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WILLA CATHER'S GREENWICH VILLAGE: NEW CONTEXTS FOR "COMING, APHRODITE!"

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Early one day in June 1913, Willa Cather left her house at 5 Bank Street in Greenwich Village to do the day's marketing. She had just finished off a breakfast made from fresh raspberries, brioche, and strong Chinese tea, and she was in good spirits to haggle. She walked south toward the Jefferson Street market, chatting about France with her friend Elizabeth Sergeant, who had recently arrived in New York. As the two women walked, they passed near the home of John Sloan, a painter and illustrator who had been submitting regularly to *The Masses* since Max Eastman took over the editorship in 1912. But Willa Cather was probably not thinking about radical journalism; she was probably thinking about a good French Camembert.¹

The weather was agreeable and the two women decided not to walk directly to the market, but to stroll east to Fifth Avenue and south to Washington Square. They liked to admire the old houses, and Cather particularly wanted to show Sergeant the Church of the Ascension, where she often went to vespers and gazed at John La Farge's frescoes. Across the street from the church was a mansion whose upper floor was rented out to Mabel Dodge, a woman recently returned from Europe who was hosting regular gatherings in her home, inviting people like Big Bill Heywood, Carl Van Vechten, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, John Reed, and Lincoln Steffens to stir up the conversation. But Cather had not met Mabel Dodge yet, and so she passed by without comment; instead, she pointed out the Brevoort Hotel, where, only a few years earlier, she and Edith Lewis were taking their dinner as often as four times a week.²

They walked near the old house of Richard Watson Gilder off Fifth Avenue on Eighth Street. The Gilder house had hosted a distinguished salon at the end of the nineteenth century, drawing such artists as August Saint-Gaudens, John Burroughs, Helena Modjeska, and Stanford White, the architect who designed the Washington Memorial Arch in nearby Washington Square. As Cather and Sergeant walked under the Arch, Cather pointed directly south to 60 Washington Square South, the first building she lived in after moving to New York to work for S. S. McClure in 1906. Next door, at 61 Washington Square South, was the "House of Genius," a building that had known Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, O. Henry, and a variety of other artists and

journalists as tenants. After they walked through the park filled with local Villagers, mostly Italian immigrants, they turned west, walked past the studio of William Glackens, and, crossing MacDougal Street, looked south toward Polly's restaurant, home of Heterodoxy, a local radical women's group. After *O Pioneers!* was published, Willa said, she got all sorts of invitations from local women's groups, and she hated the very thought of belonging. "Perish all social clubs for women!" she exclaimed.³

They soon made it to the Jefferson Street Market, and Willa and Elsie bought a chicken from an Italian man with a ragged blue hat, an unshaven chin, and one fang-like tooth pushing against his lip and forcing his ready smile into an eccentric shape. Cather, nodding at a well-dressed young man in a black-banded straw hat who was walking near, said to Sergeant, "Surely that one sells bonds on Wall Street, and no doubt his mother had his teeth straightened! Mouths should be left as nature made them—mouths are as individual as ears or eyes, . . . but the dentists insist on deadly conformity."⁴

After getting back to Bank Street with armfuls of food for Josephine Bourda to cook, Cather excused herself and told Sergeant that she must be alone for two and a half hours, as it was time for her to write.

"Greenwich Village does not exist"

Two assumptions confront anyone exploring Willa Cather's relationship to Greenwich Village. First, that Willa Cather, who lived in the Village from 1906 until 1927, and made New York her permanent residence until her death in 1947, was at American modernism's geographic center: around her in these years was the highest concentration of artistic talent that twentieth century America ever knew.⁵ According to Ann Douglas, "Modern American culture . . . is unimaginable without New York City."⁶ To Alfred Kazin, Greenwich Village "ushered in the first great literary society in America after Concord."⁷ "Nowhere did the instinct for the new flourish more extravagantly," Christine Stansell writes, "than in New York City, where a group of writers who collected in Greenwich Village between 1890 and 1920 transformed an unexceptional shabby neighborhood into a place glowing with a sense of the contemporary."⁸ The second assumption is that, living in the heart of the American avant-garde, Willa Cather ignored it.

Most critics who have commented on Cather's relationship to Greenwich Village have presumed she willfully distanced herself from Village bohemia due to her particular frame of mind, one that preferred

quiet, elegant domesticity to raucous party-hopping. In her friend Elizabeth Sergeant's words, Cather "had more natural affinity for *la vie de famille* than for *la vie de bohème*."⁹ James Woodress reports that "Cather was an observer rather than a participant in the yeasty ferment in Greenwich Village."¹⁰ Joan Acocella states that, despite her Greenwich Village address, "she had no contact with the partisans of Freud, Marx, and free verse who constituted Village bohemia in those days."¹¹ Deborah Lindsay Williams, however, considers Cather's aloofness from the bohemian community a willful attempt to protect her "public persona" and "remain free of any obligations that might interfere with her writing."¹² Williams paints a picture of Cather as a writer ruthlessly establishing imaginative "boundaries" for her literary career that will not allow her to publicly acknowledge any sort of identification with the literary community of Greenwich Village.

Whatever the analysis, virtually every critic who has written about Cather in the Village has begun with a presumption of Cather's unwillingness or inability to enter into the vibrant arts community around her.¹³ They have assumed a split between Cather and the community as if it were a given and irrefutable fact. These interpretations fail, however, because they inaccurately circumscribe the experience of early-twentieth century Greenwich Village.

The popular perception of Greenwich Village is that it is brimming with personality: artistic, feminist, sexually uninhibited, leftist, Freudian, and—above all—eccentric. This version of the Village gained prominence with a series of events that transpired between 1912 and 1918: the beginning of Mabel Dodge's salon (1912); Max Eastman's assumption of the editorship of *The Masses* (1912); the creation of the Liberal Club and the all-women's group Heterodoxy (1912); the Pater-son Strike Pageant at Madison Square Garden (1913); the 1913 Armory Show and exhibitions of modern art at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291; the publication of Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*; Margaret Sanger's fierce advocacy for women's reproductive rights and access to birth control; the formation of the Provincetown Players (1915); Randolph Bourne's cultural criticism; and Emma Goldman's fiery labor activism. Additionally, historians highlight the romances and sex lives of Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Max Eastman and Ida Rauh, Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood, Mabel Dodge and John Reed, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, and many more.

As an embodiment of national political, artistic, and intellectual life in the early twentieth century, "Greenwich Village . . . did not refer to an actual neighborhood so much as to a fictive community."¹⁴ In the American imagination, the Village "has often served as kind of

iconographic shorthand" for not one but "two parallel mythologies," Ross Wetzsteon argues: "fun-loving, sexually uninhibited, and bizarrely attired bohemians" on the one hand, and "blasphemous, un-American, and unhygienic . . . nonconformists" on the other.¹⁵ By such accounts fiction and myth have achieved a seemingly irresistible momentum of their own, standing in for "Greenwich Village" in American culture broadly and in Cather studies specifically. Even in 1921, when she gave an interview to the *Omaha Daily News*, Cather had to respond to the myth: "The village doesn't exist," Cather told the reporter; "How could it in these times when the last cellar is empty?"¹⁶

This essay is about Willa Cather's Greenwich Village, a real place, though distinct from the fictive community, and about Cather's iconoclastic experience of it. She arrived in 1906, well before "the Village" became shorthand for the bohemian lifestyle. Between 1912 and 1918, she lived quietly with her partner, Edith Lewis, in an unassuming apartment at 5 Bank Street, and worked steadily on the books that would establish her reputation: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918). Though the Village did produce novels, poetry, and memoirs that codified the bohemian myth, it also produced the broad western landscapes of Cather's first major works of fiction.

"Although the image of the Village as a republic of free spirits won wide popular acceptance during the mid-1910s," historian Robert McFarland observes, "it reflected only a tiny sliver of Village life."¹⁷ Caroline Ware's 1935 study, *Greenwich Village, 1920-1930*, agrees, and she makes a clear distinction between two groups that she labels "Local People" and "Villagers":

Socially this community lived in two distinct social worlds. The first world was the world of the local people, mostly tenement dwellers who made up the basic population, to whom the community was home, and whose behavior patterns constituted the basic pattern of the community. The second was the world of those who came to reside in Greenwich Village without becoming a part of the locality, the backflow whose social patterns had been built up elsewhere, whose social contacts remained far-flung, to whom the locality was a mere place of residence, and who did not mesh with the basic population. The distinction between these two worlds was . . . sharp.¹⁸

The "local people" lived in a different "social world" from the "Villagers" and, therefore, had a different experience of the place. Moreover,

there are many possible dividing lines beyond the one drawn by Ware. McFarland notes that the "nonbohemian" residents "differed greatly among themselves," which is the "key to understanding how the Village functioned as a social community for the diverse groups who lived in it in the early twentieth century."¹⁹ Among the "nonbohemian" population were tens of thousands of Italian immigrants and their native-born children, thousands of Irish immigrants and their native-born children, thousands of old-stock native-born Protestants, and thousands more German, French, Russian, and other immigrants. Additionally, there was an African-American enclave with long roots in Greenwich Village.²⁰

Cather's residence in the Village between 1906 and 1927 was not—and could not have been—simply a life among the bohemians. Instead, it was life lived among a diverse group of people, including a few scattered bohemians. In one of the first detailed stories we have of Cather responding to her Greenwich Village environment, the story of her first encounter with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in 1910, the complexity of Cather's Village community is apparent. Sergeant's account, written and published in the early 1950s, is, of course, a reminiscence colored by knowledge of Cather's full career and adult life, but it is still revealing of Cather's place in the dynamics of 1910s Greenwich Village.

Sergeant and Cather met because Sergeant was trying to sell an article—a muckraking piece about the squalid conditions in the Italian tenements in New York—to *McClure's*, where Cather was managing editor. Sergeant, who would have a long career as a journalist, novelist, memoirist, and political activist, remarked upon seeing Cather that "no trace of the reforming feminist" was on her face. The lack of this "trace," combined with Cather's "open, direct, honest" face, "rosy" cheeks, "freshness and brusqueness," and "boyish" enthusiasm, compelled Sergeant to remark that Cather "rebelled against urban conformities." Sergeant paints Cather against expectation; though she tells of nervously entering into the heart of an eastern city, what she encounters is the "resonance of [Cather's] Western voice." In other words, Cather, full of "homespun brilliance," did not really fit into urbane New York.²¹

Sergeant remembers in her 1953 memoir that Cather "exploded" at her after reading her 1910 piece on the tenement: "Tell me why you joined the reforming pamphleteers? This all has its place—it's good—but aren't short stories more in your line? I don't mean tenement stories—you look like a Jamesian—am I right?"²² Sergeant defended her article passionately, pointed out the dire conditions of so many Italian immigrants who toiled at "artificial flowers for the ten-cent stores,"

and connected the immigrant population to the Italians Cather admired while visiting Naples, a trip Sergeant knew about from their mutual friend, Pauline Goldmark. Cather quietly responded, "I know those Italians." After Sergeant carried on for a few more impassioned paragraphs, Cather "gruffly" explained: "she knew the Italian children, because they splashed in the fountain in Washington Square of a summer evening when she often sat on a bench with a book. She lived in Washington Place, right up against the Italian Quarter I was talking about, and she loved the big brown eyes, dark smooth skins and Latin voices of the youngsters."²³ Cather accepted the article for *McClure's* and suggested to her boss that they find more assignments for Sergeant.

This incident might have been about Cather's refusal to accept the fashions of her Greenwich Village neighbors, for she lacked the "reforming" spirit that fed the political activism that dominates the histories of the Village. But it isn't about that; at least, the incident isn't only about that. Instead, it is about the unique way Cather, as an artist, does respond to her Greenwich Village community. Though Cather does not respond to "reforming pamphleteers" in theory—she is much more interested in the refined artistic sensibilities of "Jamesians"—she does respond when there is a personal connection, when she feels that an authentic community is being sincerely represented. She "knows those Italians" not because, as Sergeant supposes, she romantically remembered them as a tourist in Naples, but because she is their neighbor, and because she is a part of their community.

I doubt those Italians thought of Willa Cather as one of their own. My point is not that Cather actually was a part of the Italian immigrant community, but that she perceived her Greenwich Village world differently than many did.²⁴ Caroline Ware perceives a "sharp" distinction between "Villagers" and "local people." Other prominent Village artists, like Djuna Barnes, mention the diversity of the area ("houses and hovels passing into rabbit-warrens where Italians breed and swarm in the sun as in Naples") as a quality that "gives life, stimulates imagination, incites to love and hatred" and imparts to Washington Square "a meaning, a fragrance" unlike other parts of the city.²⁵ Barnes, like Ware, characterizes the area in terms of duality, "satin and motor cars on this side, squalor and push carts on that."²⁶ Cather, though financially closer to satin than squalor, resists easy dualities. Instead, Cather's Greenwich Village is its own place, unique in its disassociation from popular characterizations of both Bohemia and tenement misery.

"I still insist that I am in that sort of village"

In 1925, Allene Sumner, a reporter from *The Cleveland Press*, had a conversation with Cather about Greenwich Village. When Sumner asked Cather about life in "Bohemia, Inc.,"²⁷ she was told that when Cather moved there in 1906, "it was just a gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers, filled with folks who like quiet and rest and mellow living." "I still insist that I am in that sort of village," Cather told her, "The rest just flows over my head."²⁸

By telling the reporter that "Bohemia, Inc." was just flowing over her head, Cather was declaring herself apart from the nonconformist lifestyle that dominated conventional understandings of the Village. But she was not suggesting an ignorance of bohemianism, with which she had long experience by 1925. In April 1896, Cather published a thoughtful article on Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* and the nature of Bohemia itself in the *Nebraska State Journal*, revealing that during her early twenties she was already deeply engaged with the issues.

The Bohemia Cather writes about is, initially, that found in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, the world sentimentalized and made famous by Murger's 1848 novel and its subsequent dramatizations by Murger and Théodore Barrière (1851), Dion Boucicault (*Mimi*, 1873), and Giacomo Puccini (*La Bohème*, 1896). As her article progresses, though, Cather moves to a fuller discussion of bohemianism within the artist's life, concluding that as inviting as the anti-bourgeois, artistic life sounds in fiction, it is ultimately quite "tragic." "For despite all sentimental notions to the contrary," Cather writes, "Bohemia was the result of an absence of money rather than an absence of morals, and not one of its many celebrated inhabitants dwelt there a day longer than his income compelled him to." Cather was concerned with serious creative activity and found Bohemia to be merely "a land of youth where [a young man] tarries but a moment and from which the serious business of life will call him away." More darkly, though, Cather calls Bohemia "pre-eminently the kingdom of failure." The reason for this is the self-destruction that results from the "essence" of Bohemia, the "rebellion against all organized powers." This rebellion is "in itself a defeat, for victory is with the organized powers of the universe." She traces a man's hypothetical rebellion against "standards of art," "social government," "ethical standards," and, finally, "nature," and she concludes that the only completion to "the cycle of Bohemianism" is "annihilation."²⁹

To be a successful, productive artist, Cather says, one must get out

of Bohemia, must leave behind a life of absolute rebellion. The proper choice is not to embrace a conventional life, though, but to stop worrying about whether one is conventional or not:

Artists have never been close observers of conventionalities of life because it requires too much time and that way lies an artificial regularity. But to openly defy the accepted conventionalities of any generation requires an even greater expenditure of time and that way lies anarchy. For the business of an artist's life is not Bohemianism for or against, but ceaseless and unremitting labor.³⁰

Systematic nonconformity, poverty, lifestyle-obsession: these things don't get the work done, and one must, to be any sort of artist at all, get the work done.

Cather published this article on April 5, 1896, only months after her graduation from the University of Nebraska and a short time before she left Lincoln for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the editorship of the *Home Monthly*. In leaving Nebraska and her student days behind her, Cather was also leaving her bohemian self behind. She would, instead, give herself over to "ceaseless and unremitting labor" as a professional journalist and budding creative writer.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1896, Cather exchanged letters with Mariel Gere, a Lincoln friend and daughter of Charles Gere, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, and Bohemia was a topic of their correspondence. On May 2, 1896, Cather wrote to Mariel Gere from Red Cloud, Nebraska, confessing that her college years had been full of different personas, that she had tried being scholarly and had even affected the bohemian. This affectation, Cather implies, is behind her; she was tired of everyone watching her, waiting for her to be outrageous.³¹ By July, Cather was in Pittsburgh, trying to get out the first issue of *Home Monthly*. Her letters back to Nebraska that summer are full of implicit and explicit denials of bohemianism. Among the implicit denials is the July 13, 1896, letter to Mrs. Gere, Mariel's mother, which explains in great detail that Cather has chosen "ceaseless and unremitting labor" over bohemianism. Cather tells of writing half the copy of the first issue by herself, sweating over forms in the composing room until one o'clock in the morning, and trudging through piles of manuscripts and correspondence. The responsibility is overwhelming, Cather explains, and she even dreams about the magazine at night. This letter is not from someone indulging in the devil-may-care life of the bohemian, but from an industrious, practical young woman.³²

Mariel Gere must nevertheless have continued to tease Cather for

living a bohemian life as a Pittsburgh journalist, for Cather's August 4, 1896, letter to Mariel is a lengthy denial of bohemianism. After expressing surprise that Mariel would suggest that she was a bohemian, Cather claimed that she never seriously contemplated living that sort of lifestyle. Mariel must have kidded Cather (quite prophetically) that she was on her way to the New York literary world, for Cather responded that she certainly would not go for the express purpose of entering Bohemia. Rather, she hoped to surprise her friends and disappoint her enemies by living very conventionally. She did not want to be a *poseur*, but instead wanted to sincerely give herself to Art, which she can get as much out of as most people do their religions. Cather goes on to describe her hard work, as she did in the earlier letter to Mrs. Gere, and ends by listing a few of the distractions in her life: picnics, boat rides, and a local woman's club. All that, Cather writes slyly, is not very bohemian, is it?³³ The next letter to Mariel Gere, dated August 10, 1896, follows up by joking about Mariel's description of her as bohemian. Cather compares it to calling a nun "bohemian." She insists that she really likes the working life, and suggests that the temperament that allows her to enjoy her work would drive her to suicide in Bohemia.³⁴

Her article on Henri Murger and the letters to Mariel and Mrs. Gere demonstrate that as she left her undergraduate years and began her working life, Cather defined her professional identity explicitly against bohemianism. She embraced her work with industry and was not ashamed of reveling in conventionalities (though, as her letters to Mariel Gere make clear, she did not take many of those conventionalities, like women's clubs, very seriously). Cather had a detailed notion of Bohemia in her imagination and apparently affected bohemianism as a student at the University of Nebraska. But by the spring of 1896, when she was only twenty-two years old, she decided to put Bohemia aside and try "ceaseless and unremitting labor."

Her move to Greenwich Village in 1906, then, cannot really be understood as an embrace of bohemianism. Her description of the Village as "a gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers, filled with folks who like quiet and rest and mellow living" was not facetious. Rather, it was an argument made in 1925 (the year the interview to Allene Sumner was given) for a different perspective on Greenwich Village. Cather's comment "I still insist that I am in that sort of village" is, like her letters in the spring and summer of 1896, both a denial of a bohemian life and a claim for a different professional identity.

This "sort of village" is reminiscent of the one Edith Lewis describes in her memoir of life with Cather. Lewis describes Cather's

first Greenwich Village residence, at 60 Washington Square, as in

one of the most charming places in New York. On the north side the long row of houses of rose-red brick, residences of aristocratic old New York families, gave it an aura of gentility and dignity. On the south side, writers and artists lived. But it was a very sedate Bohemia; most of the artists were poor and hard-working.³⁵

Deborah Lindsay Williams complains about "Lewis's silence about their neighborhood" which, she suggests, would have been teeming with revolutionaries from *The Masses* and Steiglitz's gallery, and claims that Lewis "aimed more at perpetuating Cather's image as a writer uninterested in public life than at accurately characterizing life in the Village in the teens and twenties."³⁶ However, Lewis was not describing the Village "in the teens and twenties"; she was describing the Village in 1906. *The Masses* was nowhere to be seen. The timeline is important. Historians of Greenwich Village bohemianism have pointed to "around 1910" as the year when "New York's avant-garde emerged as a coherent community."³⁷ Others have noted that Greenwich Village did not get a wide media reputation as a bohemian community until around 1915.³⁸ Cather's understanding of the community would predate the bohemianization of Greenwich Village. Rather than being (as Williams suggests) disingenuous, Cather's public description of the Village as a "gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers," like Lewis's description of the "sedate Bohemia," reflects perspectives outside the avant-garde community.³⁹

Cather did have an artistic community surrounding her in Greenwich Village, though it was not the one that has been popularized by the canon of American literature. Cather's acquaintance, the popular novelist Fannie Hurst, notes that Cather's Bank Street apartment "was no more a part of Fitzgerald's twenties than Mars,"⁴⁰ but it was a part of the artistic world of the 1910s and 1920s, even if it wasn't Fitzgerald's.

Cather's artistic associates were innumerable, and some of them, like Elizabeth Sergeant, Zoë Akins, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, became close friends as well as writers. Elizabeth Sergeant's memoir offers a glimpse of one occasion in 1914, when Cather invited over several people that were a part of her artistic community. Cather's dear friend Isabelle McClung was there, as was Ida Tarbell, whom she met through her work at *McClure's*. Ferris Greenslet, Cather's editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Alice and Henry Hoyt, the latter a painter, were also there. And, of course, Cather's partner Edith Lewis, a professional editor, and Elizabeth Sergeant, a successful writer, were at the same function.⁴¹ At other times, Cather welcomed Elinor Wylie, Marian and

Henry Canby, George Arliss, Viola Roseboro', Harry Dwight, Blanche and Alfred Knopf, and Irita and Carl Van Doren.⁴² Yet, Sergeant says, Cather "seemed to have no 'circle' of intimates" and "never in the world sought to use her growing success and reputation to dip into the realm of 'Society' or 'Important People.'" Instead, Cather "cared about musicians, actors, singers, and sometimes painters and writers—if she admired them individually."⁴³ Sergeant argues what other evidence bears out: Willa Cather led a productive artistic life in Greenwich Village that had little to do with the artists we tend to call "Villagers."

Manifesto for Greenwich Village

Cather's fullest description of her Greenwich Village is contained in her 1920 story, "Coming, Aphrodite!"⁴⁴ This story, which follows the love affair between painter Don Hedger and singer Eden Bower, has been called "Cather's Manifesto for Art";⁴⁵ it also, I think, can be called Cather's Manifesto for Greenwich Village, for it offers Cather's alternative vision of Village life when most reports identified the neighborhood as "Bohemia, Inc."

The first sentence of Cather's story places us in the heart of Greenwich Village: "Don Hedger had lived for four years on the top floor of an old house on the south side of Washington Square, and nobody had ever disturbed him."⁴⁶ The construction of this initial sentence emphasizes Hedger's Villager status by referring to the most well-known part of Greenwich Village: Washington Square. Simultaneously, Cather tells us that this is not going to be another bohemian rhapsody like Floyd Dell's *Love in Greenwich Village*, but an alternative look at this neighborhood. With the final phrase of her first sentence, she establishes that Don Hedger lives quietly. Moreover, her language, "nobody had ever disturbed him," indicates that he wants it that way: more contact with people would be "disturbing" to his preferred way of living. This story of a quiet artist in Washington Square defies the public's understanding of Greenwich Village life. In the post-World War I years, tourists were flocking to the Village to see "bohemian frolics";⁴⁷ Floyd Dell, a proud member of the Village artistic set, said that the community had "become a side-show for tourists, a peep-show for vulgarians, a commercial exhibit of tawdry Bohemianism."⁴⁸ Rick Beard and Jan Seidler Ramirez suggest that "the modern discovery of the Village as a tourist destination" can be dated to around 1915, "when the neighborhood and its natives burst into bloom as a favorite subject for Sunday magazine spreads."⁴⁹

Hedger's reserved life pointedly contrasts with such popular notions of Greenwich Village:

he forgot there was anything of importance going on in the world outside of his third floor studio. Nobody had ever taught him that he ought to be interested in other people; in the Pittsburgh steel strike, in the Fresh Air Fund, in the scandal about the Babies' Hospital. A grey wolf, living in a Wyoming canyon, would hardly have been less concerned about these things than was Don Hedger. ("Coming," 69)

Cather's Villager is distinctly not the sort that would have participated in the Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913 or the free speech debates at the Liberal Club. Don Hedger would not, like John Sloan, create biting political cartoons for the leftist periodical, *The Masses*. Instead, Don Hedger dedicates himself to "painting eight hours a day" and "only went out to hunt for food" like the grey wolf of Wyoming. He is, according to this description, one of the "poor and hard-working" artists Edith Lewis describes.

This pointed de-politicizing of the artist is something familiar in Cather's writing. In her 1936 letter to *The Commonwealth*, known as "Escapism," she lays out her argument that "economics and art are strangers." She articulates the clear distinction she sees between the imaginative writer and the reformer, the accomplished artist and the useful political thinker. She believes that different intelligences must be allowed their different vocations: "I can't believe that if Tolstoi and Goethe and Viollet-le-Duc and Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton were brought together and induced to work with a will, their opinions, voiced in their various special languages and formulae, would materially help Mayor La Guardia to better living conditions in New York City."⁵⁰ Unlike many artists in Greenwich Village who sought to conflate their art and their politics, Cather thought both art and politics were best served when artists left political activism alone and political activists left art alone.⁵¹

Cather's description of Don Hedger's apolitical attitude and her subsequent declaration that he is, as a painter, "one of the first men among the moderns" ("Coming," 100) implies what "Escapism" and many other works spell out: Cather thought that to be an authentic artist, one had to cut oneself off from public life and dedicate oneself wholly to art. At the same time, though, "Coming, Aphrodite!" makes a declaration about Greenwich Village. By establishing Hedger on the south side of Washington Square, the precise location of Cather's first New York address (60 Washington Square South), Cather's story claims

that there is more to Greenwich Village than the popular notions suggest, that there are different kinds of artists and different kinds of commitments that do not belong to "tawdry Bohemianism." She implicitly claims that an artist who fits her conception, an artist like Willa Cather, belongs in the Village, too.

It is important to note, however, that many details of Don Hedger's life in "Coming, Aphrodite!" do square with popular notions of Greenwich Village. Though he is never given to "side-show" antics of the sort tourists were coming to see, Hedger still has many qualities reminiscent of bohemianism. Unsurprisingly, given Cather's Francophilia, Hedger's bohemianism combines nineteenth-century European notions of Murger's *la vie de Bohème* with modernist New York notions. For example, Hedger's appearance recalls the antibourgeois attitude and destitute condition of the French bohemians: "Hedger . . . was hunched up in an old striped blanket coat, with a shapeless felt hat pulled over his bushy hair, wearing black shoes that had become grey, or brown ones that had become black, and he never put on gloves unless the day was biting cold." Yet this vision of a raggedly-attired man is countered by his companion, Caesar III, a bull terrier that "had taken prizes at very exclusive dog shows" ("Coming," 63). The show dog speaks to Hedger's refined tastes and his relative financial security; if Hedger ever "ran short of money," Cather tells us, "he could always get any amount of commercial work" ("Coming," 67). It also echoes Leslie Fishbein's analysis of Village bohemians who "embrac[ed] picturesque poverty" in order to win "temporary reprieve from adult economic responsibilities that might confine their creativity." Celebrations of "childlike pleasures"—like playing with a dog?—were "fruits of privilege"; most bohemians could choose "respectability and economic stability" any time they wanted it.⁵² Don Hedger is no different: though "he did without a great many things other people think necessary" ("Coming," 67) he can afford to pay advance rent and leave New York for months at a time.

"Coming, Aphrodite!" also suggests that Cather was aware of the effect the bohemian population had on other aspects of the neighborhood, such as the cost of housing. Cather writes that the "trained nurse" who leases the room adjacent to Hedger's "sub-let her rooms . . . to young people who came to New York to 'write' or 'paint'—who proposed to live by the sweat of the brow rather than of the hand, and who desired artistic surroundings" ("Coming," 64). The nurse is doing what so many property managers did in early twentieth-century Greenwich Village: taking advantage of "artistic surroundings" and making some money. The Village drew many young artists because the ma-

jority of its population, immigrant laborers, kept the rents low. Once bohemians, whose education and background ensured that they were able to pay higher rates, began to look for lodging in the Village, rates went up. As Mary Simkhovitch, the activist and founder of the Greenwich House social settlement, wrote, "It was certainly amusing and astounding to us who had fought against cellar lodgings as unhealthful, damp and unfit for human habitation, as they were, to see them revived as 'one room studios' and let often at six times the price of former rentals."⁵³ Caroline Ware describes the situation with less humor:

To the local people, \$35 a month for an apartment for a whole family was high. To the Villagers, \$50 for one or two people was low. The fact that the very houses where the Villagers were paying \$50 to \$75 were nothing but made-over tenements where the former occupants had been paying \$20 to \$25 helped to make the payment of such rents seem to reflect a warped sense of values.⁵⁴

Cather's nurse appears to be following this practice of raising rates to match what the market can bear: she tosses out a playwright for unpaid rent and quickly lets the room to Eden Bower, a singer subsidized by a Chicago millionaire.

Cather further suggests the disparity between the Villagers and the "local people" in her story by offering bleak glimpses of the lives of the urban poor. For example, Hedger hires "old Lizzie," an impoverished and drunken woman from the neighborhood, to clean his little apartment. Lizzie has to "toil" up the stairs, wear "a great leather strap" on her wrist to "prevent dislocation of tendons," and is directed "roughly" by Hedger as she scoured the place ("Coming," 73). Old Lizzie's presence in Hedger's apartment and Hedger's bullying of her articulate the social divide that beset Greenwich Village. Though he seems to be content with few material possessions—"it didn't occur to him to wish to be richer than this" (67)—he also is unwilling to clean his own apartment. Instead, he "stood over" Lizzie and "watched her in nervous despair" (73). Hedger's decision to employ an ill-suited local woman to do the dirty work of cleaning his place rather than just doing it himself suggests that he perceives a social distinction between himself and the laboring class akin to Ware's separation of "local people" from "Villagers." But Hedger himself seems unaware of his own demarcation. Immediately after he shuts the door behind Lizzie, "he hurried off with his dog to lose himself among the stevedores and dock labourers on West Street" (73). Whether from ignorance or guilt, Don Hedger's immediate reaction after authoritatively directing a working-class woman is to "lose himself" among laboring men, some-

thing Cather's narrative suggests is impossible.

Other moments in Cather's narrative present a much more coherent Greenwich Village, one where the divisions between the "Villagers" and "local people" are not so apparent. For example, in a scene early in the story, when Hedger first overhears Eden Bower singing, Cather describes a cityscape full of music and a neighborhood unified underneath such sounds. While looking at the stars, Hedger and his dog are "suddenly diverted by a sound." Following Hedger's attempt to locate the source, the narrative catalogs the many musical sounds that rise from the Village: "It was not the Prologue to *Pagliacci*, which rose ever and anon on hot evenings from an Italian tenement on Thompson Street, . . . nor was it the hurdy-gurdy man, who often played at the corner in the balmy twilight. No, this was a woman's voice, singing the tempestuous, over-lapping phrases of *Signor Puccini*" ("Coming," 68). Though Eden's voice, "a big, beautiful voice" that "sounded rather like a professional's" (69), is privileged in this scene, the story suggests that there is a community-wide interest in artistic expression, that the Italian tenement is a source of operatic singing just like the artists' studios. In another scene, Hedger and Eden Bower visit Coney Island to watch Molly Welch, one of Hedger's models, perform a balloon act. One way Hedger convinces Eden to join his trip to Coney Island is to argue it is a place where a diverse crowd of New Yorkers can share a common experience: "It's nice to see all the people," he tells her, "tailors and bar-tenders and prize-fighters with their best girls, and all sorts of folks taking a holiday" (72). To go to Coney Island is to be one of the crowd, to fit into the broader community.

Importantly, Cather creates this characterization of Greenwich Village in 1920; however, the Greenwich Village of most of the story is not the Village of 1920,⁵⁵ but an earlier, pre-bohemian Village. The most specific time reference Cather offers is that the summer of the story's plot was "the very last summer of the old horse stages on Fifth Avenue" ("Coming," 65). Essentially, the story takes place at the turn of the twentieth century, around the years of Cather's first residence in the city. This temporal setting allows Cather to be free of much of the "Bohemia, Inc." atmosphere that her audience might expect, and it lets her make a claim about the heritage of the Village and add a refinement and depth to the public discussions of her neighborhood. It allows her to wax about the beauty and peace of the place, a peace threatened by the advent of modern life:

The fountain had lately begun operations for the season and was throwing up a mist of rainbow water which now and then blew south and sprayed a bunch of Italian babies that were being sup-

ported on the outer rim by older, very little older, brothers and sisters. Plump robins were hopping about on the soil; the grass was newly cut and blindingly green. Looking up the Avenue through the Arch, one could see the young poplars with their bright, sticky leaves, and the Brevoort glistening in its spring coat of paint, and shining horses and carriages,—occasionally an automobile, mis-shapen and sullen, like an ugly threat in a stream of things that were bright and beautiful and alive. (“Coming,” 65)

This description, full of images of spring and rebirth—wet babies, hungry robins, newly cut grass, sticky-leaved poplars—recalls the Village in an idyllic past, a “bright and beautiful and alive” instant before the “mis-shapen and sullen” cars turn the neighborhood into another piece of urban machinery. Her insertion of the “ugly threat” at the end of a lovely descriptive passage gives a tone of regret to the story, as if the authentic Greenwich Village where artists like Don Hedger and Eden Bower could come together was gone. It is a nostalgic voice similar to the one she used when offering her friend Yehudi Menuhin “historical perspectives” about New York: she “resurrect[ed] a Manhattan where whole houses belonged to single families, the breadwinners of which walked or rode to Wall Street, tipping their hats to acquaintances met en route.”⁵⁶ Her sense of regret is not unlike Henry James’s in *The American Scene*. Returning to Washington Place, the site of his birth and childhood, James is saddened by the loss of his remembered home: he realizes that his hope that “nearly nothing was changed” is a “pretence” and feels “amputated of half [his] history.”⁵⁷ James mourns the loss of the Greenwich Village of his young memory, a Village captured in his 1881 novel *Washington Square*. Although Cather never knew the patrician world of James with intimacy, she admired something of the old-world elegance that accompanied nineteenth-century Greenwich Village.⁵⁸ Before it became lionized in the press as a den of “tawdry Bohemianism,” the Village could claim a quiet detachment from the urban cacophony of New York City. “Coming, Aphrodite!” is set on the margin between the Old Village and the New; it is, after all, the “very last summer” of horse stages clopping up Fifth Avenue.

But it would be simplistic to claim Cather is, like Henry James, lamenting the loss of wealthy, old-stock Villagers. I do think she was attracted to the quiet refinement that money can provide; however, her story is not about that world. Her Greenwich Village borders Henry James’s Greenwich Village, but they are not the same place. Instead, Cather suggests, not unlike Edith Lewis, that the Village was, for her, a “sedate Bohemia,” a place where artists could do serious work without undue interruptions. Don Hedger can be a withdrawn artist, yet

still be economically stable, partly because he lives in Greenwich Village, where no one is taken aback by his behavior. Likewise, Eden Bower, who grew up in the Midwest but wants a little urban training and excitement before leaving for Europe, can get what she needs in Greenwich Village. She is able to socialize with whomever she pleases, to be a part of a Coney Island show for one afternoon, and to have a passionate relationship with an eccentric artist—even unbolt the doors that separate their rooms—without any pressure for marriage. Ross Wetzsteon perceptively argues that Willa Cather herself got “order, comfort, security, and especially privacy” from the Village, that she “sought the isolation that only a tolerant community could provide.”⁵⁹ She gave her characters the same kind of isolation, and they have a sexual and emotional relationship unhindered by prying neighbors. Willa Cather used the Village in “Coming, Aphrodite!” to create a space where her characters could be alone as they tromped through the city, where they could make decisions for themselves and accept, for themselves, the consequences.

Notes

¹ Gerald W. McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898–1918* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 156, 193; Elizabeth Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953; Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1992), 126. My description of this walk is an imagined scene conflating several different days.

² Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (1953; Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2000), 151–52; McFarland, 80, 192–94; Willa Cather, *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Janis P. Stout (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002), 24, #140.

³ Sergeant, 127; McFarland, 86, 156–57, 193; Rick Beard and Jan Seidler Ramirez, “‘A Spiritual Zone of Mind’: Village Culture,” in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 264.

⁴ Sergeant, 126–27.

⁵ A list of some of the notable figures who lived in New York—many of them in Greenwich Village—between 1910 and 1930 would include: Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Elinor Wylie, Hart Crane, Sara Teasdale, Floyd Dell, Hutchins Haggood, Neith Boyce, Katherine Anne Porter, Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Max Eastman, Crystal Eastman, Ida Rauh, Louise Bogan, Edmund Wilson,

Robert E. Sherwood, Edna Ferber, John Dos Passos, George S. Kaufman, Ludwig Lewisohn, Gilbert Seldes, Van Wyck Brooks, Katharine Cornell, Laurette Taylor, Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Bix Beiderbecke, Cole Porter, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Damon Runyon, Gene Fowler, Robert Ripley, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, E. B. White, Al Jolson, Babe Ruth, Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, Harry Houdini, Raymond Hood, Jimmy Walker, Eugene O'Neill, Heywood Broun, George and Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Walter Winchell, Moss Hart, Walter Lippmann, Fats Waller, and Willa Cather. See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 15–16.

⁶ Douglas, 13.

⁷ Alfred Kazin, "Greenwich Village Writers," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 295.

⁸ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 2.

⁹ Sergeant, 35.

¹⁰ James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 236.

¹¹ Joan Acocella, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2000), 23.

¹² Deborah Lindsay Williams, "Pernicious Contact: Willa Cather and the Problem of Literary Sisterhood," in *Willa Cather's New York: New Essays on Cather in the City*, ed. Merrill Maguire Skaggs (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2000), 212.

¹³ Very few critics have written about Cather and Greenwich Village at all, and no critic has commented extensively on it. Other than James Woodress, Cather's biographers virtually ignore Cather's relationship to Greenwich Village. Phyllis G. Robinson, in *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), briefly describes Cather's early days in the Village much as does Edith Lewis (a "very sedate Bohemia"): "The informal neighborhood of little shops and restaurants, with its mixture of the tidy and the slightly tawdry, had retained an individuality and an air of *bonhomie* that she enjoyed. It reminded her of Europe. The presence of creative people made it stimulating, but it was the sense of civility and privacy that Willa found not only attractive but also absolutely essential to her temperament" (131). Janis P. Stout in *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2000) notes that where "Cather and Lewis chose to live . . . alerts us to an aspect of Cather's life that has not been adequately recognized." "There is surprisingly little evidence that Cather interacted with any of these people and groups [Village bohemians]," Stout continues, "but it is clear that the atmosphere of bohemia was all around and that she chose

to be within it." Stout concludes that the absence of references within Cather's correspondence to hallmark events of Village bohemia—for example, the Armory Show of 1913—is a "puzzling" quality of her life (128). The collection *Willa Cather's New York*, ed. Merrill Maguire Skaggs, contains multiple references to Cather's life in Greenwich Village, but only Deborah Lindsay William's "Pernicious Contact" offers sustained attention.

¹⁴ Stansell, 43.

¹⁵ Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910–1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), x.

¹⁶ L. Brent Bohlke, *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

¹⁷ McFarland, 210.

¹⁸ Caroline Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920–1930* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 105.

¹⁹ McFarland, 210–11.

²⁰ Ware, 38; McFarland, 211.

²¹ Sergeant, 43, 44.

²² Sergeant, 45.

²³ Sergeant, 46–47.

²⁴ In one of Cather's relatively few fictions set in New York City, the short story "Behind the Singer Tower" (first published in *Collier's* in May, 1912), Cather demonstrates her awareness of Italian immigrant experiences through the inset story of Caesarino, a laborer who dies thanks to unsafe cost-cutting measures taken by a wealthy engineer. Though the tale is somewhat sentimentalized (Caesarino dies just before he is to go back home to his mother), it provides an example of Cather responding to urbanization and labor issues through her fiction.

²⁵ Djuna Barnes, *Greenwich Village As It Is* (1916; New York: The Phoenix Bookshop, 1978), 3.

²⁶ Barnes, 3.

²⁷ The term "Bohemia, Inc." must have been shorthand for describing the Village in the 1920s. In another article on Cather in 1925, this one by Walter Tittle in *Century Magazine*, there is a description of Greenwich Village as "the haunt of Bohemianism, Incorporated" (Bohlke, 81).

²⁸ Bohlke, 87–88.

²⁹ Willa Cather, "Murger's Bohemia," in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, ed. William M. Curtin (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), 293-95.

³⁰ "Murger's Bohemia," 295.

³¹ Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, May 2, 1896, Bernice Slote Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries. Cather's will forbids direct quotation from her letters.

³² Willa Cather to Mrs. Gere, July 13, 1896, Bernice Slote Collection.

³³ Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, August 4, 1896, Bernice Slote Collection.

³⁴ Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, August 10, 1896, Bernice Slote Collection.

³⁵ Lewis, xxxi.

³⁶ Williams, 214.

³⁷ Stansell, 40.

³⁸ Rick Beard and Jan Seidler Ramirez, "'Greenwich Thrillage': Village Commerce," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 333.

³⁹ It is interesting to note Cather's prominent use of the word "bohemian" in her fiction of the 1910s as an ethnic marker. She published "The Bohemian Girl" in 1912, wrote of Marie Shabata, a "Bohemian," in *O Pioneers!* (1913), and of the Bohemian Shimerda family in *My Antonia* (1918). Though the word "bohemian" would have described immigrants from the eastern European region of Bohemia in the agricultural communities of Nebraska, Cather wrote these fictions from Greenwich Village and knew full well that community's use of the word. Her frequent use of the word as an ethnic descriptor, combined with her willful distancing from the Village Bohemia, suggests that consciously or not she sought to reclaim the original meaning of the word.

⁴⁰ Fannie Hurst, *Anatomy of Me: A Wonderer in Search of Herself* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), 259.

⁴¹ Sergeant, 139.

⁴² Woodress, 281.

⁴³ Sergeant, 140, emphasis Sergeant's.

⁴⁴ This story was published first in *The Smart Set* (August 1920), in a different form, as "Coming, Eden Bower!" It was collected with seven other stories under the title "Coming, Aphrodite!" that same year in Cather's collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920). I have chosen to use the

text of "Coming, Aphrodite!" rather than "Coming, Eden Bower!" since many textual variants result from Cather's decision to alter the tale for magazine publication in order to avoid run-ins with censors (see Woodress, 315–16). Therefore, the story published as "Coming, Aphrodite!" is more authoritative. As Woodress notes, Cather "never regarded the magazine publication as very important; it was the book version of her works that counted, and she needed money" (316).

⁴⁵ See Susan J. Rosowski, "Cather's Manifesto for Art—'Coming, Aphrodite!'" *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1994), 51–56.

⁴⁶ Willa Cather, "Coming, Aphrodite!" in *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1992), 63; hereafter cited parenthetically as "Coming."

⁴⁷ Leslie Fishbein, "The Culture of Contradiction: The Greenwich Village Rebellion," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, ed. Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 225.

⁴⁸ Floyd Dell, *Love in Greenwich Village* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), 296.

⁴⁹ Beard and Ramirez, "Greenwich Thrillage," 333.

⁵⁰ Willa Cather, "Escapism," in *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988) 27, 21.

⁵¹ To say Cather was apolitical, though, is an overstatement, at least according to our current understanding of "politics." Political statements are implicit in Cather's fiction as in that of every other writer. Although Cather never actively supported the political enfranchisement of American women, her pre-Nineteenth Amendment novels, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, certainly have something to say about women's empowerment.

⁵² Fishbein, 214.

⁵³ Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, *Neighborhood: My Story of Greenwich House* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1938), 110–11.

⁵⁴ Ware, 108.

⁵⁵ The end of the story, an epilogue of sorts, is set twenty years after the rest of the action, suggesting that the last few pages are set in New York circa 1920.

⁵⁶ Yehudi Menuhin, "From 'Unfinished Journey,'" *Willa Cather Remembered*, ed. Sharon Hoover (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002), 184.

⁵⁷ Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), 91.

⁵⁸ In the late nineteenth century, Greenwich Village, especially around Washing-

ton Square and on streets adjacent to lower Fifth Avenue, was home to upper-class New Yorkers, some living in mansions that pre-dated the Civil War. By the twentieth century, this group felt threatened by the growing immigrant population and the encroachment of commercial buildings, and most abandoned the neighborhood. It was a group from this patrician population, however, that in the 1890s commissioned and funded the Washington Memorial Arch in an attempt to unite the Village to its "old republican virtues" (McFarland, 77–81).

⁵⁹ Wetzsteon, 297, 298.