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The Willa Cather Society

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Short Story Issue

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Poet Bill Kloefkorn of Lincoln reads poetry on lawn in front of the restored Burlington Depot in Red Cloud as part of the annual Willa Cather Spring Conference. — Photo by Beth Bohling

"The Old Beauty" and Maternal Purity

John N. Swift
Occidental College

I

To begin a reading of some of the ambivalences of Cather's bleak 1936 story, "The Old Beauty," I want to move immediately to its emotional center, Mr. Henry Seabury's recollection of witnessing the attempted rape or seduction of Gabrielle Longstreet in her New York home. His memory is striking enough to bear recounting in its entirety. Seabury is twenty-four, "only a boy" as Gabrielle remembers (49), entering the chambers of a beautiful, mature woman, "considered notorious . . . a divorcée, known to have more friends among men than among women" (50).

> From the doorway he beheld something quite terrible. At the far end of the room Gabrielle Longstreet was seated on a little French sofa — not seated, but silently struggling. Behind the sofa stood a stout, dark man leaning over her. His left arm, about her waist, pinioned her against the flowered silk upholstery. His right hand was thrust

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Conference Activities

The 37th Annual Cather Spring Conference Red Cloud, May 6-7

Beth Bohling
Hastings Tribune

Oldtimers and newcomers gathered Friday and Saturday for the 37th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference and there was plenty to please everybody.

Blanche H. Gelfant, professor of English at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, said she was excited to be back in Red Cloud for her third visit. Gelfant was featured speaker at the Saturday evening banquet. She compared Cather's artistry in writing the short story "Old Mrs. Harris" with the performance of a stage magician. "Cather evokes illusion to delight and baffle the readers," Gelfant said. She cited instances in the story as examples of Cather using the magician's tricks of production, transformation, vanishing, escape, penetration and restoration. "Cather has found the secret of the perfect magical trick," she said. "Her method is completely inexplicable and invisible."

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"THE OLD BEAUTY" AND MATERNAL PURITY, (Continued)

> deep into the low-cut bodice of her dinner gown. In her struggle she had turned a little on her side; her right arm was in the grip of his left hand, and she was trying to free the other, which was held down by the pressure of his elbow. Neither of these two made a sound. Her face was averted, half hidden against the blue silk back of the sofa. Young Seabury stood still just long enough to see what the situation really was. Then he stepped across the threshold and said with such coolness as he could command: "Am I too early, Madame Longstreet?"
>
> The man behind her started from his crouching position, darted away from the sofa, and disappeared down the stairway. To reach the stairs he passed Seabury, without lifting his eyes, but his face was glistening wet." (52-3)

Cather's readers will recognize this memory as compensatory, the closing of an account nearly fifteen years old. Cool-headed Seabury does what his prototype Niel Herbert had failed twice to do in *A Lost Lady* (with Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters): intruding on a scene of caddish violation, he decisively ejects the villain and saves his unattainable lady's honor. As Hermione Lee has said, this is "bad melodrama" (356) but still an engagingly boyish melodrama with a high chivalric purpose. Seabury is appropriately rewarded, after a thirty-year interval, by Gabrielle's lavish gratitude and praise, and eventually by a dance, a "*spirited* waltz . . . in the grand style" (58-9).

Other readers, psychoanalytically inclined (and thus understanding that some story of infantile love always informs and deforms adulthood's narratives), will find more here: an unabashed expression of Oedipal desire, a confused fantasy of filial triumph and renunciation. Since I cannot in a short paper present all the evidence necessary to make such a reading persuasive, I'll simply offer axiomatically a working hypothesis: like *A Lost Lady*, "The Old Beauty" unequivocally manifests the structure that Freud called "the family romance," a common adulatory childhood fantasy that replaces real parents with royal or noble surrogates; and, like Marian Forrester, Gabrielle Longstreet becomes in that structure the *maternal* object of the boyish narrator's desire.[1] Casting Gabrielle as an unacknowledged "mother," unlikely on the face of it, actually throws some light on Seabury's blind adoration and vague reverence. Situating her in a lost past "whose manners, dress, conventions, loyalties, codes of honour, were different from anything existing in the world today" (5), he recalls her as "a woman who had had the real thing" (25), one whose special virtue was an elusive capacity to be beautiful and to be loved: "She was not witty or especially clever," he muses, "— had no accomplishments beyond speaking French as naturally as English. She said nothing memorable in either language. She was beautiful, that was all. And she was fresh" (17). She survives into 1922 as a kind of familial relic, an austere widow whose principal task (the duty refused by Marian Forrester) is to maintain a literal shrine to the past — her traveling photo collection, an imaged *paternal* past of masculine authority, "uniforms, military and naval, caps and gowns; photographs, drawings, engravings" (33).

If Gabrielle Longstreet is in some sense a mother, if her figure conjures a memory of filial love, then the averted rape's intensity becomes clearer. In his 1909 essay on "Family Romances," Freud had noticed that in some of these fantasies the child's determined adulation of his parents is complicated by an awakening sexual differentiation and desire, so that, while the father figure remains distant and abstract, regarding the mother "the child . . . tends to picture to himself erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind this being his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs" (239). Seabury's recollection is just such a picture: an ambiguous "primal scene," a reconstructed infantile discovery of parental sexuality.[2]

At least four distinguishable forces shape the scene. First, some desire to know, to be certain, creates an undeniable acknowledgement of maternal sexual possibility, confirming a number of vague suggestions earlier in the narrative (Sir Wilfred's unaccountable jealousy, for example, or Gabrielle's uncertain reputation). But another counter-energy disavows that acknowledgement at the moment of its appearance: what's pictured is after all only a *potential* rape, and Gabrielle emerges (thanks to Seabury's intervention) with her purity intact. This is perhaps the simplest Oedipal reading, casting the father as brutal predator, the mother as victim, the son as her white knight, still young enough to escape complicity in sexuality's sweaty squalor: "Am I too early, Madame Longstreet?" Seabury asks, simultaneously longing for and resisting the unimaginable. Yet the dominant insistence on purity is itself qualified by the witnessed act's visual complexity. Seabury recalls a moment of recognition in which he "stood still just long enough to see what the situation really was" — but readers trying to duplicate the strange twinings that he describes will perhaps feel a doubt: is Gabrielle in fact an assault's passive victim?[3] Or is she herself a willing participant, "silently struggling" in an obscure responsive passion, and is Seabury saving her from *herself?* Finally, and most significantly, if Gabrielle is indeed a participant, if her sexuality is active as well as passive, the scene offers an opportunity for disguised Oedipal gratification, as the youthful watcher identifies himself with the "stout, dark man" — a lover as far removed as possible from the quintessentially British "great men," the "succession of Great Protectors" (23) who elsewhere in the story provide the paternal *imago* in the ennobled parental couple. This final allegory traces desire's radical renunciation, which reads: — despite my desire for her and my fantasy of her availability, I will res-

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CATHER SPRING CONFERENCE
(Continued)

Seventeen states and a foreign country (Austria) were represented at the spring conference. Don Connors of Huntington Beach, California, retired English teacher and a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors, said 35 years ago he was on the first bus trip ever taken to visit country sites related to the author. He had sponsored a trip from Omaha for students who were reading Cather's works. This year Connors was one of the guides for bus tours. However, they were confined to town and highway locations since recent rains made the country roads impassable. Bev Cooper of Hastings, who has been photographing the conference for several years, said, "We keep coming back here because we know whatever we see, Cather saw it first."

Among new conference attendees were a number of Hastings High School students. Eric Trader, prize-winning speech student, gave a dramatic reading of Cather's short story "Eric Hermannson's Soul" to climax a morning panel discussion by Cather scholars. Trader and other junior honors English students from Hastings were present for the opening of "Prairie Gleanings," an exhibit which their class had produced following a visit to Red Cloud and the Catherland Prairie in the fall of 1993. The exhibit of poetry, sketches, and photos went on display at the Red Cloud depot for the rest of May. The depot is one of the buildings associated with Cather which the Nebraska Historical Society maintains in Red Cloud.

As a special feature of the opening, Nebraska State Poet Bill Kloefkorn of Lincoln read several poems he had written while serving as a mentor for the high school project. He said the poems were very directly influenced by Cather, particularly her attitude toward female protagonists and their connection with the land. Kloefkorn was introduced by Betty Kort of Hastings, teacher of the honors class. The project had been funded by a Nebraska Department of Education grant awarded to Kort as 1993 Nebraska Teacher of the Year.

During the morning panel, Kevin Synnott, vice president at Russell Sage College, Troy, New York, compared the short stories "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years," and John J. Murphy, professor of English at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, spoke about "The Enchanted Bluff" and "Before Breakfast." Mellanee Kvasnicka, head of the English Department at Omaha South High School, moderated the panel. Car trouble kept Susan Rosowski, professor of English at UNL, from participating. However, she did attend afternoon and evening sessions.

Robert Harwick, former professor of English at Hastings College, was master of ceremonies for the banquet attended by 180. Special music was provided by baritone Darin Stringer of Inavale, student at George Washington University. He was accompanied by Ben Hansen, Superior High School junior. Karen Hartmann Roggenkamp of Detroit, Michigan, who was the first winner of the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship when she was a student at Minden High School, presented this year's scholarship to Kelly Elizabeth Bare of Lincoln Southeast High School. The $8,000 scholarship is awarded to a Nebraska high school senior girl planning to major in English

Saturday's events began with an ecumenical service at Grace Episcopal Church, led by Father Steven J. Ryan of St. Thomas More Catholic Church, Austin, Texas. Several people participated in reading Cather selections, and hymns were performed by the St. Juliana Choir, which was organized several years ago to sing for the conference. Pre-conference events Friday included open house at the Cather buildings, the reading of papers, and a showing of films of "Paul's Case" and "Jack-a-Boy."

Pat Phillips, executive director of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, who organized the conference, said she was equally pleased with the fine showing of oldtimers who returned and the good crowd of newcomers.

— Edited from *The Hastings Tribune*
May 9

The 6th Annual American Literature Association Conference San Diego, June 1-5

The largest gathering of ALA members (about 700) met at the Bahia Resort Hotel on Mission Bay, and among the more than 200 presentations were nine papers on Willa Cather.

Two sessions, chaired by Bruce Baker, University of Nebraska, Omaha, were devoted entirely to Cather's

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American Literature Association participants David Stouck, Blanche Gelfant, John Murphy, and Susan Rosowski enjoy the setting sun off LaJolla.

cue my mother from *myself* and my own brutal desires; I promise in fact *always* to be "too early," juvenile. The result for Seabury is thirty years of self-imposed exile in China, followed by his autumnal repossession of a disdainfully post-sexual Gabrielle. One suspects that some such renunciation may be involved with a number of boyish, sensitive — and essentially asexual — protagonists in Cather's work, from Jim Burden through Niel Herbert to Jean Latour: and in fact it's not too difficult to locate in these works similarly remarkable "primal scenes," confrontations with and denials of maternal sexuality.

II

A question arises now that can no longer be put off: notwithstanding interesting structural resemblances, is there any useful and *necessary* relationship between the fantasies that Freud observed in small boys and neurotic men and this story, the carefully crafted work of a woman in her mid-sixties? What can we legitimately infer from these apparent representations of a disavowed desire? I don't want here to follow the biographical paths that lead back to Cather's own childhood and her strong-willed, beautiful mother; or to her famous adolescent masculine identifications; or to what Woodress calls her adult "sublimation" of sexual impulse in work (126). These paths are all promising, and in the last decade increasingly well-traveled. But I intend instead to consider further one striking detail of Cather's family romance, with an eye to discovering its specific determinant in her national and cultural experience.

That detail is an apparent connection between sexuality, corruption, and foreignness. Gabrielle's assailant, simultaneously rapacious and cringing, is most emphatically a cultural, linguistic *alien:* "The man's accent must have told you," Seabury admonishes, "that he belonged to a country that you did not admire" (49). "How could such a thing happen in one's own house, in an English-speaking city?", Gabrielle wonders; and Seabury responds: "But that was not an English-speaking man who went out from here. He is an immigrant who has made a lot of money. He does not belong" (56). In fact, the predator is a stock Jewish banker, the descendant of Sigmund Stein (of the 1919 story "Scandal") and at least a cousin of Louis Marsellus. The memory's "Freudian" familial or personal content seems here suddenly intertwined with some larger cultural fantasy that surfaces from time to time in Cather's work.

That fantasy interweaves two not very pretty subplots in the great American drama of national ethnic pluralism. The first involves a common depiction of immigrants and foreigners (particularly non-Northern Europeans) as hypersensualized, libidinal. This image, powerful in the great immigration debates of the century's first three decades — and still extraordinarily potent in my own Los Angeles of the 1990s — presumably reflects concerns over the dilution or "degeneracy" of America's dominant Anglo-Saxon stock, and a fear that (as the eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard put it in 1921) "the Nordic native American [will be] crowded out with amazing rapidity by these swarming, prolific aliens" (165).[4] The second subplot reconfigures an old ethnic stereotype, the Jewish moneylender, as the international conspiracy of Jewish bankers. In the 1910s and 20s this menacing theme was voiced in a number of arenas, and in the 30s most stridently as part of a broad Depression-born public mistrust — particularly in the populist Midwest — of bankers and rootless wealth in general.[5] Where the two plots converged was in their treatment of the Jewish immigrant as a parasite, illicitly drawing sustenance from and finally offering to destroy the American way — or, as in "The Old Beauty," Western civilization itself.

"Unnatural" usury; foreignness; dilution of the old stock; miscegenation; mongrelization; these vague worries traversed the Depression's emotional landscape, and we can revisit "The Old Beauty" in light of the rich symbolism that they created. Gabrielle Longstreet's "old beauty" epitomizes the orderly elegance of pre-war Europe, victimized by a demonic alien, a "beast" (as she calls him) simultaneously rapist and succubus: "I was mired down in something," she remembers; ". . . *the power of the dog,* the English Prayer Book calls it. But the moment I heard your voice, I knew that I was safe . . . I felt the leech drop off" (48). Seabury responds to her much as another prototype, Claude Wheeler, had to war-ravaged France, acting on a protective impulse of *cultural* kinship or affiliation. He rescues more than simply Gabrielle's virtue; he assumes a place as one of the "Great Protectors" of the threatened Anglo-Saxon way of life itself, a guardian of cultural as well as sexual purity. And his heroism finds an appropriate reward: his thirty years in China, a romantic assumption of the white man's burden reminiscent of the "critical mission" of his own hero and first among the Protectors, the Victorian statesman X — (35). Thus in this second, essentially political reading of Seabury's memory, he again struggles to take the place of his own idealized father, as Freud suggests any son must do in creating a rescue fantasy ("Special Type" 173): only in this case, the father is a composite figure invoking an entire cultural tradition of masculine grace and authority.

But the fantasy takes one more turn: just as the child in the personal family romance must contend with the mother's potential complicity in her own violation, so does the Anglo-European son in Cather's ethnic romance. Gabrielle, after all, represents English or European aristocracy in an unusual way: she is herself "an immigrant who has made a lot of money," who "does not belong." Her personal history, the "whole romantic story" that Seabury fondly recounts to himself, more or less duplicates that of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha

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AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (Continued)

works. "Strategies and Fears" included "Neighbour Rosicky: Cather's 'Feast of Words'" by David Stouck, Simon Fraser University; "Cheat-Death: Narrative Form and Desire in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" by Ann Fisher-Wirth, University of Mississippi, and "Nowhere to Go But Up: 'Behind the Singer Tower' and the Yellow Peril" by John Swift, Occidental College. The second session, "Things That Teased the Mind," featured "Framing the Professor's Story: Frost's 'Wild Grapes' and 'Directive'" by John Murphy, Brigham Young University; "The Genesis of *A Lost Lady*: A Report from the Cather Scholarly Edition" by Susan Rosowski, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and "Mortal Enemies: Myra Henshawe and Thackeray's Beatrix Esmond" by Richard Harris, SUNY Maritime College.

A cooperative session of the Cather and Faulkner Societies included papers by Joseph Urgo, Bryant College, and Jo Ann Middleton, Drew University. Urgo spoke on "Conceptions of History and Place" in the two authors and Middleton on "Influence and Intertexuality." In a session on Katherine Anne Porter, Merrill Skaggs of Drew University discussed "Cather's Influence on Porter's 'He'."

Beautiful weather provided opportunities for walks on the beach and continued discussion of literary topics. Participants from the WCPM Board of Governors devoted one afternoon to plans for the upcoming Sixth International Cather Seminar to be held in Quebec City in June, 1995.

WCPM and Nebraska State Historical Society Boards Take Historic Step

On July 1, the WCPM Board of Governors entered into a management agreement with the Nebraska State Historical Society Board to manage the Willa Cather Historical Center in Red Cloud. Properties consist of the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank Building (Willa Cather Historical Center and Museum) which houses the Archives, the Cather Childhood Home, the restored Burlington Depot, St. Juliana Falconeri Catholic Church, Grace Episcopal Church, and the Pavelka farmstead near Bladen.

Entry point to the Cather properties will be the WCPM Art Gallery and Book Store; all tours will originate there. Full tours (to all restored buildings) will run daily at 9:30, 11:00, 1:30, 2:45 and 4:00; Sundays at 1:30, 2:45 and 4:00. The Archives will be available to scholars with an advance appointment at times convenient for them.

Staff members from the Historical Center will continue in their current positions but will be housed at the Art Gallery and Book Store. Tour hostesses are Dorothy Mattison, Dorothy Hansen and Kathy Mittan. Thelma Barnes and Shirley Just continue in custodial positions. WCHC curator John Lindahl has been appointed curator of the Kennard House in Lincoln, a branch museum of the NSHS.

Those who have worked for the WCPM will also continue: Janice Nikodym (secretary), Judy Graning (bookstore), Vicki Bush (weekends and tour guide), group tour guides Louise Eldred, Doreen Sanders, Kathy Mittan, and Director Pat Phillips.

To reach the Willa Cather Center call (402) 746-2653, fax (402) 746-2652, or write to 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Hours of operation: 8:00-5:00 Monday through Saturday, Sunday 1:00-5:00.

Admission charge to buildings remains $1.00 for adults and 25¢ for children not accompanied by an adult (accompanied children are free). Group tour rates are available and must be booked in advance. NSHS and WCPM members are admitted free; there is a 10% discount on purchases for both memberships.

WCPM now accepts MasterCard and Visa as well as checks on purchases.

BOOKS NOT LISTED ON FALL 1993 PRICE LIST

A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather by Sheryl L. Meyering. $60.00, hardcover.

A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather by John March, edited by Marilyn Arnold. $99.50 plus $4.50 postage, hardcover.

Willa Cather: Writing at the Frontier by Jamie Ambrose. $17.50, paperback.

Willa Cather by Edward Wagenknecht. $19.95, hardcover.

Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile by Laura Winters. $27.50, hardcover.

My Ántonia. New Penguin edition with introduction, explana tory notes, and bibliography by John J. Murphy. $6.95, paperback.

Great Plains Quarterly, Spring 1994. Important article by David Murphy: "Czechs, the Land, Cather and the Pavelka Farmstead" $6.00 (Postage — $1.50).

Sacred Fire: Willa Cather's Novel Cycle by Evelyn Helmick Hively. $37.50, hardcover.

New paperback editions of *My Ántonia*:

- Penguin Classic: Introduction, explanatory notes, and bibliography by John J. Murphy. $6.95.
- Bantam Classic: Introduction by Stephanie Vaughn. $4.50.
- Vintage Classic: $8.00

Coming in December!!! *My Ántonia*, the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition edited by Susan J. Rosowski and Charles W. Mignon with Kari Ronning. Historical essay and explanatory notes by James Woodress. $55.00, hardcover.

Postage and Handling: $3.00, paperbacks; $4.00 hardbacks (Exception — the March Reader's Companion is $4.50). *If ordering from Nebraska, please include 5 percent sales tax.* Visa and MasterCard accepted. Checks still accepted and preferred!

"THE OLD BEAUTY" AND MATERNAL PURITY, (Continued)

Mason; and, like Bertha's, Gabrielle's exoticism subverts the refined English social landscape into which the unlucky Sir Wilfred Longstreet imports her. In other words — and again in a striking parallel to the Freudian interpretation with which I began — the rescue fails before it begins: the "mother" is somehow *in her essence* impure, contaminated, and the chivalric perspective that idealizes her and insists on her purity represents a repression as powerful in the history of nations and national identities as it is in the development of individuals.

I want to conclude by discussing, with some caution, a last inevitable question: what part does Cather herself play in these readings? I do not propose a single intention, conscious or unconscious, in "The Old Beauty," nor do I find it very useful to use interpretations of this sort as a means of diagnosis, discovering in her a case of masculine-identified Oedipal frustration and consequent misogyny, or of anti-Semitism, or of both. Cather's readers have generally quite properly insisted that there are more viewpoints than Seabury's from which "The Old Beauty" should be read; Marilyn Arnold, for example, sees Gabrielle Longstreet as the vehicle for a darkly satiric, cautionary exploration of barren nostalgia in old age, to be considered against the positive portraits in *Not Under Forty* of Madame Grout, Annie Fields, and Sarah Orne Jewett (162-65). And, although I'm not myself as sure of a single-minded purpose to the story as is Arnold — the nostalgia is as genuine, as moving to me as is the critique of its sterility — I agree with the principle: Cather's own complex sensibility and sympathies (to use some old-fashioned terms) rarely let her assume only one perspective. She was certainly touched by the powerful shaping forces of any child's "family romance," his (or in Cather's case her) coming to terms with masculine authority; and she also internalized and faithfully registered the romance's cultural counterpart, the fantasy of endangered ethnic purity that captured much of the American imagination in the 1930s. But in neither her writing nor her life could she entirely *become* Seabury (or Niel Herbert or Jim Burden or any other of her male protagonists), either as self-denying bachelor or as arch-conservative defender of Western civilization. In her complicated imagination Ántonia and the hired girls — fecund and unabashedly sexual immigrants — assume a progenitive importance to rival that of the high Europeanism that she loved; and Mrs. Rosen stands against Sigmund Stein and the "stout, dark man" — not as a Jewish leech upon culture, but rather as its preserver and enabler. In short, Cather was far too aware of her *own* essential "foreignness" to assume any stable position in the fantasies that I've described: the result is her characteristic ambivalence, her signature "magic of contradictions."

NOTES

1. A central issue for psychoanalytic literary interpretation is exactly *whose* desire is at work in the text. I don't intend here any simple Freudian allegory, according to which Seabury suffers from an unresolved "Oedipal Complex" and replaces his real mother with Gabrielle; in the first place, clearly, as a textual figure he has no "real mother." Nor is it exactly my purpose to find a reflection of Virginia Cather in Gabrielle Longstreet or Marian Forrester, though this seems a more promising approach. Instead I want simply to use the idea of a mother, and of a child's energies directed toward a mother, to gain access to some otherwise puzzling emotional depths in "The Old Beauty." That idea of mother may be founded in Cather's historical, biological reality, or it may be an artifact of human culture, or (more plausibly) both.

2. I use the term "primal scene" in Freud's sense from his "Wolf Man" case history, laying stress on the *visual* and *constructed* nature of the scene. As Freud suggests there, the historical reality of the scene is less important than the opportunities it offers for wish-fulfillment and identification.

3. I have in mind here also Freud's sense that children usually understand witnessed parental intercourse as a *violent* act (see, for example, "The Sexual Theories of Children," *Standard Edition* IX, 220ff.).

4. Frightened nativist and eugenicist thinkers of the 1910s and 20s saw the impending demise of Western culture and its values in neo-Darwinian terms: the defective but prolific non-white races (generally exemplified by the "new immigrants" of the turn of the century, those coming from southern and eastern Europe), unnaturally propped up by white technology, would eventually overwhelm their host cultures. In the most famous of his works, *The Rising Tide of Color*, the white supremacist Lothrop Stoddard put the matter succinctly:

> Colored migration is a *universal* peril, menacing every part of the white world. . . . The grim truth of the matter is this: The whole white race is exposed, immediately or ultimately, to the possibility of social sterilization and final replacement or absorption by the teeming colored races. (297-98)

Calvin Coolidge's Labor Secretary James Davis, noting the many studies demonstrating widespread "feeble-mindedness" among darker-skinned immigrants, called for genetic selection in immigration policy: "The blood of a nation determines its history. . . . Let us do what we can to purify the national stream of life, to dry up the sources of hereditary poisoning, and to keep America sound at the core" (49-50).

5. "The Old Beauty" was presumably written against the backdrop of the presidential campaign of 1936, in which the remnants of Huey Long's populist movement generated a flamboyantly unsuccessful third-party campaign, orchestrated largely by the anti-Semitic radio demagogue Father Coughlin, whose principal strategy was a series of vitriolic attacks on Roosevelt and the international banking community.

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Cather's Canadian and Old World Connections
The Sixth International Seminar
June 24 - July 1, 1995
Quebec City, Canada

Old Quebec from the St. Lawrence

Seminar Theme:

Although her associations with Nebraska and the American Southwest are far better known and acknowledged, Willa Cather's imaginative connections to Canada and, especially through Quebec's Old-World culture in *Shadows on the Rock*, to Europe, are considerable. The Sixth International Cather Seminar, which will be held in Quebec City from June 24-July 1, 1995 will focus on these connections.

Broadly defined, this theme will include papers which address Cather's literal connections to Canada and Europe — her use of history in both *Alexander's Bridge* and *Shadows*, her summer visits to Grand Manan, New Brunswick, Quebec City, and her European trips — as well as her imaginative use of such antecedents in bringing the Old World to the New throughout her fiction. While a formal call for papers will be circulated this fall, interested participants should contact the Seminar Co-directors with proposals as early as possible.

Seminar Format:

Participants will be housed in dormitories on the suburban Quebec City campus of Laval University. The program will be made up of lectures and discussions by scholars on Cather, her use of Canadian and Old-World materials, and on Quebec itself. Much time will be spent in the Old City — the areas described in *Shadows* — as well as in its environs.

Post-Seminar Trip to Grand Manan:

Also being planned is an optional trip to Grand Manan island after the Seminar is concluded, tentatively scheduled from July 1-4 and beginning and ending in Quebec City. Participant numbers will be limited and there will be an additional fee.

Send inquiries, statements of interest, and paper proposals to:

Robert Thacker
Canadian Studies Program
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY 13617

Michael Peterman
Department of English
Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario
Canada K9J 7B8

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"THE OLD BEAUTY" AND MATERNAL PURITY, (Continued)

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Flux and Friendship: Impressionism in "Two Friends"

Kristy Rimmasch
Brigham Young University

One of Willa Cather's later short stories "Two Friends" begins with the narrator nostalgically looking back to childhood. She is searching for some "unalterable reality" among the vivid pictures and transitory memories that move freely through her mind (193). The wisdom of maturity tells this persona that like the restless seagulls she needs a "remote island" or "lonely ledge" as a place of stability; as she longs to find some reality to cling to, her story becomes an attempt to fix a memory from a rootless life represented by these gulls, "that seem so much creatures of the free wind and waves, that are as homeless as the sea" (193). She employs concrete, specific images of her childhood town and its two main characters, Mr. Dillon and Mr. Trueman, in order to recapture a moment in her past that had seemed a refuge of stability like the rocks to which the gulls return.

This notion of preserving a particular moment from the flux is one of the main features of impressionism. However, while the French Impressionists strove to arrest the flux of time in their immediate surroundings, Cather created a persona who attempts to capture a particular, stable moment from her fluid memories. The impressionist painters carried their canvases and paints outside to nature to capture a subject spontaneously, in spite of the transitory and illusory nature of ever changing light, shadow, and atmosphere. Painters such as Monet were obsessed with the idea of stopping the flux of time, and Monet's series paintings of Rouen Cathedral and of haystacks in the countryside represent this attempt to capture a subject in one exact moment with each change in nature. His Rouen Cathedral series consists of thirty paintings that demonstrate the changing light, atmosphere, and seasons over a one year period. Cather's "Two Friends" shows this same fascination (even the need) to capture with descriptive words that portray minute changes in mood and atmosphere a perception of stability and friendship as associated with the title characters. In addition, biographical information reveals that, similar to the narrator in "Two Friends," Cather sought stability in her own life through the concrete memories of her youth.

Cather completed "Two Friends" in 1931 while she was working on *Shadows on the Rock.* This was a time of emotional upheaval for the aging author: her father had recently died and her mother was in declining health from a stroke. As Cather suffered the loss of family and friends over the years, she made an attempt in her fiction to capture the stability she remembered from her childhood. Childhood was not an unusual subject in Cather, for she believed she created most of her stories from impressions gained during her formative years. However, as Woodress explains, now the youthful striving of her earlier novels was behind her and she became more "preoccupied with time and eternity" (434). The major symbol in *Shadows on the Rock*, for example, involves the rock of stability upon which the colonists fashion a life of changeless decorum and order in the Canadian wilderness.

"Two Friends" may be read as a similar attempt to find reality and stability in life. Cather wrote that she devised the two men who represent these qualities from actual men in Red Cloud whom she admired. However, they are not meant to be portraits but rather suggestions of a child's memory because "a story is made out of an emotion or an excitement and not out of the legs and arms and faces of one's friends" (Woodress 445-46). Perhaps during this time of insecurity and loss, Cather was attempting to recall and fix an idyllic youth remembered in deep velvety descriptions of night, "flooded by the rich indolence of a full moon, or a half-moon set in uncertain blue" (210). The scene has the effect of Renoir's *In the Meadow*, his dream-like depiction of two girls in the 1890s which, though set in the day, appears like a scene from a fairy tale in a country setting that, like Cather's, idealizes youth and the memories of childhood. The opening passage in "Two Friends" defining vivid memories as anchors of one's existence (193) and later passages describing the moon remind the reader that the narrator is creating a world of dreamscapes and fluid memories.

The attempt of an aging persona in "Two Friends" to arrest time and rescue memories is similar to Marcel Proust's obsession with individual moments of memory in the impressionistic *Swann's Way.* Similar to Cather's partially autobiographical story, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* results from a string of now unconscious memories that the author longs to retrieve and fix in his mind. Proust writes of his desire to portray an exact timeless image for future readers and then of the joy that comes when he frames an idea with words or stabilizes an unfolding memory in his

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Willa Cather's University Days: A Centennial Celebration 1895/1995

APRIL 6 - 8, 1995

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Cather's years at the University of Nebraska, 1890-1895, were pivotal ones. While there she began her literary and journalistic careers, publishing her first stories, reviews, and essays in campus and Lincoln newspapers, and national magazines. The taste of a wider world in the University developed the passion for art which drove Cather throughout her life.

This three-day celebration of Cather's college days explores the formative influences on her through talks by distinguished scholars; papers on Lincoln and the University in the 1890s and on Cather's connections to the literary, musical, social, scientific, and political life of the times; exhibits of Cather-related materials by the University Archives, the Nebraska State Historical Society, and other institutions; readings; musical events; local tours — all designed to help the modern reader place the young Cather in the context of her times.

Sponsored by the Cather Colloquium, the Department of English, and the Center for Great Plains Studies.

For more information and/or registration write: KARI RONNING
Department of English
315 Andrews Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0333

My Ántonia the Play Makes "Splendid Entertainment"

The stage "hit" in Omaha in March was Omaha Community Playhouse Director Charles Jones's adaptation of Cather's most famous novel. Georgia-reared, Jones credits Cather with acclimating him to Nebraska twenty years ago when he came to Omaha. "Without Willa Cather," Jones said, "I wouldn't have known how to appreciate a Nebraska landscape. Her greatest genius was probably in finding the profound in the simplest human activity, like a child picking up a grasshopper."

Omaha *World-Herald* reviewer Jim Delmont describes the play as "splendid entertainment" and "a miracle of condensation." The rest of his review follows:

Jones gets off to a risky start, entrusting the opening moments to mostly child actors. But gradually the larger cast takes hold, and the show focuses on the narrator's grandmother, Emmaline Burden, a dominating figure in the play — realized by Joan Hennecke with dignity, humor, strength and a genuine feeling for the role. She is wonderful.

The long first act, running about an hour and a half, concerns families — the Burdens, including three versions of Jim Burden, the novel's narrator — and the Shimerdas, poor Czech immigrants, whose daughter, Ántonia, beguiles Jim.

Three actresses play Ántonia, and three actors are Jim Burden. Marie Ellis could not be better as the child Ántonia — her diction, timing and the feeling she brings to the role are impressive. Equally charming as the teen Ántonia is plucky Christina Belford, a very gifted performer. Sweeter and quieter, with an inner strength, is Julie Huff, as the adult Ántonia.

Little Jack Waldron, much smaller than his counterpart, Miss Ellis, manfully tackles a huge role as the child Jim Burden. He appears throughout the show, because the three Burdens and the three Ántonias often appear in tandem or trio, playing against one or more of their opposite numbers.

Handsome Trever Pfeiffer hits just the right notes of innocence and confidence as the teen Jim, and Brad Luchsinger brings a casual charm to the adult Jim.

These multiple personalities may sound confusing, but Jones has no trouble keeping the narrative clear — and at times this technique has extraordinary impact, as when the three Ántonias appear together, entwined on the stage, speaking in unison as a kind of Greek chorus.

Another dramatic device that works to perfection — and draws the audience closer — is the bold use of foreign tongues. Characters speak in Czech, German and Russian, or in heavily accented English. The deep concern the characters have in listening and understanding each other is shared by the audience.

(Continued on Page 27)

mind through imagery (232). Concrete images may also be catalysts for memories, he writes, "just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, *permanent* and recognisable" (58 italics added). Proust recalls once forgotten childhood memories with the touch of a towel or the taste of cake dipped in tea, but Cather's usual writing process involves taking incidents from childhood after they have gelled with time within the recesses of her memory to reflect her quest to discover realities "somewhere at the bottom of things" (193).

Cather concentrates on images that represent stability by contrasting them with objects that are flimsy and transitory. Both R. E. Dillon and J. H. Trueman are strong characters with definite features and personalities that the narrator as a young girl finds unique and dependable. Dillon's face with its "high cheekbones" and "bold Roman nose" appears carved "in many planes, as if the carver had whittled and modeled and indented to see how far he could go" (194-95). The depth of his face reveals a strength that would not be found in a shallow character. The build of Trueman's body represents his strong character: "the moment one looked at him one felt solidity, an entire absence of anything mean or small, easy carelessness, courage, a high sense of honour" (196). This strength and stability draw the young girl to the two men and later entice the storyteller to recreate a memory that will represent their solid reality.

Not only are the characters of the two men solid, but their friendship seems to be formed of strength and depth. On a superficial level, this friendship seems somewhat surprising because of the differences between the two men. Dillon is a banker and a religious, family man who detests gambling, while Trueman is a widower who enjoys gambling and a game of poker in the evenings. However, even though Dillon is one who usually expresses his opinions, the narrator observes that about billiards and poker Dillon "held his peace before Trueman. His regard for him must have been very strong" (201). The narrator's concentration on the men's relationship demonstrates Cather's own attempt to maintain secure friendships during her life. Relationships with female friends became extremely important, especially with Isabelle McClung Hambourg for whom Cather stated she had written all of her novels (Woodress 479). She fully realized the necessity of close friends after the death of her parents, and commented that the bond between brother and sister was the closest and most satisfactory type of friendship (436).

The two friends' environment reflects the stability and strong reality the narrator longs to recreate. Although the relatively new western town was hastily built with shoddy materials, Dillon's bank and general store are constructed of red brick walls with a board sidewalk in front that "was wider than any piece of walk in town, smoother, better laid, kept in perfect repair; very good to walk on in a community where most things were flimsy" (197). Just as she liked the "solid and well built" store and sidewalk, the young girl also admired the two men because "they were secure and established" (197), were unlike the other "nervous" men in the town. After supper, these men would sit in old-fashioned office chairs outside on the sidewalk. These chairs had spreading legs for support and low round backs that enclosed the sitters (203), and their proximity to the ground and rounded features suggest a rock firmly rooted in the ground. They are reminiscent of Monet's solid haystacks; seemingly immovable and stable, these cone-shapes with their full, circular bases become nostalgic reminders of an idyllic, pastoral age. In Monet's obsession with capturing the elusive quality by painting this subject repeatedly in different light and atmospheric effects, he refused to let the farmers remove the haystacks until the first snow fall prohibited further painting.

Claude Monet, Rocks of Belle-Ile, 1886 Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Cather not only solidifies the relationship in "Two Friends" through specific details, she attempts to stop time and capture memory's evanescence by recalling exact moments within fluid narrative. The relationship of these two men had been "steady by some law of balance, an unconscious relation like that between the earth and the moon. It was this mathematical harmony which gave a third person pleasure" (227). Their relationship does not end merely as a result of a difference in politics, but because suddenly their talk becomes common and filled with material concerns. Dillon's obsession with Bryant and Trueman's unsympathetic responses make them more like the other men who talk of "nothing but politics and their business, and the very young men's talk was entirely what they called 'josh' . . . . It was scarcely speech, but noises, snorts, giggles, [and] sneezes . . ." (207). When Dillon and

(Continued on Page 28)

MY ÁNTONIA . . . "SPLENDID ENTERTAINMENT," (Continued)

This technique also heightens the storytelling mood of the entire work.

One really engaging scene is that of a dying Russian immigrant feverishly telling a Russian folk tale about wolves chasing down sleighs full of people. Actor Phillip Steiner shouts the tale in fluent Russian as the three Ántonias translate to the audience.

The second half of the play (53 minutes long) centers more on Ántonia — her adventures as a hired girl in town and her later misadventures with men. Though separated by education and geography, Jim Burden retains an emotional tie with her. There is more broad comedy in the second half, as Jones gives the show the punch of a Victorian tale.

A lovely musical score by Jonathan D. Cole, soaring at times on familiar American folk melodies, and often deeply moving, is a triumph — as is the remarkably simple scenic and lighting design of James Othuse with its vast panorama of ever-changing sky hues. Wendy Stark has skillfully created an amazing number of period costumes for the large cast.

The play was warmly welcomed by an opening-night audience of 565.

My Ántonia the Movie in Progress

Wilshire Court Productions of Los Angeles is filming a television version of the Cather novel in and around the Stuhr Museum in Grand Island, Nebraska.

A call for extras was issued in mid-June to portray farmers, shopkeepers, and families exemplifying Nebraska life in the late 1880s. The producers also sought help from locals to find authentic costumes and props from the 1885-1912 period.

Jason Robards and Eva Marie Saint star as the elder Burdens. Ántonia is played by Elina Lowensohn and Jim by Neil Patrick Harris. Joseph Sargent directs the teleplay by Victoria Riskin; David W. Rintels is Executive Producer. A USA Picture, *My Ántonia* is tentatively scheduled to air in December 1994 on the USA cable network.

Call for Papers

Seventh Annual American Literature Association Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, May 26-28, 1995.

For information write 1995 Cather Sessions Directors: Ann Romines, Dept. of English, George Washington U., Washington, D.C. 20052 (topic open); Kevin A. Synnott, Vice President, The Sage Colleges, Troy, NY 12180 (topic: Cather and the Visual Arts). Length 7-10 pages; due date: 1 December 1994.

— Photo by Robert Graning

RIDDLE: What is 14' x 20', has a lot of bookshelf and storage space, has an outside door, natural life, and makes Pat Phillips smile?

ANSWER: The WCPM Director's new office, which has a window to a part of Willa's World, the Art Gallery and Bookstore.

GIFT: Bob and Virginia Beardslee donated half of the fee for installing heating and air conditioning in WCPM's new office addition. This gift was given in memory of Bill Van Meter, former manager of the Red Cloud KNEnergy office and late husband of WCPM Board member Marcella Van Meter.

ERRATA: J. R. K. Kantor of Berkeley, California, has pointed out several errors in our printing of Wasserman's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* essay (*WCPMN* [36] Spring, 1994): the second word of Mitchell's title (*With*) should have been capitalized; Ferber's *Show Boat* has a two-word title; the surname of novelist Charles W. Chesnutt is not spelled like the plantation (Chestnut Hill) in *Sapphira*; finally, in *Works Cited*, the C. Waller Barrett Library was referred to as the William Barrett Library. I must add here that the Wasserman piece generated an unusual amount of positive response as a well-articulated answer to recent treatments of *Sapphira* by Toni Morrison and Elizabeth Ammons. — J. J. M.

Trueman go their separate ways, the narrator sees that friendships, for somewhat vague reasons, are not permanent.

Cather develops astrological imagery, the occultation of Venus, to arrest and then relinquish to the flux of time the concrete memory of the friendship. Monet's *Rocks of Belle-Ile* demonstrates a similar combination in capturing ocean waves at their moment of contact with jagged rocks: sunlight reflects on the white, loose daubs of the water's arrested spray as moisture seems to fill the air. In "Two Friends," only the narrator and the two men are present to witness the rare occultation, which Dillon tells the young girl to watch because she may never see it again in her lifetime (212-13). As the persona describes the event, time seems to stop; yet during this "suspension" of time, the star continually moves behind the moon, since neither Cather's verbal images nor Monet's painted ones can actually arrest time in nature. Still, the reader waits with the characters for the star to approach and then to become "a bright wart on the other edge of the moon" (213). Finally, however, there is progression: "a rift of blue came between [the moon and star] and widened very fast. The planet did not seem to move, but that inky blue space between it and the moon seemed to spread. The thing was over" (213). At the end of this passage the flux conquers, and the persona must once again struggle to find stability within her memories.

As Cather attempts to stop the flow of time and create stability, she achieves atmospheric effects found in the works of Monet. Frustrated with the changing light and atmosphere, Monet strove to portray the subject's *enveloppe*, "the visual curtain rather than conceptual bulk" (qtd in Pool, 230), in the Rouen Cathedral series. As a result, colors change from the golden-yellow of mid-day to the blue-gray pastels of waning sun through fog, and the light and air that surround Rouen Cathedral become almost palpable. In "Two Friends," Cather describes the feeling of the night in terms of touch, smell, and sight as the young girl sits listening to Trueman and Dillon: "Those April nights, when the darkness itself tasted dusty (or, by the special mercy of God, cool and damp), when the smell of burning grass was in the air, and a sudden breeze brought the scent of wild plum blossoms" (209). Or she recreates in vivid memory a young girl on a summer day filled with "sharp contrasts; thirst and cold water, the blazing stretch of Main Street and the cool of the brick stores when one dived into them" (210). The stable nature of the two men or their representative surroundings are always contained in this atmospheric *enveloppe*.

The generalized summer night scene that introduces the occultation seems particularly to imitate the impressionist style with sharp images of foreground figures and a background that fades and blurs into almost unintelligible shapes of pastel hues. Renoir uses this pattern in his later paintings with clearly delineated figures against a sketchy, blurred background of foliage. Also, the American Impressionist Childe Hassam is famous for scenes of city streets that employ this same technique. His *A City Fairyland* shows pedestrians during a snowy winter twilight; the features of a man with two young girls at his side are distinguishable in the foreground, but the scene blurs beyond the street into a mass of brownish-red buildings with square daubs of red and yellow for lighted windows. As in this twilight scene, the atmosphere in the night scene of "Two Friends" is at once palpable yet blurred, in this case "flooded by the rich indolence of a full moon" (210). In the foreground, Cather delineates the two men's striped shirts and "the flash of Mr. Dillon's diamond" (210). The "dark masses" of their shadows stand out against the white sidewalk like the massive, noticeable shadows of Monet's haystacks. As Cather's picture recedes toward background, objects are geometrically ordered and fade into painterly daubs starting with the brick wall that appears almost pink and takes on "a carnelian hue at night" (211). Across the "dusty road" stand box-elder trees and "frail wooden buildings" that were once white but are now gray "with faded blue doors" (211). In the moonlit distance, buildings blur into colors "of velvet-white and glossy blackness, with here and there a faint smear of blue door, or a tilted patch of sage-green that had once been a shutter" (211). As an attempt to capture the spontaneity and exact feeling of the moment, the scene appears sketchy and unfinished, much like an impressionist painting.

The night's atmosphere, filled with "ankle-deep" dust that seems "to drink up the moonlight like folds of velvet" (211), contains the "last residuum of material things" (212). Cather discovers through her writing, just as the impressionists did in painting, that by addressing the moment down to the very last atmospheric detail she could somehow fix the flux of memory and capture the stability that the rock came to represent for her. The narrator in "Two Friends" must make her memory of Dillon and Trueman, their friendship, and their unique environment specific and concrete; only then can Cather and her persona recapture for a moment the lost stability of childhood. Cather writes passionately of this environment: "Nothing in the world, not snow mountains or blue seas, is so beautiful in moonlight as the soft, dry summer roads in a farming country, roads where the white dust falls back from the slow wagon-wheel" (212). For it is where Cather finds reality, within the fluid memories of time.

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Willa Cather's Early Naturalism: "'A Death in the Desert'"

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In *O Pioneers!*, Cather describes the power of Alexandra Bergson's "love and yearning" for the land: "Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman" (170). It is a scene that every reader of Willa Cather remembers, one that remains engraved in the mind. It is a magnificent statement of the power of an individual to shape, to control, even to create the land around her.

And yet, just ten years before she published *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather wrote a story that could well be described as naturalistic, one in which love and yearning alter nothing in the arid desert landscape. The characters of "'A Death in the Desert'" are powerless themselves to move or to change, much less to influence, the land around them, notwithstanding their frequent trips by train and their incessant travels throughout the world. In "'A Death in the Desert,'" which opens with a train ride, the ever-present train imagery does not suggest the possibilities of a new frontier opening up but rather hints at a deterministic universe, a mechanistic one. In this early world of Cather, man, like a machine, is subject to naturally determined laws, and the characters can no more control and direct their lives than a train can go off its assigned and limiting tracks.

In the story, Everett Hilgarde is travelling by train to the West Coast when he is mistaken by Katharine Gaylord, the dying singer, for his brother Adriance, a composer of world-wide fame. Everett has spent his life explaining to excited strangers that they have mistaken him for his gifted brother. He remains with Katharine for the few weeks that she has left to live, trying to give her comfort and consolation. Everett becomes Katharine's link both to the world of art, which she has lost, and, more importantly, to his talented brother, Adriance, whom she had loved. Adriance himself is far too busy growing "into his best and greatest self" as an artist to look backwards toward the dying singer who loved him (76), but "it was not the first time that [Everett's] duty had been to comfort, as best he could, one of the broken things his brother's imperious speed had cast aside and forgotten" (74).

Woodress calls "'A Death in the Desert,'" the middle story of *The Troll Garden*, "the centerpiece of the book," but it is a centerpiece both gloomy and difficult to interpret ("Introduction," *TG*, xx). Critical readings vary widely about the emphasis of the story. Woodress, for example, sees Adriance as the story's main character, though he never actually appears in the story at all; he calls Everett "the least important of the three main characters," regarding him merely as a Jamesian "ficelle" (xx). Arnold, on the other hand, finds Katharine's plight "overstated almost to the point of melodrama," and she states that "this story is less the account of a woman's pitiful dying than it is the tragedy of a man's being subsumed in the identity of a famous brother whom he has the misfortune to resemble" (54). Rosowski seems to place both Everett and Katharine at the center of the story, stressing human values as a means of salvation from the temptations of the world of art. And O'Brien sees in "'A Death in the Desert'" a contrast between the silenced woman and the triumphant creative man: "as [Katharine's] life wanes, [Adriance's] strength and creativity increase as if, vampirelike, he were living on her gift of devotion and energy" (277).[1]

Perhaps Cather, too, sensed a certain puzzling indefiniteness about "'A Death in the Desert'"; certainly she revised it more extensively than all the other stories in *The Troll Garden*, cutting one thousand words from the magazine version and another three thousand words for *Youth and the Bright Medusa*.[2] Despite these changes, however, the emphasis of the story remains unchanged, and its essential gloominess might finally explain why Cather decided not to reprint it in her collected works.[3]

For if there is no obvious main character in "'A Death in the Desert,'" it is because none of the characters have any power to choose, or, indeed, any choices to make at all. The philosophy of naturalism claims that everything can be explained by natural and material causes. In a naturalistic world, love and yearning do not shape a land or even a character; all is determined mechanistically, by the forces of heredity or environment. Naturalistic literature that comes out of this idea tries to assign those natural causes to the actions of protagonists. It is based, therefore, upon a strictly deterministic philosophy, and it is that sense of determinism that permeates "'A Death in the Desert.'"[4]

The story of Katharine's success in becoming a celebrated artist is evident from the picture of her hanging in the music room in the home in the desert where she has come to die: "It was the face of a woman already old in her first youth, thoroughly sophisticated and a trifle hard, and it told of what her brother called her fight" (67). This narrative of a woman's choices would be told later, in glowing detail, by Willa Cather in *The Song of the Lark*, the story of Thea Kronborg's fight for fame, how it made her and what it cost her. In "'A Death in the Desert,'" however, we do not see that fight; we see no choices made at all; the vibrant story of a woman's development has been turned into a still photograph, placed behind glass, contained in a frame. Though Cather herself objected to the naturalistic theories of Emile Zola, the image of a woman placed behind glass is especially significant because of naturalism's stance of objectivity, a focus called for by a scientific theory of experience translated into literature.[5] This image was, perhaps, as

close as Cather ever came to putting such theories into a written work.

The picture hangs in Katharine's music-room, a room furnished "in the same tone" as Adriance's many studios, a copy of a New York studio that actually looks out on "the great upheaval of the Rockies" (66). Katharine is not only physically dying, she is already dead to the world around her, the western world in which she has found herself, as she is dead to the eastern world of art, where she can fight no more. One is reminded of the window in the attic of *The Professor's House*, of the view that overlooked the expanse of Lake Michigan, of the contrast between stifling indoors and vigorous life outside, but there is no middle section here, no jewel-like "Tom Outland's Story" to break the sense of suffocation and disease.

Everett Hilgarde paints a remarkable picture of the dichotomy between artist and non-artist when he remembers Katharine appearing in concert with his brother: "The footlights had seemed a hard, glittering line drawn sharply between their life and his; a circle of flame set about those splendid children of genius" (73). "'A Death in the Desert'" is, perhaps, the most pessimistic story in *The Troll Garden*, showing as it does the appalling emptiness in the world of artists and non-artists alike and barely hinting that there is any positive value to the lives of either; the combination of morbidity and arid sterility that the name of the story implies reflects the darkness of its themes. Adriance has the gift of art that can thrill Katharine, but he lacks the human feeling that would enable him to share it; Everett would like to help Katharine, to comfort her with *his* gift, but it is, finally, a gift that is but a poor reflection of what his brother has to offer. Cather does not follow the strictest dictates of naturalistic writing by analyzing just which forces of heredity or environment have thrust the characters into their strictly determined roles; nonetheless, she has Everett allude to this fatalistic sense of determinism in the story when he says about his brother that "it's difficult to prescribe for those fellows; so little makes, so little mars" (76). The performing artist's stage becomes a metaphor for a deterministic universe. Thus, none of the characters, artist nor non-artist, can free him or herself from the limitations of a strictly determined role, because each is trapped in his or her own and separated from the worlds on either side of those bright, white footlights.

And so, on the night of Adriance's opening concert in Paris, with Everett standing next to her helplessly, Katharine dies, looking at Everett and calling him by his brother's name with her final breath. It is a bitter indictment of both brothers and a grim portrayal of the inadequacies of their worlds. "'A Death in the Desert'" opens and closes with a picture of Everett Hilgarde travelling on a train through the dusty landscape of Wyoming. The opening description of Everett and his fellow passengers links them to the arid land around them, suggesting that they are almost part of the dead landscape.

> The four uncomfortable passengers were covered with a sediment of fine, yellow dust which clung to their hair and eyebrows like gold powder. It blew up in clouds from the bleak, lifeless country through which they passed, until they were one colour with the sagebrush and sandhills. (61)

Characters merge with landscape here in a quintessentially naturalistic picture.

Ten short years separate this image of a determining landscape dominating the characters in "'A Death in the Desert'" from that of Alexandra Bergson creating a landscape by herself through the power of her love for the land. What happened during those ten years to turn Willa Cather away from naturalistic forms and themes to the vigorous sense of an individual's possibilities that Alexandra's power to control the Genius of the land conveys?[6] O'Brien suggests in her biography that during this period of time Cather accepted the literary inheritance of her mothers, breaking away from her reliance on male literary forebears; perhaps that empowering act, by giving her a sense of her own creative potential and mastery, allowed Cather to empower her characters, too. Or perhaps Cather's work in 1907 revising and rewriting Georgine Milmine's *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* had something to do with it. While there is no indication that Cather felt especially drawn to Christian Science as she was, say, to the Catholic church later in life, certainly its philosophy that faith should transform life rather than simply idealize it is in tune with Alexandra Bergson's world-creating spirit.

Whatever the reason, in the space of just one decade Willa Cather moved from a naturalistic vision of a deterministic world and a landscape that dominates and traps her characters to a portrayal of a woman who could remake the land solely through the strength of her own indomitable spirit. And in shaping that memorable character and reshaping that beloved landscape, Willa Cather reshaped herself as an author, opening up new possibilities for her creation of strong women characters who dominate her oeuvre even as they dominate their own landscapes, their own worlds.

NOTES

1. O'Brien's explanation lacks force, I think because the story emphasizes Adriance's — and, for that matter, Katharine's — "vampirelike" use of Everett; Katharine's death, finally, has nothing to do with Adriance at all. O'Brien is more convincing when she points out that all the male artists of *The Troll Garden* are absent or dead, seeing this as signifying the patriarchal artistic tradition that represses the women artists of the book.

2. "'A Death in the Desert'" had been published in *Scribners* in 1903. *The Troll Garden* was published by *McClure's* in April 1905.

3. Woodress feels that the extensive revisions indicate that Cather was never wholly satisfied with the story, but that she included it in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* because the character of Adriance had been inspired by composer Ethelbert Nevin, whom Cather knew in Pittsburgh three years

before his early death. However, he says that thirty years later "it seems that a young artist's death in the desert no longer had the power to move her . . ." ("Introduction," *TG*, xxix).

4. The term naturalism is a large one, and I am using it only in a limited sense, as connoting a deterministic universe where man cannot freely control his own destiny.

Naturalist authors tend to focus on the seamier and more sensational aspects of life, dwelling on deficiencies of social environment and of human beings generally. Westbrook points out that the story of the hardships of Ántonia Shimerda's childhood, her seduction, and the birth of her illegitimate child all would seem to "constitute a deterministic formula for failure" (243). However, he makes the distinction between literary devices associated with naturalism and the determinism that is the defining characteristic of true naturalism. Thus, he finally finds that Ántonia, in salvaging her life, actually epitomizes what he calls a humanistic or libertarian philosophy of freedom of will, and not naturalism at all.

Murphy also sees in the more sensational elements of *My Ántonia* the naturalistic side of Cather's writing, which he views as a combination of naturalistic material and a Jamesian narrative consciousness ("Nebraska Naturalism in Jamesian Frames").

5. Woodress feels that although Cather thought Zola was one of the greatest minds in France and admired his stand on Dreyfus, finally she rejected his artistic theories, writing that "his greatness as a man has not always been to his advantage as an artist" (*A Literary Life* 143). In one of her drama reviews in Pittsburgh, she wrote about "this wicked and perverse generation that is so ridden by Ibsenism and Zolaism on the stage and off" (128).

O'Brien finds an even deeper hostility between Cather and Zola, calling him "her favorite target" (151). She specifically finds that Cather objected to the determinism of naturalistic writers because such a philosophy would be inimical to her own desire to break free of the social determinants of a woman's destiny. Cather, says O'Brien, "wanted to know that individual force, will, and passion could make a difference, that Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' was a reliable guide to human endeavor" (151-52). In her creation of Alexandra Bergson, Cather brought that desire to fruition; the determinism of " 'A Death in the Desert' " is a product of Cather's earlier experimentation with various attitudes and authorial stances.

6. Murphy sees *One of Ours* as another example of Cather's "experiment in turn-of-the century realism and naturalism" (234). He convincingly analyzes Cather's use of detail for naturalistic ends, and cites her depiction of characters "controlled by external forces, and success and failure as results of circumstance more than of character" (234).

Murphy reads the ending of *One of Ours* as strictly ironic. If so, perhaps Cather's return to naturalistic techniques ten years after she would seem to have given up on a deterministic universe in *O Pioneers!* resulted from a vision of life and possibility darkened by war and the death of her cousin, G. P. Cather, model for Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*. Alternatively, perhaps Cather actually meant the ending of the novel to undercut the darkness of its technique. For if Claude could not, in the end, remake his landscape and his life as Alexander or Ántonia did, at least he "died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with. Perhaps it was as well to see that vision, and then to see no more" (1296). The "bright faith" that Claude's mother sees in her son's final letters implies a hope that in having "found his life" before death, Claude actually conquered both character and circumstance, though he paid the highest of prices for his conquest (1296).

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Rollin Mallory Daggett's "My French Friend"; A Precursor of "Paul's Case"?

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I

In the January 1895 issue of the *Overland Monthly* appeared "My French Friend," a story with plot and themes so strikingly similar to "Paul's Case" (1905) as to suggest that it might have been one of the sources of Cather's story. "My French Friend" was written by R. M. Daggett, a man of considerable experience and reputation on the West Coast. The tale was far from being Daggett's first publication, but it as probably his best short story and has a surprising and poignant ending which retains power today and is good enough to have stuck in Cather's memory.

Rollin Mallory Daggett (1831-1901) is now largely unknown except by students of the Comstock Lode and of Mark Twain's early career. Elsewhere, I have reported that his life was varied, colorful, and adventurous, and that he earned favorable reputations for himself in each of several major occupations which he followed at successive periods of his lifetime: journalist,

Congressman from Nevada, Minister to Hawaii, and author (Berkove 22-28). As a journalist, he had worked on the editorial staff of the *Territorial Enterprise*, the famous Comstock newspaper, with Joseph Goodman, Mark Twain, and Dan De Quille, as well as other notable authors and personalities of the silver mining era. As a writer of fiction, in 1882 he published *Braxton's Bar*, a novel about gold mining; in 1888, with King Kalakaua of Hawaii as co-author he published *The Legends and Myths of Hawaii*; and in his latter years, a number of memoirs, poems, and short stories, including "My French Friend."

We do not know if this story is factual. Daggett did mine gold for two years, from 1850-52, so the veracity of the story cannot be summarily dismissed, but it is a time-honored convention of literature for authors to represent as true personal memoirs narratives which in fact may have come to them from other sources, or may be entirely fictitious. It is not the factual accuracy of "My French Friend" which is at issue, however, but its relevance to "Paul's Case."[1]

If there were only one or two striking similarities shared by the two stories, the case for considering "My French Friend" as a possible influence on "Paul's Case" would be tenuous, as the similarities could be easily attributed to coincidence. But there are a number of parallels, and they appear to add up to something more than coincidence. To be specific, both stories are about lonely outsiders who burned their bridges behind them. Both protagonists are sensitive males who cannot long endure an unsympathetic environment. Both on this account reach their limit of tolerance and prefer death to constant humiliation and frustration. Both try to dress well — if somewhat inappropriately for their social status — and both have a taste for elegant living which they experience one last time before they die. In both cases, the protagonists enjoy a final meal in the grand style which uses up the last of their capital. Both males commit suicide at the end, and both leap to their deaths.

There are important differences too, of course. Cather's point of view is that of an omniscient narrator, sometimes given to irony, and whatever emotion the narrator may feel is usually submerged and has to be detected by inference. Daggett's story is told as a first-person account, and emotion is expressed freely and generously. Cather's protagonist is a youth whose decision to commit suicide is tragic in part because it reflects his immaturity and in part because it cuts off his life at such an early stage. Armand's suicide may be more despairing because it is an adult decision based on more extensive experience, and it is poignant because Armand retains to the end a sweet simplicity and naive idealism. Beyond these obvious points, it must also be admitted that Cather's story is better written, subtler in nuance, and richer and more complex in theme.

But the purpose of ths comparison is not to consider whether or not "My French Friend" is the artistic equivalent of "Paul's Case," but only to suggest that it may have stimulated Cather's imagination and played a part in the conception of her story and also later fiction — the musician Blind Tom (a prototype of Blind d'Arnault in *My Ántonia*) is mentioned in the first part of Daggett's story and there are slight reminders in it of both "Tom Outland's Story" and *Shadows on the Rock*. In an 1895 sketch of Stephen Crane, Cather quotes and agrees with a statement of his that "after he got a notion for a story, months passed before he could get any sort of personal contact with it, or feel any potency to handle it. 'The detail of a thing has to filter through my blood, and then it comes out like a native product, but it takes forever' " (99).

The historical evidence for influence is at present mostly circumstantial but not inconsequential. "On the Divide," Cather's first publication in a national magazine, appeared in the *Overland Monthly* of January 1896, just one year after Daggett's story. It is reasonable to assume that Cather, like most authors, would have acquainted herself with previous issues of a magazine to which she intended to submit her story. If so, "My French Friend" would have struck her eye, for over its title is printed in bold letters "TRUE TALES OF THE OLD WEST," and "On the Divide" is certainly a Western tale with pretensions of truth. Daggett's story, moreover, has a harshly realistic note in its tracing of the progress of Armand's despair, and if Cather needed encouragement that the *Overland Monthly* might be interested in her own rather bleak portrayal of settler life, "My French Friend" would have supplied it. For that matter, Armand's suicide in the story might have suggested Canute's suicidal tendencies in "On the Divide."

It has long been known who were some of the literary figures Cather admired at this time: Woodress mentions Carlyle, Ruskin, George Eliot, George Sand, Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Henry James, Kipling, Stevenson, Dickens, Thackeray, Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, and Hawthorne (107-110). Yet she took her greatest source material from her knowledge of, and sympathy with, the unordinary lives of ordinary Western settlers. It should therefore come as no surprise to her readers, and no detraction to her, to add to that list of eminent authors some humbler names, like Daggett's, from Western regional literature. It would demonstrate that, unlike Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady*, in reading more widely than the classics Cather took her inspiration from wherever it came. The process of assimilating it until it became "a native product," however, might take a long time — even ten years.

II

My French Friend[2]

Bless us! how the pen will wander in describing events connected with pioneer life in California! However, it has not gone far astray in this instance, since it was my purpose in the beginning to say something concerning a strange character whom I first encountered while awaiting the construction of the flume on the South Yuba . . . .

I occupied a log cabin on the flat skirted by our river claim, about one hundred yards below the ferry, owned and operated by my mining partners in conjunction with a small trading establishment, where gold dust was bought and miners' supplies could be purchased.

Illustration from the 1895 Overland *printing of "My French Friend".*

Sitting in the twilight in front of my cabin door one evening in July, listening to the splashing of the waters over the riffles, and devising new investments for the quarter of a million with which I expected to leave the river before the snow began to fall, I discovered a man coming down the flat, with a roll of blankets strapped to his back, and carrying his hat in his hand. He did not stop at the ferry-house, but passed on at a brisk walk until he reached a fallen pine fifty or sixty yards back of the cabin, where he dropped his burden and began to make preparations to spend the night. After smoothing the ground behind the tree, he unrolled and spread his blankets, and, squatting down upon them, suddenly disappeared.

Strolling over the wayfarer five minutes later, I found him sitting cross-legged on his blankets, and eating from a loaf of bread, which he occasionally moistened with draughts from a claret bottle. On discovering me he rose to his feet, and politely returned my salutation of "Good evening."

He was a small, spare man, with bright gray eyes, and a strikingly intelligent face. He was partially bald, and his hair and cropped whiskers were tinged with gray. He was dressed in a faded business suit, with a soft felt hat, and shoes too frail for travel in the mountains. His hands were soft and shapely, and his whole appearance indicated that he was out of place, alone and with his blankets spread at night beside a fallen tree on the South Yuba.

No one could mistake his nationality. His face, his eyes, his gestures, his attitude in speaking, all were as French as the charming accent and amusing choice of words with which he endeavored to make himself understood in English. All that he knew of our language had been learned from books, and his vocabulary was unique and pleasing.

Finding that I could make myself understood, I invited him to the cabin, informing him that I was alone, and my lodgings embraced an extra bunk, which was entirely at his service . . . . [W]e sat in the open doorway and talked until past midnight, and I learned much of the personal history of my guest. His name was Armand Daudet. He was born and reared in Paris, and his age was fifty-one. His father was a distinguished physician, but Armand was educated for the law. The profession did not please him, however, and after receiving his diploma he drifted into journalism. He became prominent and influential in his new vocation. He favored the early aspirations of Louis Napoleon, and assisted in securing his election to the National Assembly; but when he destroyed the republic Armand became his enemy, and was finally compelled to leave France for openly attacking the Empire. A French merchant vessel took him to San Francisco, where he landed with less than a hundred dollars. The French consul treated him with scant courtesy, and after vainly trying to find some employment for which he was fitted, he started for the mines. A fellow-countryman in Nevada City advised him to go to Sweetland's, and he was on his way thither when night overtook him at the mouth of Rush Creek.

"You must be pretty nearly out of money," I suggested.

He took from his pocket a Mexican silver dollar, and, holding it up, said with a smile: "Zis is all I have left."

"What will you do when that is gone?"

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the river.

"Oh, no," I replied, alarmed at the calmness with which he contemplated suicide; "you must not think of such a thing. For the lack of gold you would drown yourself in a river that is full of it. That would be ridiculous. Do you know anything about gold mining?"

"Very leetle. As I pass along I have seen some men employed in ze acquisition of gold from ze sand by means of what you denominate a rockaire. So mooch I know of mining, and no more. It is very leetle, you must say."

"Are you willing to work?"

"Am I willing? Ah, sir, I should esteem myself most happy to arduously labor wiz my hands to procure gold." . . .

Armand would have talked all night, so greatly was he excited at the thought of becoming a miner; but he crawled into his bunk at last, and after breakfast the next morning I started him to work at the lower end of the flat, where I knew fair wages might be realized . . . .

Notwithstanding the scorn with which Armand proposed to teach his hands to regard the blisters afflicting them, a week or more elapsed before he was able to do another full day's work. But his hands hardened in time, and for nearly two months he continued his labors, adding daily to his little store of gold. He was intelligent, good-natured and vivacious, and during the evenings we spent together his descriptions of Paris life and references to French politics were incessant and entertaining. I became very greatly attached to him, and always regretted the ridiculous occurrence which led to his abrupt departure . . . .

As our bunks were so located that a conversation could not very well be carried on between us after retiring for the night, I had assisted Armand in making and swinging a canvas hammock for his accommodation, within five or six feet of the mattress of leaves upon which my blankets were spread. The arrangement was satisfactory to him, and he usually talked after we had bestowed ourselves for the night until silenced by my failure to respond.

One night, in a spirit of mischief, I harrowed him into a condition of nervousness by talking of snakes, centipedes, scorpions, and other venomous reptiles found in California. I told him that rattlesnakes, whose bit was death, sometimes entered cabins through defective chinking, and crawled into the bunks and hammocks of sleepers; and referred to a case which a short time before had resulted in the death of a miner at Waloupa.

Some time before daylight the next morning, I was aroused by Armand calling out in a suppressed, but terrified tone: "My friend! my friend! Are you awake?"

"Yes, I am awake. What's the matter, Armand?"

"I zink zare is a serpent in zis hammook."

"Oh, I guess not."

"Yes, but I am sure. What shall I do?"

Deeming it possible that he might not be wrong, I advised him to quietly remove his feet from the hammock, and then spring suddenly to the floor.

He attempted to follow my advice. In less than a minute there was a crash, followed by a succession of agonizing groans . . . .

I raised and seated him on a bench, and, seeing that he was not dangerously hurt, began cautiously to open and examine the hammock for the venomous reptile that had provoked the disaster. I found it. It was three or four loose feet of the hammock rope which accident had stretched along the side of Armand.

"Here is your snake, Armand," I said, holding up the rope . . . .

Of course, the story of Armand's mishap was too good to keep, and I told it at the ferry-house in the presence of half-a-dozen miners; and when, in the afternoon, some one in passing laughingly bawled out to him, "Crapeau, how's yer snake-bite?" he knew that I had betrayed him, and straightway attempted to blow out his brains with a rusty old horse-pistol that a former occupant of the cabin had left on a shelf; but the weapon was harmless, and I had fortunately loaned my revolver three or four days before.

His sad and reproachful look at supper awoke within me a feeling of remorse . . . . With tears in his eyes, he held out his hand and said:

"Adieu, my good friend. You have greatly humiliated me, but you have been kind, and I do pardon you. But I cannot remain here to be ze jest of brutal men. I did try to kill myself, but ze weapon decline to be discharge. I feel for you no resentment — nozzhing but love — but I must go. Adieu!"

♦ ♦ ♦

As I subsequently learned, Armand proceeded to San Francisco, where, through the influence of a French friend, he secured the position of porter in a wholesale establishment on Battery street. As it was a time of the year when trade was dull, and the duties of porter were correspondingly light, at the end of the first month Armand sought the head of the house, and said to him with dignity:

"Sir, I desire to discharge myself."

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired the merchant, with surprise. "Are you overworked?"

"Ah, sir, your words confirm ze apprehension. I do very little work. I zhink you employ me from charitee, and I decline to accept ze gratitude. Sir, allow me to tender to you my very great respect." And Armand bowed himself out of the office, leaving the merchant staring at him in speechless amazement.

Two months later I met Armand in San Francisco. He was well dressed, and apparently in a genial frame of mind. His delight in seeing me seemed to be almost boundless. He shed tears of joy. "Ah, my friend," he said, "I have waited for zis occasion. I have eaten your bread, beans, your bacon in ze Yuba rivaire. Tonight you must enjoy wiz me a French dinnaire."

I accepted the invitation, and at six o'clock Armand called for me in a carriage at my hotel, and we were driven to a French restaurant, where a private dining-room had been reserved for us. The table and sideboard were decorated with flowers, and the dinner was choice and elaborate, with the finest of old wines, and every appetizing accessory.

I had never seen Armand so happy. We ate, drank, chatted, and smoked until near midnight, when the same carriage in which we had been conveyed to the restaurant reappeared at the door, and Armand returned with me to my hotel, where I bade him goodnight. In parting, he held my hand for a moment, as if about to say something; but with a simple "adieu" he hurriedly re-entered the carriage, and was driven off.

A paragraph in a morning paper took me to the Coroner's rooms the next day, where I saw the pale, dead face of Armand. He had been seen to leap into the water from Clay Street wharf shortly after midnight, and his body was recovered an hour or two afterwards. No money was found on the person of the suicide. He had evidently spent the last of his earnings in providing a grand entertainment for his friend from the mountains, and then deliberately put an end to his life.

Poor Armand! His heart may have ached with wounds that he never showed to me.

— R. M. Daggett.

NOTES

1. I would like to express here my thanks to Dr. Gladys Leithauser, for her useful comments on this paper, and to Prof. John J. Murphy, for his friendly suggestions.

2. "My French Friend" was the second of two stories included in Daggett's "True Tales of the Old West" piece. Excerpts from the story follow. Several typographical errors have been silently emended.

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Willa Cather and Floyd Dell

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Among the younger contemporaries of Willa Cather was Floyd Dell (1887-1968), a writer now forgotten but in his time mentioned as an equal with Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. He was a familiar figure among the radical writers and artists in Greenwich Village during World War I; he was, with Max Eastman, an editor of *The Masses*, and with Eastman and several others tried under the Espionage Act for opposing conscription on American entry into that war. The charge was dropped after a hung jury, and Dell went on to a successful career as novelist, playwright, and social critic. In 1935 his literary career came to an end as he took a position in the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The later years of his life were spent as a writer for various government agencies.[1]

Dell was an early admirer of Willa Cather, writing a strong review of *O Pioneers!* They became acquainted as members of the literary circles in the Village, and in the 1920s, after Dell's marriage, his wife, an admirer as well, took the opportunity to sit at Cather's feet for conversation when she could. What never emerged in any discussion, however, is the hand Cather apparently had had in the publication of one of Dell's early poems during her time as an editor at *McClure's*.[2]

The evidence emerges in a letter Dell drafted in 1960 to a young professor who had just completed a dissertation on Dell's life and work and who was

contemplating a biography. Dell read the dissertation, which had been based in part on his own early autobiography (*Homecoming*, 1933); in it he found references to the publication circumstances of his earliest poems which stirred a sudden memory. In 1907, before Cather was widely known, Dell had been a young poet and factory worker living in Davenport, Iowa. There he met the local librarian, an inspirational woman named Marilla Freeman, who encouraged him to publish and who — more important — had some connections that would gain him a reading by editors of national magazines. In 1909, two of his poems were published in *Century* and *McClure's*. And, as he complained in *Homecoming*, the one in *Century* had been enlarged by a stanza added by an editor.[3] Looking over the material again in 1960, he was reminded that the poem in *McClure's* had been enlarged as well, and memory made a startling connection:

> Remembering that incident, the name "Sibert" came into my mind as the name of Marilla's editorial friend. Sibert? Willa Sibert. What? I thought — could it have been Willa Sibert Cather? I looked her up in an old Who's Who and found that she was assistant editor of McClure's at that time. I had never thought of Willa Cather later as in any way connected with that poem. I had admired greatly her Song of the Lark and, even more, My Ántonia. B. Marie [Dell's wife], who is deeply interested in pioneer life, had sat at her feet at the Pen Club, talking with her about her books. It amuses me to think that the new stanza may have been (I think very likely was) written by Willa Cather. Its sentiments are like some of hers and it is beautiful in its way.[4]

The scenario is a likely one. According to James Woodress's biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, Cather had the major responsibility for the poetry and fiction published in S. S. McClure's muckraking magazine. Much of it was "uniformly bad and unpublishable" and she worked hard with what showed promise.[5] It is easy to imagine her spending a few moments to make a good poem better, and such editorial license apparently was not uncommon in such magazines. Here is the poem as she published it:

WAIFS[6]

Is it across the ocean,
Or on some distant star,
Or only in my dreaming
That my own people are?

Shall I not some day find them
In valley or in mart,
My people of the vision,
The people of my heart?

How shall I come to know them?
By what mysterious sign
Shall I at once discover
That they are kin of mine?

And are there other children,
Forgotten and alone,
Who wait like me forever
The coming of their own?

I wonder if I know them;
Perhaps they pass me by,
And feel a sudden yearning
To speak — and wonder why.

And I, perhaps I pass them,
Listening for the call
From my enchanted country,
And see them not at all.

And what was the version of the poem that came to her desk from Dell, presumably with Marilla Freeman's recommendation? We cannot say for certain, for no manuscript survives. However, Dell was fond of quoting his own poems in later works, and in *Homecoming* he describes his youthful feeling of isolation as a poet in a decidedly unpoetic world. One evening in the Davenport library he had eavesdropped on the conversation of a man of obvious intelligence; his voice and demeanor suggested to Dell that the man was perhaps a poet, "someone it would be delightful to know." On the steps of the library the man spoke to Dell, and embarrassed Dell made no reply — and bitterly regretted the lost opportunity. "And upon some evening afterward, a poem came into my mind."[7]

As each one passed I scanned his face,
And each, methought, scanned mine;
Each looked on each a little space,
Then passed, and made no sign.

And every cold glance answered Nay!
Would no one understand?
None brush the cobweb bars away,
Stand forth and clasp my hand?

But as into each face I peered,
My glance was cold as theirs,
That they whose scornful laugh I feared
Might pass me unawares.

The form is different, and it is a shorter poem, but the sentiment is very close to that of "Waifs." To close the gap between it and the poem Willa Cather finally published, we might reasonably conjecture that she received another version, to which she added a concluding stanza. Dell, trying in 1960 to untangle memories called up by the sudden recollection of the name "Sibert" from a half-century past, is to be forgiven if the details are not clear.[8] But somewhere in his published poem lies the work of Willa Cather, a stanza at least, which he had accepted unwittingly as a youth and which he re-accepted, with a wry sense of the honor, as an aged man passed over by history.

NOTES

1. Floyd Dell, *Homecoming: An Autobiography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1993; reprt. Port Washington, N.E.: Kennikat Press, 1961. G. T. Tanselle, "Faun at the

Barricades: The Life and Work of Floyd Dell," [unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1959]).

2. Floyd Dell, "A Good Novel," *Chicago Evening Post: Friday Literary Review* (25 July 1913), p. 9. Letter cited n. 4 below.

3. *Homecoming*, pp. 90-92, 135.

4. Letter, Floyd Dell to G. T. Tanselle, 4 April 1960. The letter is part of the Floyd Dell papers in the Newberry Library in Chicago; in Dell's hand it is marked "written to Tanselle but not sent." The cooperation of Mr. Tanselle is hereby acknowledged.

5. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 188.

6. *McClure's* (30 March 1908), 690.

7. *Homecoming*, pp. 85-86.

8. Also not clear is the relationship between Willa Cather and Marilla Freeman, whose name appears nowhere in the Cather biographies.

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