastbound train. In a letter written that September to Elsie Cather, she confided, "I have had a bad time with my heart ever since I had to make that run for the train in Kearney in the heat" (*Complete Letters* no. 3262). Although this trip in Kearney was short, its impact of her health persisted through the fall. Despite the heart consequence, both visits with her Kearney relatives were positive experiences.

Conclusion

Kearney is an easily overlooked locale within the wider geography of Willa Cather's life. The town itself made no more identifiable impact on her life or work than a score of other Nebraska towns, but a small number of people associated with it did. Bishop George Allen Beecher and Eva J. Case were mentors and friends at important junctures in her life, and Cather memorialized them in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and "The Best Years." Although Cather was not as close to Jim and Ethel Cather as she was to some of her other siblings, she relished their children, a sentiment they shared. Her affection for Helen Louise and Charles is reflected in Charles's rendering as Jacques in *Shadows of the Rock*, and in many letters and in-person meetings, starting with Helen's baptism in 1918, when Willa Cather was a godparent, and continuing nearly to her death. In August 1946, only eight months before her death, Cather wrote in a letter to Helen, "Sometimes the little children we love turn out to be very different creatures as they grow older; but with you and Charles that was, happily for me, not the case" (*Complete Letters* no. 3109). In Willa Cather's relationships with Kearney residents, we find durable impressions.

NOTES

1. In recognition of her expertise, Case was among the highest paid faculty members on campus, making $1,350 annually. Only the president made more ("Schedule of Salaries").

2. President A. O. Thomas's home is now the University of Nebraska at Kearney's Alumni House, located just south of campus at 2222 9th Avenue.

3. Extant sources, including *The Antelope* (the school newspaper) and State Normal Board of Education minutes, do not explain why the new women's dormitory was named after Eva Case. No recorded statement on the matter at the cornerstone laying or the dedication survives, but the latter coincided with the school's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration. This event, headlined by the school's first president, A. O. Thomas, included recognition of the early faculty. The naming of the hall for Case was presumably prompted by or incorporated into this celebration.

4. The precise date of the move is not known, but Ethel Cather placed their furniture for sale at a secondhand store in February 1934 ("Articles for Sale"). Mildred Bennett claimed the family moved to California in 1930 ("What Happened to the Rest" 621), a date not supported by other evidence.

5. In a January 11, 1939, letter to her brother Jim, Cather gives a kind reply to his apparent offer to repay money she had given him in 1931 (*Complete Letters* no. 2758). In an "Individual Annotation" to this letter, the editors of the Willa Cather Archive note that "In her ledger, Cather recorded giving James $250 in 1931."

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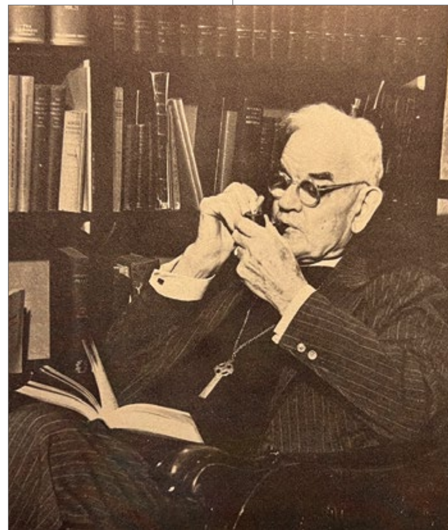
A Missed Connection: Willa Cather and Bishop George Allen Beecher in France, 1920

Nathan Tye

When Bishop George Allen Beecher and his wife Florence departed New York City for Europe aboard the Cunard Line's RMS *Royal George* in the summer of 1920, the memory of the world war weighed on their minds. Upon leaving New York, Beecher recalled in his memoir, it was impossible not to think of the millions of soldiers who made a similar journey three years earlier: "This whole sea, as well as the bloodstained soil beyond, has become precious and sacred to us all" (171). The war was ever present throughout the Beechers' sojourn. The primary purpose of the trip was to attend the 1920 Lambeth Conference, a periodic gathering for all bishops in the Anglican Communion hosted in England by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Beecher and the other assembled Anglican bishops forwarded a then-unprecedented vision of fellowship and ecumenism inspired by the war. Their encyclical letter asked, "Comradeship ennobled war. To-day men are asking, Can it not ennoble peace?" (Conference of Bishops 10). After the conference, the Beechers travelled to France and Belgium, where they met wounded veterans and a former prisoner, prayed at ruined chapels, walked through blasted villages, and traveled to the remnants of the front line. The war haunted the trip. Beecher remembered, "The streets of Paris seemed like long processions of mourners. The black veils were in evidence everywhere" (200).



"Bishop Beecher in his study, Hastings, Nebraska, about 1940." As published in *A Bishop of the Great Plains.*

A few weeks earlier, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis had also crossed the Atlantic aboard the *Royal George*, which Lewis described as "an old liner" (119). Cather was laboring over what would become *One of Ours*, a novel modeled largely on the life and death of her cousin, G. P. Cather, who died fighting in France. Richard Harris has written that this work "involved Cather more intensely than anything she had written before" (614). To finish the book, Lewis reports, "she felt she must spend some time in France" (119). After several weeks in Paris with Lewis, Cather went to battlefields and damaged parts of the countryside with Isabelle and Jan Hamboug. She visited her cousin's grave and wrote a reassuring letter about the burial site to her father, asking him to share it with G. P.'s mother (*Complete Letters* no. 0511).

Existing accounts of Cather's relationship with the Beechers as well as those on the creation of *One of Ours* do not mention the Beechers' presence in Europe while Cather researched her war novel. In his memoir, *A Bishop of the Great Plains*, Beecher provides an extensive discussion of the trip but does not mention that he knew Cather was in Europe at the same time (pp. 171–203). Nevertheless, they knew of each other's whereabouts.

While conducting research for my essay, "Willa Cather's Ties to Kearney, Nebraska," which appears in this issue, I stumbled upon an overlooked letter from Willa Cather to George Beecher. Their decades-long correspondence and Beecher's ministry to the Cather family is well known. L. Brent Bohlke found that "Until her death, Cather remained a loyal friend and regular correspondent of Bishop Beecher, always considering herself a devoted member of his flock" ("Willa Cather's Nebraska Priests" 266). The Cather letter I found is in response to a card from Beecher while both were in France. This discovery, the earliest known letter from Cather to Beecher, adds to our understanding of Cather and this significant relationship.

The letter has been misdated to 1905 and filed with Beecher's papers at History Nebraska with correspondence from his time with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Europe that year. Internal evidence, however, aligns the letter with Cather's 1920 trip to Europe to research *One of Ours* instead of the 1905 date penciled in on the physical copy of the letter. In her correspondence, Cather commonly put a month and day (in this case October 12th) on a letter with no year provided. It is not surprising that someone would assume a date of 1905 because George Beecher travelled in France that year with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (*A Bishop of the Great Plains* 153).[1] I do not know who added the 1905 date. The notation "Cather / Special File" is in Beecher's hand. Clearly 1905 is inaccurate. Cather's letter opens with "Dear Bishop Beecher," and he was not elected a bishop until October 20, 1910 (161). Furthermore, Cather was teaching high school in Pittsburgh in October 1905 and did not visit France.

The letter precedes Willa, Charles, and Virginia Cather's 1922 confirmation service at Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud, an event often considered the start of Cather's relationship with the Episcopal Church and Bishop Beecher. For example, *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather* portion of the Willa Cather Archive, in a biographical annotation on Bishop Beecher which accompanies mentions of him in her letters, currently states that "Willa Cather met him in Red Cloud, NE, in December 1922 when he presided at her and her parents' confirmation as members of Grace Episcopal Church. She and Bishop Beecher corresponded frequently thereafter." The newly located letter makes clear that they knew each other and corresponded before 1922. Also, the familiar tone suggests a longer friendship between Beecher and Cather than traditionally presumed. The Bishop, Cather states, was a subject of conversation on the way over when she spoke with a family from the North Platte area who also knew Beecher. Cather shares her intent to call on Beecher when she next passes through Hastings (his new home as the bishop) on her way to Red Cloud. Although this letter lacks the intimacy of their later letters, which were "like a warm hand-clasp," wrote Cather (*Complete Letters* no. 2995), it indicates Cather and Beecher already knew each other and suggests a growing friendship.

Other Beecher archival material strengthens the case for an earlier connection than previously known. Cather's address is listed in three of Beecher's pocket memorandum books (1920, 1921–22, and 1923–24). Among notes concerning the Beechers' 1920 London trip is Cather's Paris address, 1 Place del Opera [sic], care of Thomas Cook & Sons (Beecher, Memorandum Books, 1920).[2] It is unknown how he received this information (it may have been shared by Cather herself), but it indicates the Beechers knew she was in France as they made their own trip.

The Cather family relationship with Red Cloud's Grace Church began well before the 1922 confirmation service. Willa Cather's youngest sister, Elsie, was baptized at the Episcopal parish in 1906 (Bohlke, "Grace Church, Red Cloud" 8). Furthermore, Beecher himself provided services for members of the extended Cather family prior to 1922. Bohlke notes, "Beecher always had a special interest in the work at Red Cloud, and he, too, became a close friend of the Cather family soon after his consecration as the second Bishop of Western Nebraska in 1910" ("Grace Church, Red Cloud" 8). The established friendship suggests that Beecher's effort to connect with Cather while in France was neither unprecedented nor surprising. Despite their interest, Cather and Beecher did not connect in Paris. Cather was out of the city and did not return until after the Beechers had returned to the United States, where they received her forwarded letter.

The war weighed heavy on the Beechers and Cather while they traveled in Europe. Cather gained information and feeling that would inform her novel, and she fulfilled her mission to locate her cousin's grave. The Beechers travelled through "devastated country, covered with wire entanglements and undermined with trenches and unexploded shells and ruins of all description. To the left and right, as we passed along the road, were burying grounds, marking the last resting places of those splendid youths who made the supreme sacrifice" recalled Bishop Beecher in his memoir (197). He was especially moved when he met a soldier from western Nebraska whose "duty was to tramp over the battlefields, marshes, forests, underbrush, and trenches, in search of human bodies, in the hope that he might discover the identification tag, in order to satisfy the longing of relatives who were yet in search of their loved ones" (199).

While this letter broadens existing knowledge about Cather's 1920 research trip to France, its greater importance lies in the relationship that it evidences. It affirms that Bishop George Allen Beecher was "Cather's bishop," as Bolhke aptly put it, earlier than previously known ("Willa Cather's Nebraska Priests" 265).

Letter Transcription

VV/II
Cather
Special File

Hotel du Quai Voltaire
Paris, October 12th
[1905]

Dear Bishop Beecher;

When I returned from the north of France several weeks ago, I found your card addressed to me at Couin. I am so sorry that I was not in town when you were here, as it would have been a great pleasure to me to see you. I met pleasant friends of yours on the boat coming over, a family from a little town near North Platte, I think there name was Bachs?

I am sailing for New York from Marseille on October 25, and I look forward to seeing you when I next go home Red Cloud, though I cannot say when that that will be. If I have an hour or two in Hastings, ~~on~~ I usually have a wait there between trains — perhaps you will let me come to see you if you are at home.

Faithfully yours
Willa Cather

Hotel du Quai Voltaire
Paris, October 12th

Dear Bishop Beecher;

When I returned from the south of France some weeks ago, I found your card addressed to me at Cooks. I am so sorry that I was not in town when you were here, for it would have been a great pleasure to me to see you. I met pleasant friends of yours on the boat coming over, a family from a little town near North Platte. I think the name was Bach?

I am sailing for New York from Marseille on October 25, and I look forward to seeing you when I next go home to Red Cloud, though I cannot say when that will be. If I have an hour or two in Hastings, — I usually have a wait there between trains — perhaps you will let me come to see you if you are at home.

Faithfully yours
Willa Cather

Cather's 1920 letter to Bishop Beecher. The incorrect date of 1905, added later, is faintly visible below the October 12th date, which is in Cather's hand. History Nebraska.

NOTES

1. A long and significant friendship between Beecher and Buffalo Bill Cody began when Beecher served the Church of Our Savior in North Platte, Nebraska, and Cody and his family spent much time at his Scout's Rest Ranch there.

2. This address matches that of a June 1920 letter from Willa Cather to her mother Virginia (*Complete Letters* no. 2420). Curiously "New York" is overwritten with "Boston" in Beecher's record for 5 Bank Street in his 1922 Memorandum Book.

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No, Virginia, You Can't Have It All

Shellie Sclan

"Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) is a surprisingly erotic, often comic, and quintessentially New York love story between two ambitious artists. Near the end of the story, Willa Cather notes, "In time they quarreled, of course, and about an abstraction,—as young people often do, as mature people almost never do" (60). The so-called "abstraction" is explicitly the nature of success, placing the story with other American dream narratives. The youth of the artists holds out the promise of coming-of-age rom-coms from *Middlemarch* to *When Harry Met Sally*: suffering through a starter love affair or marriage will teach you to do it better the next time. But Cather's wry aside "as mature people almost never do" suggests something more chilling and tragic: this love story was doomed from the start. Between artists, at least, there can never be a "happy, happy love" outside of stop-action images on Grecian urns because the real subject of the story is what David Stouck calls in *Willa Cather's Imagination* "perhaps the most profound subject for any work of art" (174), one of Willa Cather's most persistent themes: "the dilemma of the artist caught between his commitment to art on one hand and to life on the other" (171).

As such, I suggest "Coming, Aphrodite!" bridges the twenty years between *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), Cather's two novels about what she called in her 1932 preface to the British edition of *Lark* published by Jonathan Cape, "an artist's awakening and struggle; her floundering escape from a smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance" (618). Cather made the escape from Red Cloud and Thea Kronborg from Moonstone, but Lucy Gayheart is buried in Haverford, fading from the town's memory except for those footprints in the cement so carefully preserved by the man whose heart she broke.

Early in *Lucy Gayheart*, at a recital of Schubert songs, Lucy struggles with "something she had never felt before. . . . It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water" (33). What determines Lucy's fate and prevents her escape is not, Cather quickly notes, as it is for some, "what happens to their person or their property." It is "what happens to their feelings and thoughts—that and nothing more" (35). This may be Cather's gesture back to the trope, especially popular in the nineteenth century, pathologizing passion in a world where a woman's unleashed desire is the road to death, echoing another Lucy (Lucy Westenra) ravaged by Dracula or Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel Cather called in her Pittsburgh critic days, "one of the books we love" (*The World and the Parish* 362); Maggie Tulliver, like Ophelia before her, was found drowned.

Looking at *Lucy Gayheart* alongside "Coming, Aphrodite!," however, suggests a different reading. When Don Hedger disdains Eden's offer to introduce him to a well-known painter who has "a wine cellar, and keeps a riding horse" (61), their conversation devolves into that quarrel about "an abstraction" I mentioned earlier, this one a bitter contest, a duel even, about whose brand of success is the real deal, indeed in this case, the deal breaker. She says, "I give you up. You know there's only one kind of success that's real." He retorts, "Yes, but it's not the kind you mean" (62). They go their separate ways. Now, however, it is the man who is rendered helpless, who loses his ability to think. Deep feeling threatens Hedger, plunging him into the "passion that drowns like black water" (*Lucy Gayheart* 33). It is Don Hedger, not Eden Bower, who will, like Lucy Gayheart, be blinded by love and torn between art and life.

For the next two pages, Cather follows Hedger as he "mechanically snap[s] the midsummer leash" (62) on Caesar (one wonders if there's one for every season) and takes to the streets, playing both sides of the argument in his head in a rant of the sort that landed Lucy Gayheart in the river. He perceives that "he had never in his life been so deeply wounded; he did not know he could be so hurt" (62–63). Hedger bitterly regrets all the ideas about art he had whispered only to her, imagining she saw them as "his apology for not having horses and a valet, or merely the puerile boastfulness of a weak man" (63–64), yet knowing "if she slipped the bolt tonight and came through the doors and said, 'Oh, weak man, I belong to you!' What could he do?" Understanding his dilemma as a "danger," he lights out to a friend's "summer studio among the sand dunes" vowing "she could find a smart painter, or take her punishment" (64).

Five days later, Hedger restlessly returns, a changed man. He has sent Eden a contrite letter, and his interior monologue has done a 180-degree turn. He realizes how "unreasonable" he had been to expect her to understand his art: "What had such things to do with him and Eden Bower? When he lay out on the sand dunes, watching the moon come up out of the sea, it had seemed to him that there was no wonder in the world like the wonder of Eden Bower. He was going back to her because she was older than art, because she was the most overwhelming

"An old house on the south side of Washington Square." The residence depicted in "Coming, Aphrodite!"—and Willa Cather's first home in New York City—was 60 Washington Square South, the building seen here on the left with open windows on the second floor. The prominent wooden building on the corner was the oldest on the square, dating to the 1820s. Unknown photographer ca. 1905, courtesy New York University Archives Photograph Collection.

thing that had ever come into his life" (65). But when he comes home, yesterday's letter is still on the hall table, and when he goes upstairs, there is no answer when he knocks on her door. We know how this will end. Eden Bower is gone to France with her Chicago millionaire—"not much to look at" reports the janitress, "nothing to him inside his clothes," (68) but useful in helping further her career ambitions.

Now everything happens in slow motion—Cather wants us to see and feel every step in this sad dance. Hedger drags himself up the stairs. Hedger unlocks his door. Hedger lights the gas. Hedger opens the windows. (The ubiquitous Caesar keeps a low profile.) Then, Hedger's mechanical actions are jostled by emotion as he discovers "hanging among his clothes, a pale, flesh-tinted dressing gown he had liked to see her wear, with a perfume—oh, a perfume that was still Eden Bower! He shut the door behind him and there, in the dark, for a moment he lost his manliness" (68). He finds a letter in the pocket of the garment, a hastily written note rehashing their quarrel ("she still didn't know just what she had done. . . . she guessed he was too proud"), excusing her hasty departure ("Fate came knocking"), and making extravagant predictions of his success. But the note ends with a hint of feeling: "She hoped he wouldn't mind her leaving the dressing gown; somehow, she could never wear it again" (69).

Somehow?! And then—somehow—Hedger goes back into the closet and kneels before the wall. Sure enough, the knothole through which he had observed her "had been plugged up with a ball of wet paper,—the same blue note-paper on which her letter was written. He was hard hit. Tonight he had to bear the loneliness of a whole lifetime" (69). Between the gown, the letter, and the choreography, Cather gives us the whole story in a few pages, the story W. B. Yeats summed up in his 1933 poem "The Choice": "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work."

In *The Song of the Lark* the question is never one of choice between two equally compelling alternatives. Cather assures us from the start that every experience Thea Kronborg has and every character she encounters will be fuel for her art. Thea's very name means beloved of God. In her preface to the 1932 Jonathan Cape edition of the novel, Cather acknowledges that Thea "seemed wholly at the mercy of accident, but to persons of her vitality and honesty, fortunate accidents always happen" (618).

The path to artistic success gets more complicated in "Coming, Aphrodite!" and then even more so, some fifteen years later, in *Lucy Gayheart*. Rather than an inevitable outcome for chosen ones, Cather outlines a damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't path, the aspiring artist between a rock and a hard place. Sometimes the path is set by fate, other times by hard work or good genes; sometimes the process is "inexplicable," the label Cather uses to explain Eden's artistic pursuit and so much more: "People like Eden Bower are inexplicable" (34). Cather often gives her heroes some degree of tragic vision; they make choices. At times, however, the "someone" the artist wants to choose chooses for them. Does that still count as a choice?

Ironically (or inevitably) for Don Hedger, it is fate in the persons of Eden's millionaire benefactor and his sister that lands her next door in the first place. Because of what Cather calls "selfishness and greed," the greed of one and the selfishness of the other, Eden got a summer all her own in Greenwich Village rather than Long Island. This summer, Cather explains, "really did a great deal toward making her an artist and whatever else she was afterward to become. She had time to look about, to watch without being watched. . . . She had the easy freedom of obscurity and the consciousness of power. She enjoyed both. She was in no hurry" (36). Had she been in a hurry, how would she

ever have encountered painter Don Hedger, the working-class hero who, before they had been formally introduced, watched her do her morning calisthenics through the knothole in his closet. Eventually, Hedger confesses his crime and after a quick reproach and then forgiveness, Eden makes her choice and suggests "suddenly" that they open the doors between their studios. "Then," she says, "if I want you, I won't have to go through the hall." When he reminds her that "naturally, the lock was on the lady's side," she strikes the lockbolt with a bronze Buddha, and exclaims, "That's better. . . . So the bolts are always on the lady's side? What a lot society takes for granted!" (58–59).

Then in a move right out of a classic screwball romantic comedy, perhaps Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, Hedger laughs, catches her in his arms roughly, and exclaims, "Whoever takes you for granted—Did anybody, ever?" Never passive and always aware, Eden is straightforward in her reply: "Everybody does. That's why I'm here. You are the only one who knows anything about me." He lingers, ironically "keeping his hold on her. 'But I won't always be the only one, Eden Bower. I won't be the last.' 'No, I suppose not,' she said carelessly. 'But what does that matter? You are the first'" (59).

Compared to *The Song of the Lark*, in "Coming, Aphrodite!" Cather complicates the tension between art and life, between fortunate accident and choice. Eden's path is less a "floundering escape" than Thea's, to return once again to the words of Cather's preface to the 1932 Jonathan Cape edition of *The Song of the Lark* (618), and more intentional, more controlled even as its lack of predictability captivates readers.

One of the biggest challenges facing the writer who would embark on a *Künstlerroman*, or any genre of fiction with an artist protagonist, is how much to show and tell about the artist at work, how detailed to make the performance or painting, or whether to show either work or working at all. In "Coming, Aphrodite!" we do not see either Eden Bower or Don Hedger at work. Other than observing her physical workout and hearing scales and a few practice arias, what we see Eden do is schmooze, networking and hanging out and exploring, which seems just right for this stage of her career. She is gathering contacts and filling gaps in her education because she has a lot to learn, and window-shopping will help her know what to order when the time comes. What Cather does with Don Hedger once Eden Bower arrives is show him not working, paintbrushes put away and canvases strapped up.

Early in the story he is presumably painting fish in an aquarium although the language is notable for its lack of detail about the act of painting: "he was absorbed in a study of paradise fish at the Aquarium" (5) and "he stuck his brushes in a can of turpentine" (6). We are told "he was painting eight hours a day just then, and only went out to hunt for food" (15). The hunt for food seems as important as the work of painting. More informative is Hedger's history: when Eden appears, he has already "outlived a succession of convictions and revelations about his art," and because he does not want to repeat himself he may never become "a marketable product" (10). But from the moment he tangles with Eden while toweling Caesar III dry from his bath and she is waiting to take one, Hedger does not pick up a paintbrush, only puts it down to watch pigeons with Eden. Cather is explicit that even before Hedger has any meaningful interaction with Eden, "he was not painting at all now" (24). Nevertheless, with everything he does he is very clearly a painter, his head full of thoughts about light and shadows and color, his every reaction to her a visual image flashing through the distractions. Even when he is not painting, he is planning a painting or observing the crowd's reaction as a painting, and, finally, he courts Eden by talking about what painting can do and what he can do with it. There are many such moments, all growing out of Don's inarticulable attraction to Eden, in which annoyance and wounded pride get channeled through and transformed into picture making, sometimes gesturally when he's alone, or at other times when attempting to articulate his ideas to her. He gets frustrated by the failure of language to convey vision and feeling when he is with her.

William James Glackens, *Street Cleaners, Washington Square*, ca. 1910. The Barnes Foundation.

Coney Island, in Luna Park. Bain News Service, ca. 1910. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

One such moment is embedded in a scene on the roof that will commence their love affair. Another centers on that knothole through which Hedger watches her; the blue paper in the knothole is a classic mixed message of an ending. In screwball comedies it would herald a new beginning, like the makeshift walls of Jericho that separate then bring together Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*. Not so for Don Hedger and Eden Bower.

Cather prepares us for the introduction of the knothole in a scene that is fully visual and painterly even as it touches all of Hedger's senses (and ours). Eden's arrival has shamed him into changing his housekeeping habits. When she is appalled by the dog hairs in the bath tub, "her fragrant person seemed to scream at him like a band of outraged nymphs" (16) and Hedger can only stammer as his face turns scarlet. While he is getting his room and person in acceptable order in case he happens to encounter her again, he moves his overcoat into his disordered closet and sees, illuminated by "a long ray of yellow light shot across the dark enclosure,—a knot hole. . . . He had never noticed it before, and without realizing what he was doing, he stooped and squinted through it" (19). Hedger's powers of observation are at their height, as is his painter's talent for putting disparate pieces together in an artistic whole. He watches while "the soft flush of exercise and the gold of afternoon sun played over her flesh together, enveloped her in a luminous mist which, as she turned and twisted, made now an arm, now a shoulder, now a thigh, dissolve in pure light and instantly recover its outline with the next gesture" (20).

Cather brings together Hedger's physical energy, emotional excitement, and mental acuity in a startingly suggestive scene that reminds me of air painting: "Hedger's fingers curved as if he were holding a crayon; mentally he was doing the whole figure in a single running line; and the charcoal seem to explode in his hand at the point where the energy of each gesture was discharged into the whirling disc of light" (20). These flashes of energy and ideas seem ready to leap from his head and paint themselves on a canvas. But if they do indeed prepare him to make that painting, they also prefigure when he won't. Here everything is fully imagined—potential art, likely sex, and passion enough for everything or nothing.

Don and Eden's trip to Coney Island is also rife with painterly moments that never move through the work of creating art; in this scene, however, Cather suggests the possibility of artists blending life and art. At first, Don is furious at Eden's performance in the balloon, but he senses a new vulnerability in her, and "In his heart he forgave her" (47). The boat ride back in silence sets the mood, and by the time they dock, "they had somehow taken hold of each other" (48). They dine in the back garden of a French hotel, where Eden drinks most of the wine. Hedger talks to her more than he ever has before. She asks about "a new picture she had seen in his room; a queer thing full of stiff, supplicating female figures" (49). He tells her one of his secret ideas: "'You see I'm trying to learn to paint what people think and feel; to get away from all that photographic stuff. When I look at you, I don't see what a camera would see, do I?' 'How can I tell?' 'Well, if I should paint you, I could make you understand what I see.' For the second time that day, Hedger crimsoned unexpectedly" (49).

Cather remarkably juxtaposes their desire for a personal, intimate relationship with their desire to create meaningful art. He loves her, he can't work, yet he can't stop working in his head. Instead, he tells her the story of "The Forty Lovers of the Queen." Cather leads us back to where we started, back in order to go forward.

That night, Eden Bower too is thrown off course. At the end of the story, she felt "she was looking at the man he really was. Nobody's eyes had ever defied her like this. They were searching her and seeing everything," even what she had concealed from other men (54). "The Forty Lovers of the Queen" starts one of the "tempestuous adventures" of passion bigger than herself and her ambitions, an adventure that will send her beyond "the latitude of conduct she was prepared to permit herself" (37). That night, unable to sleep, she combats

> the challenge that had flamed all evening in Hedger's eyes. The balloon had been one kind of excitement, the wine another; but the thing that had roused her, as a blow rouses a proud man, was the doubt, the contempt, the sneering hostility with which the painter had looked at her when he told his savage story. Crowds and balloons were all very well, she reflected, but woman's chief adventure is man. With a mind over-active and a sense of life over-strong, she wanted to walk across the roofs in the starlight, to sail over the sea and face at once a world of which she had never been afraid. (55)

Instead, "the trapdoor was open" (words Cather injects with literal and symbolic meaning), and she climbs up, entering the domain of Hedger and Caesar (56).

So begins their love affair, a contest with Hedger making no secret of his intentions as he sets down the rules of engagement. He tells her, "'If you want the place to yourself, I'll clear out. There are plenty of places where I can spend the night, what's left of it. But if you stay here and I stay here—' He shrugged his shoulders" (57). Her silence is a reply, and "the moment he put his arms about her they began to talk, both at once, as people do in an opera" (57). And that's that.

According to the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), a tragedy portrays the clash between equally compelling but irreconcilable claims upon which external forces intrude. All of us have experienced such conflicts and feel the shock of recognition because we have grown up in families, and all families experience the struggle. We know those who have grown up in what seem to be happy families as well as those from such diverse childhood families as those known by Eden Bower and Don Hedger. In her essay on Katherine Mansfield, Cather writes "that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them" (136).

Thus, we return to Don Hedger, the painter so absorbed and besotted with Eden Bower that before he gets her he can't paint and once they become lovers he doesn't want to. He sits alone at the window, where "he had to bear the loneliness of a whole lifetime." What will he do now that she has gone to meet her fate, leaving him with nothing but his dog and ideas about art that, having stared into her sun, no longer interest him? We, as my students say, "tear up"—no one wants to admit to shedding tears, and we hope that, unlike Lucy Gayheart but like Thea Kronborg, Don Hedger—older and wiser from innocence to experience—will get a second chance at ART.

Cather will acknowledge our hope but only in retrospect. She leaves Don mourning his loss, and then jump cuts to eighteen years later for some wisdom—or irony. "Coming, Aphrodite!" the legend blazes in electric lights over the Lexington Opera House, and Eden Bower is back in New York for the first time since she rolled out to seek her fortune a lifetime ago. She is in her car with her chauffeur on her way down Fifth Avenue to her broker near Wall Street, thinking only of how much of a certain stock she should buy. "Suddenly" (such a big word when one writes about feeling) she looks up and there is Washington Square. "Yes, that is the place." She can smell the dog, the "grubby bathroom at the end of the hall, and that dreadful Hedger—still, there was something about him" (71). After she finishes with her broker, uncharacteristically pondering something other than stock, she hunts down a French picture dealer to ascertain one thing only. We learn (no surprise) that, like her, Don Hedger got the kind of success he wanted: "one of the first men among the moderns . . . a great name with all the young men . . . decidedly an influence in art. But one can't definitely place a man who is original, erratic, and who is changing all the time" (72–73). The picture dealer doesn't tell her—and she doesn't ask—how he got there. Nor would she ever bother to visit one of his shows in New York or in Paris. I suggest we thank the arrival of that Chicago millionaire who takes Eden off to her fate, leaving Hedger free to pursue his loneliness. What else could he do?

How much is "chance"? Is he, like Thea Kronborg and Eden Bower, but not like Lucy Gayheart, the kind to whom good accidents just happen? Cather has shown us the loss and recovery, the luck, the tragedy averted. How does Cather accomplish this, make us believe in these two characters and each choice they make, however unexpected because it is unconventional? As soon as they choose, we are convinced. There are not any holes, and we do not see the puppet strings and Cather's stagecraft as we do at the end of *Lucy Gayheart*. Instead, Cather gives us two people equally ambitious and equally certain they have been chosen for particular destinies. No matter how confused they may be, they each have a nature and essence which must emerge, which we trust will emerge because early in the story we have watched the essence in action. How Cather works this magic is contained in the problem with

which she and they are struggling. How does the author, how do these lovers, how do we readers recognize the dimensions of this problem, the problem of *feeling*, so that we know with what we are struggling? Cather shows both characters behaving as the artist each is and—here's the key—she has them be themselves, not while he paints or she sings, but in the course of living their lives together and, simultaneously, alone; each is the disturbance and the playing field. In Don Hedger and Eden Bower, Cather creates two sides of the equation. Two distinct natures confront a crossroads with room for only one in each direction so that even if we don't like the solution or answer, we see the layout and we know that this is how it must be. In "Coming, Aphrodite!" Cather establishes the clash of two opposite and irreconcilable forces which Hegel puts in place of the "tragic flaw" of Aristotle as the fulcrum of the tragic plot, but she adds a twist. It is not a zero-sum game: nobody dies and each of the two gets at least half of what they wanted.

From the vantage point of 2022, the early twentieth century New York City of "Coming, Aphrodite!," where an orphan painter without a trust fund can claim "I work to please nobody but myself" (61) and still afford a roomy studio with roof access overlooking Washington Square, a location that is, and perhaps always was, what Ralph Ellison's invisible man suggested about Harlem: more an idea than a place. Yet in "Coming, Aphrodite!" there is something very twenty-first century—very "millennial"—about the way performers can brand themselves with a role and still stake a claim to authenticity. There is also something eternal about the almost-but-not-to-be love story between Eden Bower, the legendary singer-to-be with the made-up name, and Don Hedger, the scruffy artist who works to please no one but himself. The plot could happen right now. What feels inevitable is this: that what brings them together, their shared recognition that the bolt should be on both sides of the door or neither, affirms an equal and mutual understanding and knowledge, an absence of pretense that will ultimately drive them apart.

Because, we vow, if we are passionate enough to make what we do who we are and know that no plan B is acceptable, we will still have passion to spare. Artistic success and personal happiness are all about time management or knowing who to hire or which device to buy. Nevertheless, the old Yiddish saying "With one *tucchus* you can't dance at two weddings" will get you in the end. Two passions cannot share space whether inside one person or between two. You can't, no matter what they tell you, have it all. Hedger believes he can be a great artist who works to please no one but himself and still go back to Eden Bower because she is "older than art, because she was the most overwhelming thing that had ever come into his life," and the truth is not just that somebody has to play the traditional wife; the truth is the epiphany we understand with Lucy Gayheart: "what if Life itself were the sweetheart . . . waiting for her in distant cities—across the sea; drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her" (195). When you find that sweetheart, it's not that you won't have the time or the energy to play or sing or dance or write—it's that you won't want to.

At least that is what we fear will happen. It seems inevitable that when we pursue passion, our highest passion, the world tells us we're making a Faustian bargain. This is the tragic dilemma. The day of counting costs will bring the devil to your door, Miss Lucy Gayheart. Isn't it impossible to have perfection of the life and perfection of the work?

This is what Willa Cather is asking us to consider. Look at "Coming, Aphrodite!" as the curtain raiser, the warm-up act, or a way to comprehend rather than laugh at Cather's heavy-handed stage managing of the cautionary ballad of Lucy Gayheart. If we look past the creaky mechanics, we won't laugh at Lucy's almost ridiculous death but instead will feel all the pity and terror we're supposed to feel at a tragedy. Perhaps we'll wonder and remember before it's too late to always watch where we're going.

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Cather on Suicides, Reconsidered

Patrick K. Dooley

The genesis of this reconsideration provides a lesson in how powerfully assumptions can influence one's interpretations and conclusions. In an essay I presented at the 20th Annual Conference of American Literature Association in 2009 in Boston, Massachusetts, "Cather's Treatment of Philosophical and Theological Aspects of Suicide," my premise was that Cather considered suicide an ethically challenging, as well as socially problematic and culturally condemned, behavior. I presumed that Cather shared the "normal" view of suicides: that many instances of ultimate self-destructive acts are avoidable, wasteful, regrettable, and tragic. Hence, a natural response to them carries with it a plea to exonerate and the hope of absolving from guilt those who kill themselves. I now believe, on the contrary, that for the most part, Cather accepted suicides as matters of fact. Two factors prompted my rethinking.

In the spring of 2010, the survey seminar in American literature, history, and philosophy I taught at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore as a Fulbright fellow included *My Ántonia*.[1] For several years of teaching her most famous novel, I have found that a staple, sure-fire approach is to begin our discussions with their responses to my journal prompt, "Discuss Cather's treatment of the philosophical (and theological) dilemmas posed by the suicides in the novel." When I outlined the topic, the immediate and nearly unanimous response from my Singaporean students was, in effect, "we don't understand the question." "Isn't suicide a courageous, self-affirming choice?" I was stunned by how radically their reaction had laid bare the extent to which my religious beliefs and cultural background had informed my own assumptions about suicide.

As I was rethinking my analysis of Cather's position in light of my Singaporean students' views of suicide as an ethically sanctioned, even heroic, act, I read *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. I was struck by Cather's mention of suicide in eight letters in that collection. I will comment on many of these letters below, but none is more arresting than her astonishing remark in an 1894 letter to her college friend Mariel Gere: "We have had a little rain here and are hoping for more. Of course I want it to rain but I am rather disappointed in loseing such a good crop of suicides as dry weather would certainly have brought" (22). What a sanguine, even cold-blooded, offhand remark!

Cather's interest in, bordering on a fascination with, suicides emerges early in her writings and persists for over thirty years. It is the focus of her first story, "Peter" (1892, age 18); likewise, it is the theme of "Lou, the Prophet" (also 1892). After the mother of the protagonist of her tale "The Clemency of the Court" (1893, age 19) drowns herself, Serge is handed off to an old woman in the Russian colony. Often at night, young Serge's stepmother tells him and her children stories of Russia, including how, after many tries, her brother killed himself.

"On the Divide" (1896, age 22), the first story Cather published in a national magazine (*Overland Monthly*), is full of foreboding, worries about insanity, and suicides. Four years later, in her *Cosmopolitan* story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul" (1900, age 26), the hero seeks relief from the severe and oppressive beliefs of the Free Gospellers. His friend and employer, Jerry Lockhart, says of this radical religious cult, "I don't just like to pass judgment on any Christian sect, but if you're to know the chosen by their works, the Gospellers can't make a very proud showin', an' that's a fact. They're responsible for a few suicides, and they've sent a good-sized delegation to the state insane asylum" (31).

Cather's novels also deal with suicides. Both her first and seventh books, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912, age 38) and *The Professor's House* (1925, age 51), describe at considerable length failed or accidental near-suicides, while *The Song of the Lark* (1915, age 41) and *My Ántonia* (1918, age 44) depict four characters who die by suicide.

And so, as I now take a fresh look at Cather's depictions of suicide from a more neutral, nonjudgmental starting point, my examination acknowledges, paraphrasing the narrator's observation in "On the Divide" that suicides are common events, quite understandable given certain situations and circumstances. Accordingly, I begin my analysis with the view that the baseline of Cather's approach to the topic is the adoption of a clinically dispassionate perspective. However, there is one significant exception wherein her compassion and empathy dramatically surface.

Two of her letters speak of her own unemotional detachment about suicides. After Cather graduated from the University of Nebraska in June 1895, she moved back home to Red Cloud for six months, waiting to land a job. Datelining one of her letters "Siberia," she complained to her Lincoln college friends of her isolation and boredom. In this January 2, 1896, group letter she comments, "One of the charms of the Province is that one gets indifferent toward everything, even suicide" (*Selected Letters* 25). Later that year, she moved to Pittsburgh and her first full-time appointment as editor of the *Home Monthly*. When that journal changed ownership, she left and took a position as telegraph editor, headline writer, and reviewer for the *Pittsburg Leader*. Apparently, the workload was demanding enough that after a year at the *Leader*, shortly before her twenty-fourth birthday, she sounds like a jaded journalist in a letter to Louise Pound: "And it's so perplexing to think up different headlines for twelve suicides all at once" (*Selected Letters* 48). She continues, now every

bit the cynical veteran reporter, "People show such a poverty of imagination in the way they kill themselves."

In her 1915 story "Consequences," Cather explores a number of philosophical issues involved in the view that suicides are naturally occurring events with identifiable, predictable, and determinate causes. In this story Henry Eastman and Kier Cavenaugh discuss several suicides, beginning with the tragic end of their friend Dudley. Eastman recounts that after Dudley's wife Rosina had an affair with a Spaniard, they separated; Rosina went to Spain and Dudley to the Northern Rockies and then Wyoming. Two years later when Dudley returned to his Madison Avenue home to retrieve some things, he shot himself. He left no suicide note; indeed, the narrator stresses that "he left no letters" (142), thus disappointing Cavenaugh, who believes "every suicide is logical and reasonable, if one knew all the facts" (142). Eastman disagrees, explaining that he is acquainted with several suicides and "some of them were absolutely inexplicable" (143). Cavenaugh next describes a meticulously planned suicide by a rich bachelor acquaintance, Wyatt, which prompts Eastman's comment: "That looks like a considered case, but I don't think philosophical suicides like that are common. I think they usually come from stress of feeling and are really, as the newspapers call them, desperate acts; done without a motive" (143). Cavenaugh's view of logical, reasonable suicides is akin to my Singaporean students' supposition that some suicides are manifestly rational, freely willed choices while, on the other hand and contrary to Eastman's paradigm, other suicides are rash, reflexive behaviors ("without a motive"), desperate acts due to adverse circumstances and environmental forces.

Cather's story next takes up a third suicide: without any warning, Captain Jack Purden throws himself over the stern end of a passenger steamship. Naturally, Eastman considers this case inexplicable, while Cavenaugh, an advocate of the view of suicides as predictable, understandable events, maintains that even in this puzzling case, "if one knew everything" there would be no mystery (144).

Cather's theoretical reflections in "Consequences" on how causes link events provides a framework for an examination of six additional suicides in her writings. In this story her interlocutors sort suicide into two categories: despairing, tempestuous actions or calmly thought out, deliberate, and resolute deeds. Of course, there are degrees and gray areas between these categories. For example, even coolly rational suicides are obviously impelled by a measure of despair that seems to leave only one option—ending one's life; on the other hand, suicides which seem rash, frantic, and "without motive" are still informed with a measure of forethought and intention. Analogously, in the traditional Western account of moral, religious, and legal considerations, suicides are located on a similar continuum from rational/sane to irrational/insane.[2]

An atmosphere of hopelessness and despair pervades, to a greater or lesser extent, all of Cather's suicide case studies. Then too, however, all of her protagonists forcefully assert themselves, even if none of Cather's stories celebrates the sort of ethical/heroic apogee of courage that my Asian students readily associated with suicide. Now to her narratives.

In addition to its early consideration of suicide, Cather's first published story, "Peter" (1892), is interesting on its own merits and for its anticipation of a number of elements in her celebrated *My Ántonia*. Like Mr. Shimerda, Peter is an erstwhile cultured, violin-playing, theatergoing, city-dwelling Bohemian ill-suited for Nebraska homesteading. Peter has suffered a stroke and can no longer play his beloved violin; consequently, "of Peter no one knew much, nor had any one a good word to say for him. . . . He was a lazy, absent minded old fellow" (5). He is abused by his son who even wants to sell his fiddle. Peter is cold, he is hungry, he needs a drink, he is forlorn, and he is disconsolate. Going out to the sod stable, he ends his life. His penultimate act is to break his violin over his knee; for his ultimate act "he pulled off his old boot, held the gun between his knees with the muzzle against his forehead, and pressed the trigger with his toe" (7). Cather's bleak, blunt, matter-of-fact account of Peter's release from his winter of suffering is powerfully underscored by the actions of his son, Antone. When he finds his father "stiff, frozen fast," he postpones the burial service so he can carry "to town the fiddle-bow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been" (7).

Another 1892 story, "Lou, the Prophet" begins in a punishing summer of dust, dawn-to-dusk work, and bad food that make the homesick young Dane's life "as sane and as uneventful as the life of his plow horses, and it was as hard and thankless" (536). The heat and drought bring on the loss of his corn crop, pushing him to the brink. A strange religious epiphany brings relief as he believes, "I have found out why it don't rain, it's because of the sins of the world" (537). Lou's remedy is prayer. However, instead of being revered as a holy man, he is hounded as a crazy misfit: "When the people saw his emaciated frame and wild eyes, and heard his wild words, they told the sheriff to do his duty, the man must be mad" (539). Hiding out in a cave along with a half dozen adolescent boy-disciples, he tells them of his new "true dream": "He was not going to die like other men, but God was going to take him to himself as he was" (539). He ran away, never to be seen; among the neighbors "it is thought that he was drowned and the quicksands of the river sucked his body under" (540). The boys' parents and Lou's neighbors and the police who couldn't find him no doubt sighed, "Good riddance."

Lou's self-annihilation, however, was discounted by his juvenile followers who believed Lou was like the biblical Enoch, who did not die, but "walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (*King James Bible*, Genesis 5:24). Cather's narrative neither condemns nor condones the disappearance of Lou, the Prophet, recalling her letter of January 2, 1896, cited above, in which she

reports how she herself became "indifferent to everything, even suicide." She relates Lou's demise with a studied indifference, echoing Antone's response to the death of his father, Peter. One supposes that the narrator's announcement of death and disappearance of a human person would be no more or less emotionally charged than, say, a weather prediction of a dust storm or blizzard.

A dozen years after Cather's pair of Nebraska prairie suicide stories, she published "Paul's Case" in *McClure's Magazine* in 1905. Cather's treatment of Paul's suicide is also decidedly low-key. The emotional palette of the story is bland and its prose muted—no pity, no regret, no recriminations, no second-guessing. Paul's death is merely the ineluctable last event in the life of a confused, tormented young man. As her subtitle suggests, Paul is captive to his own temperament.[3] In the first third of the story, devoted to events several months before his ill-fated spree at the Waldorf Hotel in New York City, the narrator comments, "Paul wondered whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside" (473). The very next paragraph foreshadows his self-orchestrated death: "He turned and walked reluctantly toward the car tracks. The end had to come sometime." Furthermore, the picture of John Calvin over his bedstead is a clear icon of Paul's fated condition. He vows to be part of a spectacular curtain call: "he would show himself that he was game, he would finish the thing splendidly" (486) once his money and luck ran out. Paul leaped in front of the train, and thereby "dropped back into the immense design of things" (488). Cather's unembellished account depicts Paul's suicide as a routine occurrence—no other next step could fit the sequence of events up to then; no other ending would fit his character, destiny, and temperament. Also, the social ramifications of his death are negligible—he dies a stranger in a faraway place; his mother is dead; as a loner, he has no real friends. Beyond Paul himself, the only ones affected are his sisters, whom he ignores, and his father, who did not try to understand him and who cares for his well-being only in a mechanically financial way.

Two other loners, both tramps, are featured in Cather's accounts of suicides in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918). No surprise here, both suicides are described in the same straightforward, matter-of-fact manner as in "Peter," "Lou, the Prophet," and "Paul's Case."

The vagrant in *The Song of the Lark* wanders into Moonstone, hoping to pass the hat after his show involving a box of snakes. But when the saloon keeper sees the crowd gather, he "rushed off for the marshal, who arrested the wretch for giving a show without a license and hurried him away to the calaboose" (151). After a day in jail the tramp is released and ordered to leave town; meanwhile, however, his snakes have been killed. When he disappears, the townspeople assume that he has left, but he drowns himself in Moonstone's standpipe, polluting the town's water supply and setting off "a scourge of typhoid" (150). Interestingly, the narrator interprets the tramp's suicide as a premeditated act of revenge: "the tramp had got even with Moonstone" (152). Young Thea, however, suggests other explanations. Maybe the tramp was simply a victim of bad luck, for "how could people fall so far out of fortune?" (153). Or were there others who were responsible for his behavior? Perhaps she herself was to blame when she turned away from him when he walked by her house; possibly her father was at fault since he didn't take care of the man; maybe all the citizens of Moonstone ought to be indicted for their failure to practice Christian charity. Thea cannot keep from replaying "the drama of the tramp [which] kept going on in the back of her head, and she was constantly trying to make herself realize what pitch of hatred or despair could drive a man to do such a hideous thing" (153). What must be underscored is that Cather introduced the episode of the tramp's suicide by remarking that "a certain grim incident, which caused the epidemic, troubled [Thea] even more than the death of her friends" (150). In other words, the tramp's suicide distresses Thea more than the gruesome deaths of several of her classmates poisoned by the city's contaminated water. Haunted by his suicide, she seeks out Dr. Archie, who summarily waves off religious interpretations. Voicing Cather's matter-of-fact acceptance of suicide, he counsels her, "Ugly accidents happen, Thea; always have and always will" (155). He advises her to forget the tramp (and presumably the deaths of her schoolmates) and focus her attention, her energy, and her considerable talents into making herself "a number one musician and make us proud of you."

In Cather's account of another tramp's suicide, this time in *My Ántonia*, it is noteworthy that the narrator is Ántonia, who has gotten past, with apparently little emotional scarring, her own father's suicide. Now living in Black Hawk, Ántonia is a hired girl in the Harling household. Favorite activities for winter evenings are to make cookies or candy and listen to Ántonia's stories: "one evening when we were picking out kernels for walnut taffy, Tony told us a new story" (171). Without prompting, Ántonia captivates her listeners with the story of what she had witnessed when she hired out as a field hand at harvest time. One day, after the noon dinner break, while waiting with her team of horses and her grain wagon, Ántonia recalls, "After a while I see a man coming across the stubble, and when he got close I see it was a tramp. His toes stuck out of his shoes, and he hadn't shaved for a long while, and his eyes was awful red and wild, like he had some sickness. He comes right up and begins to talk like he knows me already. He says, 'The ponds in this county is done got so low a man couldn't drownd himself in one of 'em'" (171–72). Next, the tramp crawled up on the threshing machine—despite Ántonia's warning to Ole Iverson, "that man was crazy and might get the machine stopped up" (172). He cut the bands on the bundles for a while and then without warning, "jumped head-first right

into the thrashing machine after the wheat" (172). As she had warned, he stopped up the machine. Who he was and where he came from were never discovered. The fact that neither Ántonia nor any of the other witnesses of the tramp's impulsive behavior had any personal ties with the loner suggests an unemotional, nonjudgmental statement: this is what happened one summer afternoon. But for Ántonia, what stands out above all else about this happenstance is a puzzling question: "What would anybody want to kill themselves in summer for? In thrashing time, too! It's nice everwhere then" (174).

A second suicide story in *My Ántonia*, narrated by Ántonia's oldest son Rudolph, is eagerly greeted as fodder for gossip and entertainment, because a murder (not a suicide) is the incident at the forefront, "'Hurrah! The murder!' the children murmured, looking pleased and interested" (349). Later, Cather notes that "the children interrupted Rudolph's narrative by smothered giggles" (351). The real tragedy was Wick Cutter's premeditated and vicious killing of his wife—hatred and greed led him to arrange things so that he could guarantee that his wife died before him, thereby blocking her from inheriting one-third of his $100,000 estate (approximately three million dollars today). For Cather, Cutter's suicide is merely appalling. In her account, Cutter's calculated and spiteful act of taking a pistol to his own head is just a matter of his hateful maliciousness, merely another instance of his avarice. No regrets, no recriminations.

I again stress how routine and matter-of-fact are Cather's depictions of suicides so far examined. Most of them are "rational," in that they are carefully planned and casually performed—the deaths in "Peter," "Lou, the Prophet," "Paul's Case," "Consequences" (Dudley, Wyatt, and Captain John Purden), and *My Ántonia*, (Wick Cutter); while others are "irrational," that is, impulsively and recklessly carried out—the tramps in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* and Cavenaugh in "Consequences." But in all ten instances, Cather denies her readers details that would allow them access to the degree of self-insight that her characters possess. Nonetheless, her usual authorial decision to adopt a detached, emotionless mode of narration is dramatically abandoned in the case of Mr. Shimerda's suicide in *My Ántonia*.

Cather's chronicle of the death of Ántonia's father is full of pity and pathos. She goes to great length to probe his motivations and she seeks out factors which might exonerate, justify, and absolve his guilt, all in an effort to mitigate the psychological and emotional burden he has caused to his family and acquaintances, especially his neighbors, the Burdens. I contend that the driving force in her account is to confront the Catholic Church's doctrine that denies a suicide a Christian burial. On this last point, I argue that the locus of the ethical and religious framework that she marshals to structure her analysis (and critique) was a careful reading of the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on "suicide" written by the Belgian Catholic biblical scholar Achille Vander Heeren."[4]

Cather's study of the topic would have begun with this formal definition from the *Encyclopedia*: "Suicide is the act of one who causes his own death, either by positively destroying his own life, as by inflicting on himself a mortal wound or injury, or by omitting to do what is necessary to escape death, as by refusing to leave a burning house. From a moral standpoint we must treat therefore not only the prohibition of positive suicide, but also the obligation incumbent on man to preserve his life" (326).

Vander Heeren's article closely follows the work of Thomas Aquinas in its style and approach, so it predictably employs distinctions to differentiate different sorts of suicide. The standard case is a positive and direct suicide that occurs when one intends to cause his own death or does so as a means to "to escape condemnation, disgrace, ruin, etc." (326). On this view, suicide is a grave injustice to God since a human being destroys what does not belong to him, his own life. From a similar point of view, suicide can be seen as a form of stealing and thereby a violation of the sixth commandment. On both accounts, since our lives belong to God alone, we are not authorized to dispose of them. Accordingly, the Catholic Church "condemns the act as a most atrocious crime and, in hatred of the sin and to arouse the horror of its children, denies the suicide Christian burial" (326). Further, "For a sane man deliberately to take his own life he must, as a general rule, first have annihilated in himself all that he possessed of spiritual life, since suicide is in absolute contradiction to everything that the Christian religion teaches us as to the end and object of life and, except in cases of insanity, is usually the natural termination of a life of disorder" (326).

Vander Heeren contends that since there are the fewest suicides in Catholic countries, but more in Protestant countries and even more in non-Christian ones, the controlling factor must be the Catholic faith and its doctrines, notably its views on the true end of human life, life after death, eternal damnation, and the happiness of the afterlife. Vander Heeren admits that in all countries a percentage of suicides are "attributable to mental illness" (328), yet he stresses that the Catholic church rejects, as simplistic, the view that "suicide is always due to insanity" (328). Accordingly, between the extreme poles of a *felo de se* (literally, a felon of one's self) committed by an adult, sane, and responsible person (for example, the suicides of Dudley and Wyatt in "Consequences") and a suicide impelled by madness (as in the case of the tramp who throws himself into the thrashing machine at Ole Iverson's farm) reside the interesting and challenging borderline cases. For some of these, the Catholic church lifts its prohibition against Christian burial: "while admitting *exceptions*, [the Church] considers that those unfortunates who, impelled by despair or anger, attempt their life *often* act through malice or culpable cowardice" (329, emphasis added). Mindful of these strictures, even though the odds are slim, could an exception have been made to allow Mr. Shimerda the mercy of a Christian

funeral and a burial in consecrated ground?[5] With that in mind, we turn now to Cather's *apologia* on his behalf, a suicide narration significantly different in both degree and kind from all the others in her oeuvre.

Throughout the first book of *My Ántonia*, Cather offers a wonderfully complex, gentle, and sympathetic description of his state of mind that eventually led Mr. Shimerda to take his own life. From the very beginning of his days in Nebraska, Mr. Shimerda is a misfit alien. Long before the hardships that winter brings, his careful dress and "dignified manner" (24) cannot hide the "melancholy" (24) in his eyes, his ashen face, "his far-away look" (40) and his characteristic and deliberate pace of "walking slowly, dragging his feet along as if he had no purpose" (39). His subdued and depressed body-language is so chronic, Ántonia remarks, "My papa sick all the time" (39). Others note that his excitable and vibrant older daughter "was the only one of his family who could rouse the old man from the torpor in which he seemed to live" (39).

The only place where he feels at home is at the farmstead of the Russian immigrants Peter and Pavel. Ántonia recounts Mr. Shimerda's happiness: "My papa find friends up north, with Russian mans. Last night he take me for see, and I can understand very much talk. Nice mans, Mrs. Burden. One is fat and all the time laugh. Everybody laugh. The first time I see my papa laugh in this kawn-tree. Oh, very nice!" (31–32). But then Pavel died, and Peter sold out and left Nebraska. Cather writes, "The loss of his two friends had a depressing effect upon old Mr. Shimerda. When he was out hunting, he used to go into the empty log house and sit there, brooding. This cabin was his hermitage until the winter snows penned him in his cave" (59).

Cather poignantly captures Mr. Shimerda's condition and eventual fate, as winter approaches, with two wonderfully symbolic images. The first is a dying cricket, which forms a powerful connection with Mr. Shimerda's violin. Stopping to rest and sit in the tall grass prairie, where "the little buzzing things that lived in the grass were all dead—all but one" (37), Jim and Ántonia find a dying cricket. But when she warms it in her hand, "presently he began to sing for us—a thin, rusty little chirp" (38). She puts the cricket in her hair and covers it with her handkerchief. Later, when they come across Mr. Shimerda out hunting, they show him the cricket, which will soon die in the cold. Jim comments, "We stood there in friendly silence, while the feeble minstrel sheltered in Ántonia's hair went on with its scratchy chirp. The old man's smile, as he listened, was so full of sadness, of pity for things, that I never afterward forgot it" (41). The cricket's raspy tune recalls the violin that Mr. Shimerda no longer plays—he only plucks at it. Ántonia reports, "My papa sad for the old county. 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. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but he never make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree" (86).

The second symbolic image is a Cather staple: trees. The harsh winter only exacerbates Mr. Shimerda's lethargy and intensifies his shame and regret that he cannot provide for his family. For Cather and her readers, the trees in the draw along Squaw Creek *are* Mr. Shimerda: "the tree-tops that had been gold all the autumn *were dwarfed and twisted, as if they would never have any life in them again*" (61–62, emphasis added).

Though his death was self-inflicted, young Jim sees it differently: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda. . . . He had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer" (97,100). The terrible news reaching the Burdens and then the town folks in Black Hawk, the formalities of a coroner's inquest, and decisions about his burial bring us to a reconsideration of Mr. Shimerda's suicide and the matter of a Christian burial.

Cather has given us a clear case of a *felo de se* action; his was not a dementia-driven suicide but an act preceded by thoughtful, intentional preparation. Otto Fuchs is Cather's spokesperson:

> "I don't think he was out of his head for a minute, Mrs. Burden," Fuchs declared. "He done everything natural. You know he was always sort of fixy, and fixy he was to the last. He shaved after dinner, and washed hisself all over after the girls was done the dishes. Ántonia heated the water for him. Then he put on a clean shirt and clean socks, and after he was dressed he kissed her and the little one and took his gun and said he was going out to hunt rabbits. He must have gone right down to the barn and done it then. He layed down on that bunk-bed, close to the ox stalls, where he always slept. . . . His coat was hung on a peg, and his boots was under the bed. He'd took off that silk neckcloth he always wore, and folded it smooth and stuck his pin through it. He turned back his shirt at the neck and rolled up his sleeves." (92–93)

But even if Mr. Shimerda's was a *felo de se* suicide, Cather provides numerous extenuating and mitigating considerations. I rehearse, without much elaboration, the wide array of factors that she offers her readers.

- Cather introduces at least the theoretical possibility that Mr. Shimerda was murdered by Krajiek.
- Grandfather Burden's prayer at the burial begins by expressing skepticism that anyone can accurately know another person's state of mind and ends with an appeal for divine mercy.
- The Catholic "missionary priest was at the other end of his parish, a hundred miles away, and the trains were not running" (100); the Catholic cemetery in Black Hawk is too far away, so the Catholic church's judgment about Mr. Shimerda's suicide is held in abeyance, at least for the time being.

- Initially, the family believes they can “pray his soul out of Purgatory” (99); later, the priest in Black Hawk does not refuse to say the Masses that Ambrosch arranges for his father. Without extenuating circumstances, his suicide would have been a mortal sin and dying in that state would have condemned him to hell, where his soul could not be helped.
- The Norwegians, presumably Scandinavian Lutherans, decide that they will not extend the hospitality of their cemetery to Mr. Shimerda. Their reasoning is not provided—their objections might have been to his Catholicism, the fact that he was not a Norwegian (Mrs. Burden comments, “These foreigners are so clannish” [108]), or that his death was a suicide and they shared the Catholic position.
- Jim Burden’s commencement address is dedicated to Mr. Shimerda.
- Apparently her father’s suicide must not have scarred Ántonia too deeply, for, as previously noted, she composedly narrates the suicide of the tramp at Ole Iverson’s farm.
- Finally, and most significantly, Mr. Shimirda is buried where the two section lines meet. Later, when roads are graded, both the north/south and the east/west roads veer away from his grave site. Jim Burden as narrator comments, that thereafter, “never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper” (115). Not only does no one tread near his grave, but he lies in a little island of virgin prairie that is blessed with one of the few remaining stands of “tall red grass that was never mowed” (114). Cather could not more emphatically underscore her celebration of the uncut tall grass prairie as natural and, thereby, sacred: Jim’s first night on the Nebraska plains filled him with awe at the unbroken and virgin prairie: “I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction” (7). And at the end of the novel, after his night on the Cuzak farm with Ántonia, Anton, and their many children, Jim returns to Black Hawk. The next day, while waiting for the night express train, he searches out a remnant of natural Nebraska: “I took a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again” (358).

To recapitulate, given Cather’s meticulous and measured *apologia* for this desperately unhappy Bohemian husband and father, I am convinced that Cather’s view is that Mr. Shimerda, despite his suicide, deserved to have RIP, *requiescat in pacem*, written on the unpainted wooden cross that marked his grave. Moreover, she has made a convincing case that he could have had a Catholic burial service whose liturgy ends with the prayer, “may his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed rest in peace, Amen.”

However, I remained puzzled about how to square Cather’s predominant, matter-of-fact depictions of suicides in letters and other fiction with the compassion and empathy she afforded Mr. Shimerda. I find Cather’s January 27, 1934, letter to Carrie Sherwood significant and telling. No doubt Cather’s closeness with the real Ántonia accounts for her deeply felt empathy for the real Mr. Shimerda. Her letter discusses the interplay between the real life and her fiction:

> You never can get it through peoples heads that a story is made out of an emotion or an excitement, and is <u>not</u> made out of the legs and arms and faces of one’s friends or acquaintances. . . . As for <u>Antonia</u>, she is really just a figure upon which other things hang. She is the embodiment of all my feeling about those early emigrants in the prairie county. The first thing I heard of when I got to Nebraska at the age of eight was old Mr. Sadalaak’s [Francis Sadilek] suicide, which had happened some years before. It made a great impression on me. People never stopped telling the details. I suppose from that time I was destined to write <u>Antonia</u> if I ever wrote anything at all. (*Selected Letters* 492–93)

In conclusion, in the eighth chapter of his *The Principles of Psychology*, “The Relations of Minds to Other Things,” William James elucidates his distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge-about” by contrasting the vivid awareness that a sighted person has of colors with a blind person’s abstract comprehension of color theory (221). Not only is the first sort of knowledge privileged because it provides our access to reality, it is also notable for its lasting emotive import. And so, more than thirty years after young Willa Cather had been so powerfully impressed with the details of the tragic demise of “Mr. Sadalaak,” in her “fictional” narrative of Ántonia’s father’s suicide, she cast aside the “knowledge-about” mode of authorial distance and detachment that was characteristic of her ten earlier suicide narratives and, in its place, she crafted her “knowledge by acquaintance” into a loving and tender tribute to him.

NOTES

1. For more on Singaporean students see my “Teaching American Literature in Singapore: Two Fulbright Fellowships.”

2. Robinson Jeffers, for example, agrees with the first but not the second of these assertions. In a 1926 letter to Benjamin De Casseres, he quips, “Suicide is often justifiable, very rarely admirable. As a rejection of life it is only justifiable; you can’t praise a man for going to bed early” (92).

3. Nearly forty years after “Paul’s Case” was published, responding to a reader’s question about temperament, Cather’s letter of March 15, 1943, explains,

> You ask me about "Paul's Case". I once had in my latin class a nervous, jerky boy who was always trying to make himself "interesting", and to prove that he had special recognition and special favours from members of a stock company then playing in the town theater. You will recognize one part of Paul. The other part of Paul is simply the feeling I myself had about New York City and the old Waldorf Astoria. (*Selected Letters* 614)

Also relevant is her earlier April 8, 1921, letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Cather, hoping to get past a rough patch in their relationship, writes to her dear friend from student days, "I believe we could quite come together again now—and oh how good that would be for me! I know I was sullen and defiant for a good many years—like Paul in 'Paul's Case', all mixed up" (*Selected Letters* 300).

4. This essay thereby extends the line of reasoning of my article, "Philosophical Pragmatism and Theological Temperament: The Religious and the Miraculous in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." Therein I argued that Cather's account of miraculous events that informs the starkly different views of Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant on divine manifestations was drawn from the "Miracles" article in the same *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

5. In addition to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article, Cather may have drawn on other sources to form her ideas on suicide. Interestingly, only one article on suicide was published by *McClure's* during Cather's tenure with the magazine. George Keenan's "The Problem of Suicide" confines itself to a sociology of suicide, unlike Vander Heeren's essay, which includes an informative exploration of philosophical and theological issues surrounding killing oneself, before turning to the demographics of suicide. Keenan, however, only sees fit to offer an examination of "general and world-wide conditions that limit or control the suicide impulse . . . weather and war. Other factors, such as education, religion or economic status" (219) are also given statistical analysis. Though Keenan's article concludes with what promises to be a helpful segment, "The Emotional Temperament as a Cause," neither Cather nor her *McClure's* readers would have found encouragement or enlightenment, only stiff-upper-lip nostrums and pep talks:

> There is one other way in which the suicide rate may possibly be lowered, or at least held in check, and that is through the cultivation of what may be called the heroic spirit. . . . In the language of the prize ring, the pugilist who lies down while he can yet stand and see is called a "quitter." It would be harsh and unjust to apply to all suicides this opprobrious name; but there can be little doubt, I think, that the majority of them are weaklings who give up and lie down while they still have a fighting chance. . . . We should not only feel, but we should teach, by conversation and by our literature, that, in the struggle of life, it is essentially a noble thing and a heroic thing to die fighting. (228–29)

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If you or someone you know is in crisis

Call or text **988** to reach the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline or visit **988lifeline.org**. The Lifeline is free and confidential and available 24/7. If you are experiencing an emergency, call **911**.

From the Collections

On August 15, National Willa Cather Center closed the Willa Cather Childhood Home and spent several weeks planning and executing a collections move, as we anticipated beginning rehabilitation work. After decades of being tour-ready nearly every day, the house was in desperate need of rest and renovation. In the coming year we will add an accessible entrance, which will allow us to welcome guests of all physical abilities for the first time, and we will update electrical and heating and cooling systems, improve the foundation, and make repairs to the roof, windows, and more. These historically sensitive changes will not only improve the visitor experience, but they will ensure the safety and preservation of many Cather family artifacts.

The process of relocating the collections has given us the chance to perform in-depth assessment of each object, a task that was difficult in a historic house with limited modern lighting and other basic services. The 2019 transfer of the house and collection into our care provided the occasion to remove materials from years of display for cleaning, conservation, and rest. Our collections staff and volunteers are now cleaning, inventorying, and safely storing the objects, but some important pieces are in need of professional conservation.

Object conservation is a time-consuming process, involving many steps to identify, analyze, stabilize, and preserve each component of an artifact, as well as researching the history of the object itself. Much of the damage done to collections happens while on display—irreversible damage can be done by light and high temperatures—but damage also occurs through inherent vice; objects tend to deteriorate because their constituent parts—leather, paper, wood, metal, glue—are unstable and, at times, cause damage to each other.

While the Willa Cather Childhood Home is closed to the public and its collections off-view, we will highlight some special pieces that are in need of conservation treatment. We would love to have your support as we undertake this long-overdue work. We seek to raise an additional $200,000 for collections care, wallpaper and other conservation efforts, and for interpretive improvements. You can donate to our efforts by clicking **Donate** on our website and noting "collections conservation" in the comment field, or by contacting Executive Director Ashley Olson at aolson@willacather.org. For questions about our collections or conservation efforts, your friendly archivist would be happy to talk with you; email me at ttucker@willacather.org.

Tracy Sanford Tucker

Caroline Cather's trunk. This trunk, noted in the original ledgers of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial as an "1876 Cather Trunk," was tucked away in the eaves of the attic in the Willa Cather Childhood Home. The dome-top trunk is covered in patterned paper inlaid between wooden bands and metal strapping, leather handles, and a beautifully decorated tray. "E. C. Cather" indicates that the trunk belonged to Willa Cather's paternal grandmother, Emily Ann Caroline Cather; a lower portion of the trunk's covering is missing and may have noted the trunk's origin in Back Creek Valley. The fragile condition of the paper covering and the tray necessitated delivery to conservation experts at the Ford Conservation Center in Omaha, where the trunk's history and methods of stabilization will be researched.

Quilts and textiles. The Childhood Home is richly decorated with many textiles that belonged to the Charles Cather family and the extended family. Of particular value are the family quilts. Pictured here is a crazy quilt that belonged to the Charles Cather family; the front is composed of wool, satin, silk, and cotton fabrics, embellished with distinct embroidery stitches in contrasting colors. The plaid wool backing is tied with red yarn. Many of the pieced quilts are in poor condition from decades of UV damage; the crazy quilt was fortunately covered by a dust sheet and another quilt. While it needs cleaning and minor repairs, the condition of this piece is good and we can anticipate that it may be displayed again once conservation is complete.

Attic wallpaper. We look forward to beginning restoration of Willa Cather's wallpaper once renovations to the historic building are complete. Paper conservator Hilary LeFevere has conducted additional testing on the wallpaper to identify the best restoration methods. During the packing of the house, we discovered a section of paper with a significant overlap, giving us a good view of a wallpaper segment that had been protected from the accumulated UV damage of 140 years. This find will allow us document the wallpaper to the best of our ability, should a reproduction ever become necessary in the future. This time-intensive work requires the help of skilled conservation professionals like LeFevere who recognize the irreplaceable nature of the wallpaper.

Two Projects, One Purpose: Historic Preservation in Cather's Red Cloud

At the National Willa Cather Center, we have seen firsthand that historic buildings attract people and serve as representations of our cultural history. Thanks to supporters nationwide, we are making major investments in the preservation of two significant historic sites that will have a lasting impact on the Cather community and the town of Red Cloud.

The Willa Cather Childhood Home, a National Historic Landmark, is being lovingly restored for the first time in over fifty years. And the Potter Block, set to become a lodging and event space called Hotel Garber, is being rehabilitated to its early splendor.

Please help us maintain the charm and heritage of Cather's Red Cloud by making a tax-deductible contribution to help us preserve these important sites. Pledges are payable over a five-year period, and gifts of all sizes make a difference. To learn about naming and recognition opportunities for gifts of $1,000 or more, please contact Executive Director Ashley Olson at aolson@willacather.org or 402-746-2653.

Teacher Institute Debuts in Red Cloud

Every summer, teachers across the country sign up for professional development workshops to bolster their skills regarding social-emotional learning, data analysis, instructional design, and more. In our efforts to enhance educational programs and resources at the National Willa Cather Center, education staff designed a professional development opportunity for teachers who are bringing Willa Cather's work to their students. The 2022 Teacher Institute launched in early July, and by all accounts it was a rousing success. Five teachers—John Elster, Elizabeth Lafleur, and Marcy Mahoney, all from Nebraska; Stan Szczesny of Utah; and Cynthia Adams of New York—arrived at the Cather Second Home eager to tour our historic properties, conduct research in the archive, and attend lectures by scholars specializing in Cather's work and Nebraska history, among other activities.

Institute participants at the Pavelka Farm, left to right: John Elster, Stan Szczesny, Cynthia Adams, Marcy Mahoney, and Elizabeth Lafleur. Photo by Rachel Olsen.

Education staff initially led teachers in an immersion experience at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. Then, Ohio Dominican University professor Kelsey Squire gave a virtual talk about biographical approaches to teaching Cather and her approach to teaching short stories. Retired professor Steve Shively brought artifacts to a lunchtime discussion designed to inspire interdisciplinary approaches to teaching Cather. The first day concluded with a workshop for our humanities interns in which the teacher cohort provided feedback about traveling museum trunk projects created by the interns. Of the first full day, Cynthia Adams said, "I came away refreshed and filled with ideas." After a day of tours and programs that sparked teachers' creativity, the group was ready to discover how our archival collections could help bring their ideas to life.

Once archivist Tracy Tucker took teachers through the archival storage facility, pulling back tissue paper to reveal vibrant clothing, or carefully opening rare books to read Cather's inscriptions to loved ones, everyone was eager to search for a collection piece to augment their lesson plans. The group decided to focus on "A Wagner Matinée" for their collaborative lesson plans because it is widely anthologized and several participants had taught it. They produced a fun interactive unit that incorporates archival photographs, a Red Cloud newspaper article, and even a Spotify playlist. When they presented their finished unit, the cohort explained that they wanted students to understand how striking Wagner's music would have sounded to someone like Aunt Georgiana, a homesteader who had not heard live music in some time. They included an activity that asks students to compare Bing Crosby to Jimi Hendrix, or an Atari video game to a PlayStation 5 game. Students can then empathize with Aunt Georgiana's sensory and emotional experience. The archival experience ended with University of Nebraska at Kearney professor Nathan Tye sharing strategies for incorporating objects and primary sources into lesson plans. Time in the archive helped teachers create educational assets that couple historical details with contemporary reference points to deepen students' understanding of Cather's writing.

Staff and teachers then settled in for a screening of *Minari*, a 2020 Academy Award–winning film inspired in part by *My Ántonia*. Our inaugural Teacher Institute concluded with a trip to the Willa Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where Dr. Andrew Jewell shared items in their collection. Although the work of educators is serious, examining a manuscript written by a favorite author or recognizing Easter eggs hidden throughout a new movie makes the work fun.

The 2022 Teacher Institute accomplished the objectives education staff hoped for, building connections with educators who teach or want to teach the works of Willa Cather as well as developing our own resources. Omaha Central High School teacher Marcy Mahoney said, "The Institute is an invaluable experience for a new or seasoned veteran teacher. The activities that made up the Teacher Institute sparked new ideas for how to present Cather's work in a meaningful way that will resonate with my classes." Perhaps the most important outcome of this new program is the opportunity to show teachers our appreciation for the challenging work they do by giving them a special, curated Cather experience.

The 2023 Teacher Institute will be held July 6–10 in Red Cloud and Lincoln, Nebraska. Details are available online at ***The National Willa Cather Center Teacher Institute****.*

Rachel Olsen

Willa Cather Honored in Window Medallion at University of St. Thomas

Mary Jo Patton

> I can remember how glad I was when there happened to be a light in the church, and the painted glass window shone out at us as we came along the frozen street. . . . Without knowing why, we used to linger on the sidewalk outside the church when the lamps were lighted early for choir practice or prayer-meeting, shivering and talking until our feet were like lumps of ice. The crude reds and greens and blues of that colored glass held us there.
>
> –*My Ántonia* (168–69)

Snow fell lightly outside the arched windows of the O'Shaughnessy-Frey Library on the University of St. Thomas campus in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was December 7, 2021, Willa Cather's 148th birthday. Centered in each of these leaded glass windows is a stained-glass medallion, many of them honoring distinguished writers. On this snowy afternoon, Willa Cather would join them.

Despite the snow and restrictions imposed by the coronavirus, thirty people came together to witness the unveiling of the Cather stained-glass medallion. Dan Gjelten, retired associate vice provost for University Libraries, welcomed everyone and spoke of the history of the windows, which were created in 1958 by the Conrad Pickel Studio in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Over a hundred windows throughout the library feature symbols of enduring ideas, local history, great literature, and influential writers, leaders, and thinkers. In 2009, however, a member of the English Department pointed out that there were no women authors nor authors of color depicted in the windows. The library, working with the English Department, rectified that situation. In February 2010, Zora Neale Hurston was added to the medallion collection. Five years later, Mary Shelley followed.

In 2020, Robert K. Miller, professor emeritus of English at St. Thomas and a supporter of the Willa Cather Foundation, proposed that Willa Cather be the next author recognized in the library. Enthusiastic assent was given by Gjelten, and the work began. Miller chose the classic Edward Steichen photograph of Cather taken for *Vanity Fair* in 1927 and used by permission of the Steichen estate as the image for the window. Julie Kimlinger of the library staff worked with artists from the Conrad Pickel Studio (now located in Florida) on Miller's proposal of Cather in the foreground with cliff dwellings from the Southwest behind her.

Photo by Liam Doyle, University of St. Thomas.

Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell, an art historian and interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, tied together the ancient art of stained glass with the twentieth century photograph of Willa Cather as an example—a metaphor, really—of liberal arts. He and Miller once team-taught a class on Cather's *The Professor's House*. While Miller focused on literary exploration of the novel, Stansbury-O'Donnell raised questions of ethics in collecting Ancestral Puebloan pottery and took the students to the Minneapolis Institute of Art to see pottery similar to what Tom Outland finds. He pointed out that studying the past brings us lessons for the present. Reading Cather encourages taking a fresh look at current issues. "Celebrate the liberal arts; protect the liberal arts," he urged.

Ashley Olson, Executive Director of the Willa Cather Foundation, traveled from Red Cloud, Nebraska, to join the window dedication ceremony. She, too, saw reading Cather as a "gateway to our past, which reinforces that we are all part of the continuing human story." Olson introduced audience members to the goal of the Foundation in promoting Willa Cather's legacy through conferences, scholarships, tours, arts, education, and the new National Willa Cather Center. Cather's readers, she argued, continue to find relevance in her writing as she explores tensions between "love and loss, art and economics, judgment and understanding, regret and longing, preservation and assimilation of cultures."

After thanking Olson for coming, Robert Miller also thanked several people who were instrumental in helping to organize the ceremony and introduced the audience to one of Cather's short stories, "The Bohemian Girl." A fitting selection, "The Bohemian Girl" brings together several aspects that highlighted Cather as the next female writer to be recognized with a medallion. The story was published in 1912, a transitional year for Cather. It was year she took the courageous step of leaving her editor's position at *McClure's Magazine* after Sarah Orne Jewett had earlier urged her to leave the job and

concentrate on her writing. "The Bohemian Girl" examines what Miller identified as "one of the great questions of late nineteenth and twentieth century fiction: what's a woman to do if she finds herself in an unhappy marriage and doesn't see a way out?" Also, it honors the working women of this fictional prairie community.

For his reading, Miller chose a two-page excerpt that focuses on such women. Cather describes the interior of a new barn decked out in wild grapevine and sheaves of wheat to celebrate the day's barn raising with piles of fried chicken, roasted beef, glazed hams, pies, cakes, cookies, and the women who had spent hours doing all this cooking and baking. Cather writes, "They were a fine company of old women" (29). Their hands had accomplished so much in their years on the prairie. Cather has Nils Ericson marvel at all they had done: "the cows they had milked, the butter they had made, the gardens they had planted, the children and grandchildren they had tended, the brooms they had worn out, the mountains of food they had cooked. It made him dizzy" (29). On this note of Willa Cather celebrating the work of women, her stained-glass medallion was unveiled and champagne was poured.

"May this beautiful window," Ashley Olson said, "inspire the next generation of readers to discover and critique her literature."

The University of St. Thomas Conrad Pickel Glass Collection can be viewed online at stthomas.edu/libraries/special/digitalcollections/stainedglass or in person at the O'Shaughnessy-Frey Library. The university is pleased to have the Willa Cather window join those honoring Zora Neale Hurston, Mary Shelley, and other notable writers.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Complex and Brilliant: Cather at 150

"If her image flashed into his mind, it came with a brightness of dark eyes, her pale triangular cheeks with long earrings, and her many-coloured laugh. When he was dull, dull and tired of everything, he used to think that if he could hear that long-lost lady laugh again, he would be gay."

—A Lost Lady

Our 68th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, to be held during Willa Cather's sesquicentennial year, marks several important anniversaries and provides an occasion to pay homage to the author's life and legacy in Nebraska. The revised version of *April Twilights and Other Poems*, *A Lost Lady*, and "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" were all published in 1923 and offer opportunities to celebrate Cather's writing, reexamine her place in the American literary canon, and develop new points of analysis.

The directors invite papers on a variety of topics related to commemorating Cather's 150th birthday by examining the evolution of her writerly imagination. A full call for papers and list of suggested topics can be found online at ***68th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference***.

Proposals of no more than 500 words should describe papers or presentations approximately 20 minutes long. Innovative formats are encouraged. Abstracts, along with a short bio, your contact information, and institutional affiliation should be emailed to Rachel Olsen, director of education and engagement, at rolsen@willacather.org by Feb. 15, 2023. Responses to proposals will be sent by mid-March. We intend to offer an in-person conference but remain committed to offering digital programming to our audiences. Accepted speakers will be asked to prepare a video recording of their paper for submission by May 22, 2023, for our digital conference platform.

Direct questions to Rachel Olsen or Dr. James Jaap, academic director of the 2023 Spring Conference, at jaj15@psu.edu.

Margaret Anne O'Connor

I met Maggie O'Connor only once, at the 2011 Willa Cather Seminar in Northampton, Massachusetts. It was my first seminar, and immersion in the intense, close-knit community of Cather lovers was thrilling and a little overwhelming. Maggie and I sat together on a bus ride to an excursion and then decided to get a cup of coffee together afterwards. Maggie suddenly said that she was tired and casually suggested we ask a nearby police officer for a ride to the coffee shop. Horrified, I lagged behind her, thinking: "You can't do that." Two minutes later, I found myself in the back of a police cruiser with a delighted Maggie. As with any text, there are multiple ways this story can be read; to me it exemplifies Maggie's charm and spontaneity as well as her unwillingness to be subordinate to arbitrary authority or convention.

Born in 1944, Margaret Anne O'Connor died on November 4, 2021, in California, her long-time retirement home.

Maggie's academic accomplishments were numerous. She completed her doctorate at the University of California, Davis and was a professor at the University of North Carolina from 1971 to 2002, initially one of only two women in the UNC English Department to occupy a tenure line. Not content with her own success, Maggie spent her career advocating for other women. She worked to increase the number of female faculty members and their representation both at UNC and in various professional organizations devoted to the study of literature. Ever mindful of her students, she also pushed to diversify the curriculum, developing UNC's first class on women in literature (which she taught at night in a residence hall) and playing a pivotal role in the founding of UNC's women's studies program in 1980. The unquestioned presence of female authors such as Willa Cather in today's college courses owes a great deal to Maggie and her generation of female academics. Maggie's professional accomplishments are almost too numerous to list: her monumental *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, published in 2001 by Cambridge University Press, is her most tangible. Its continued usefulness in the age of the internet reflects the many hours Maggie spent tracking down reviews in remote libraries and collections. Functioning as more than simply a collection of reviews of Cather's work (which would be significant enough), *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* uncovers the different literary ecosystems in which Cather's books circulated and the diverse communities that responded to her work.

Maggie O'Connor and Barney. Photograph courtesy of Ryan O'Connor.

When Maggie and I met, I had just finished my Ph.D. at UNC. She spoke eagerly and fondly of her Chapel Hill colleagues, drawing me into connection with her through them and through her into the Cather world. James Woodress, who had been her dissertation director, her peer in the study of American literature, and ultimately her neighbor in retirement, had died a short time before. Maggie's grief for him was still evident. I never met Jim, although I, along with many other scholars, have been the beneficiary of his generosity through the Woodress Visiting Fellowship (now the Nebraska Cather Collaborative Research Grants for Willa Cather Scholarship). Guy Reynolds recalls visiting Maggie and Jim at Mt. San Antonio Gardens, their Pomona, California, retirement community in 2010. Guy was intrigued by all the cultural activities on offer and the numerous retired academics buzzing around. Maggie, always eager to stretch the boundaries of her community, advised him to put his name on the waiting list; he was forty-five at the time.

Connie Eble, Maggie's colleague at UNC and great friend, remarked in a recent email, "Maggie made personal connections her highest priority. Friendships that began at an academic conference or for professional reasons became lifelong." Such a tribute strikes me as particularly appropriate for someone who studied Willa Cather, a writer whose own friendships, like Maggie's, spanned decades and continents, and whose books return again and again to our obligations to one another. I am inevitably reminded of Ántonia's words in *My Ántonia*, "Ain't it wonderful, Jim, how much people can mean to each other?"

Sarah Clere

Peter M. Sullivan

Just as our last issue was going to press in June, word reached us that one of its contributors, Peter M. Sullivan, had passed away after a year-long illness. Peter's essay there—"Incongruities and Questions of Fact in the Narrative of *One of Ours*"—began as a presentation at the 2018 Cather Symposium in Ireland and was one I worked on and accepted for publication. For reasons interesting only to authors and editors, the essay was a while getting into print and, as I told Peter more than once, I wished it had got there sooner. Given his circumstances, though, we editors all worked together and are happy that Peter was able to see page proofs of the article before he left us. And happy too that he was writing about *One of Ours* since, aptly, that is just what Peter was, one of ours.

A native of the port city of Bayonne, New Jersey, Peter learned German from his maternal grandmother with whom he was close and, as his friend Evelyn Haller writes, "so for Peter the language was not an academic hurdle to be grudgingly overcome but rather an enduring source of intellectual reward." He worked as a longshoreman, graduated from St. Peter's College, and served in the Army in Germany, where "he later spent more time doing physically demanding work in a box factory," Haller also reports. She recalls too that when the revolution which brought Castro to power in Cuba was happening, Peter and his brother decided to fly there "to see what was going on"; after a few days in Cuba, their return became a frightening experience when their plane had trouble on takeoff because it was too heavy.

Peter earned a Ph.D. in German at Johns Hopkins University, and for more than forty years he taught German language and literature in Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education, spending most of his career at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Early on Professor Sullivan became fascinated with Cather's writings and embarked on a sustained program investigating her German influences and references—he was especially proud of this work. He thought Cather captured intriguing aspects of German culture, and he pursued them widely—her depictions of Germans and German-American culture, Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the Gerwigs in Pittsburgh, prototypes for Rosamond St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, and more. His articles appeared in these pages, in *Cather Studies*, in *Western Pennsylvania History*, and elsewhere—most recently here Peter's focus, as noted, was *One of Ours*. "In recent years Peter worked several summers with the Benedictines at a monastery in Canada translating documents from German for a history of their founding which he assembled," Haller tells me as well.

Peter Sullivan in Pittsburgh in 1999. Photograph by Tim Bintrim.

Peter leaves a brother and his family, two daughters, the one a doctor and the other a lawyer, and two grandchildren. As Mark Madigan wrote after hearing the news of Peter's passing, "He was a friendly, humble man, an excellent scholar, and a Cather conference stalwart as well. I'll miss seeing him at the next one." So will I, as I know many others of us in the Cather community will too.

Robert Thacker

Contributors to this Issue

Sarah Clere lives in Charleston, South Carolina, and has taught many semesters of college literature and composition. Her work on Cather has appeared in *Cather Studies 9* and *Studies in the Novel* and is forthcoming in *Cather Studies 14.*

Patrick K. Dooley is Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of Philosophy emeritus at St. Bonaventure University. He has authored four books, among them *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane* (1993) and *A Community of Inquiry: Conversations between Classical American Philosophy and American Literature* (2008), as well as more than one hundred articles and book chapters. His work focuses on the intersection of philosophy and American culture. His current project is a collection of images, with commentary, about the illustrated Crane stories and journalism.

Rachel Olsen is director of education and engagement at the National Willa Cather Center. She creates activities and programs that help preserve Willa Cather's literary legacy, and she works to build lasting relationships with educators, volunteers, and visitors.

Mary Jo Patton, now retired from teaching American literature in Wisconsin, read, studied, taught, and wrote about Willa Cather during her professional years. She continues to be a member of the Willa Cather Foundation and has participated in national Willa Cather seminars and symposiums, including ones in Nebraska, Utah, and New Mexico.

Shellie Sclan's focus has been on how Willa Cather's own reading life informed her exploration of the inner and outer lives of women artists. After forty-two years of teaching literature and writing to high school performers at the Professional Children's School in New York City, as of June 2021, Shellie's time is her own.

Robert Thacker is the current president of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation and a coeditor of the *Review*. He is also professor emeritus of Canadian Studies and English at St. Lawrence University. His latest book, *Alice Munro's Late Style: "Writing is the Final Thing,"* will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2023.

Tracy Tucker is director of collections and curation at the National Willa Cather Center and a certified archivist. An Affiliate Fellow of the Center for Great Plains Studies, she presents regularly on topics related to Willa Cather, Great Plains literature, and the environment.

Nathan Tye is assistant professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. A historian of labor, gender, and mobility on the Great Plains, his essays on hobos have appeared in *Nebraska History* and *The Annals of Iowa*. He also publishes on literary history, including work on Oscar Wilde, Julian Hawthorne, and Wright Morris.

Willa Cather REVIEW

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Ashley Olson, Executive Director

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

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“Bright and Beautiful and Alive”: Willa Cather’s New York Intersections

John Sloan, *The City from Greenwich Village* (1922). Wikimedia Commons / National Gallery of Art.

18TH INTERNATIONAL

CATHER SEMINAR

The New School

New York, New York

June 21–23, 2023

Despite her strong association with the Great Plains, Willa Cather lived most of her life in New York City (1906–1947), first in Greenwich Village and later on Park Avenue on the upper east side. Though Cather only occasionally wrote about the city, it was her home for decades and a key element of her personal and professional life.

In summer 2023, the Cather Seminar will be in Manhattan at The New School, only blocks from the apartments Cather and her partner Edith Lewis shared between 1906 and 1932. This conference will explore the city Cather knew, but also the city that was present around her, though perhaps not always visible to her. The goal is to locate Cather in the broader context of New York in the first half of the twentieth century and to imagine her work as a product of that urban experience. This seminar will also be part of celebrations throughout 2023 honoring Cather’s 150th birthday.

The program committee of the 2023 Cather Seminar invites proposals for papers on diverse themes, works, and people evoked by Cather’s early twentieth century experience in New York. Find details and the full call for papers at **WillaCather.org/events/nyc**.

“Looking up the Avenue through the Arch, one could see the young poplars with their bright, sticky leaves, and the Brevoort glistening in its spring coat of paint, and shining horses and carriages,—occasionally an automobile, mis-shapen and sullen, like an ugly threat in a stream of things that were bright and beautiful and alive.”

—“Coming, Aphrodite!” (1920)