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Review of *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner and Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*

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198 | Book Reviews

Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner

By Merrill Maguire Skaggs

Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2007. xvii + 202 pp.

Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather

Edited by Joseph R. Uργο and Merrill Maguire Skaggs

Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 320 pp.

Willa Cather and William Faulkner represent an intriguing and potentially productive pairing for comparative study. Their works and careers are located at the rich intersection between regionalism and modernism, and both early 20th-century writers often looked back to the 19th century in their fiction. Even in the absence of influence or intertextual reference, these commonalities would give a literary historian much to say. However, in her study of these two authors, Merrill Maguire Skaggs exhaustively catalogs similarities and differences as proof of a decades-long competition between the authors at the expense of depth and subtlety in her analysis of individual texts. Even more troubling, her claims for influence and what she calls (adapting the title of a Faulkner novel) “reiving” (literary theft) often depend on unsupportable claims about knowledge and access.

Although their novelistic careers overlapped for two decades, Cather was a generation older than Faulkner. Cather was middle-aged when she published her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, in 1912, while a relatively young Faulkner published his first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, in 1926. Furthermore, as Skaggs concedes, Cather acknowledged Faulkner's existence only once (in an odd, backhanded reference in an essay in *Not Under Forty* in 1936), while Faulkner named Cather publicly several times as one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century. These facts seem to establish a higher probability of Cather's influence on Faulkner rather than *vice versa*, especially before the 1930s, but Skaggs nevertheless begins her study in the 1920s with a claim that a minor character in Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) is William Faulkner. Indeed, this character, Victor Morse, is something like the young Faulkner -- an American who trained as

a pilot with the Royal Air Force in World War I and who takes on British airs and manners -- but Skaggs's claim that Cather must have met Faulkner in the fall of 1921 rests on chronological coincidence alone -- both Cather and Faulkner were physically present in Greenwich Village in New York City for an overlapping period of a few weeks. Even if Cather met Faulkner, why would she incorporate this young nobody from Mississippi (not yet an author) into her novel? And even more to the point, what does literary history gain from reading Victor Morse as a portrait of William Faulkner?

Much of Skaggs's analysis is built on just the kind of tenuous logic embodied in the Victor Morse example -- she finds some similarity or echo, and then she reverse engineers a case for access or knowledge, even if chronology would seem to mitigate against it. For example, as she both acknowledges and discounts, Cather almost certainly had already drafted the section of *One of Ours* featuring Victor Morse before late summer 1921, but she claims that Cather was so struck by Faulkner and his (bogus) war stories that she immediately wrote him in. She also, as in the Morse, example, oddly frames many of Cather's instances of "reiving" as appropriations of Faulkner's *person* rather than his *texts*. Not only is Victor Morse William Faulkner -- Tom Outland from Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) is William Faulkner (a claim based on Cather having access to Faulkner's volume of poetry *The Marble Faun* in late 1924, including the volume's mythologizing biographical preface by Phil Stone) and the historical figure Kit Carson made a character in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is Faulkner.

Skaggs sometimes applies tenuous logic in reverse, giving Faulkner access to particular Cather texts (if not her person) before such access seems probable. She is sure, for instance, that Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (completed in January 1930 and published in October) is a corrective to Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky" (written in 1928, but first published in a magazine in April and May of 1930). She thus hypothesizes a "power lunch" between Cather's and Faulkner's literary agents in 1928 at which the theme and subject matter of Cather's story was divulged. This scenario suffers from a serious flaw -- there is no evidence that Cather's agent Paul

Revere Reynolds ever handled, or even knew of the existence of, “Neighbour Rosicky” before its first publication. There are lacunae in the Reynolds archive, but all extant evidence points to the 1927 serialization of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as the last transaction handled by Reynolds for Cather. Indeed, in 1928, she told Reynolds to communicate with her only through her book publisher, Alfred Knopf, and seems to have assiduously ignored later repeated attempts to contact her, instead allowing Blanche Knopf to place her fiction in magazine or in one case (the serialization of *Lucy Gayheart* in the *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1935) dealing with an editor directly.¹ The thinness of Skaggs’s bibliography is telling here -- she consulted neither the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *Obscure Destinies* (1932) (which documents the composition and textual history of “Rosicky”), nor the Reynolds archive itself.

From my position as a Cather scholar, I could multiply such examples, which testify to a broader problem: throughout Skaggs’s analysis lacks sufficient support and context. She refers to no theoretical work on intertextuality and influence, for example, and she refers to very little published critical work on either author, not even the half dozen or so thematically-focused academic monographs published in the last two decades that include both Cather and Faulkner as primary figures. When she does refer to extant scholarship, she does so primarily to establish “facts” and chronology, rather than to enter a discussion about interpretation.

Skaggs co-edited the collection of essays on *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather* with Joseph Urgo, and Urgo’s brief introductory essay highlights the lost opportunity of Skaggs’s authored monograph. Deftly drawing on recent work in psychology, philosophy, and literary history, Urgo positions Cather as a writer whose fictional universe “holds existential terror,” the threat of “death and destruction” “from anywhere at any time,” while Faulkner’s fiction resonates with the cold war threat of violence from known enemies (13). The volume consists of papers from a 2005 conference conceived in 2003, and Urgo’s introduction recognizes and makes productive the origins of the conference theme in September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. The focus does not carry consistently through the

volume, however, “Violence” is little more than an attenuated metaphor in most essay titles, and the quality of the essays varies widely.

A few of the essays are little more than lightly revised twenty-minute conference papers that demonstrate the perils of single-author model of scholarship -- they merely catalog acts of violence in Cather’s fiction and make basic observations about patterns over time. Many other essays demonstrate the strength of the single-author scholarship, investigating Cather’s sources and reading her works and career in light of biographical evidence. Richard Harris explores Cather’s reading about World War I incidents mentioned in passing in *One of Ours* in order to recover a base of shared knowledge about war violence Cather shared with her readers. Timothy Bintrim and Mark Madigan recover the actual teenage robbers in Pittsburgh who inspired Cather to write “Paul’s Case” and consider how she both drew upon and distanced herself from her years as a reporter in Pittsburgh in crafting her short story. Robert Thacker explores Cather’s canny attempts to manage her reputation by corresponding with critics while simultaneously proclaiming she wrote only for the sake of art, without any thought of audience or reception.

In her contribution to the volume, Skaggs unpersuasively claims that Cather “violently appropriated” both “minor details” and “major themes” from Henry James’s *Roderick Hudson* (1876) “in every one of her novels, stretching throughout her writing life” (160), and there are several other essays making similarly problematic claims about influence. These essays are counterbalanced by other essays that put Cather in conversation with her culture and produce rich readings of her literary texts that, in turn, contribute to larger conversation in literary history. That is, they do what Skaggs does not do in *Axes*. Janis Stout, for instance, analyzes Cather’s revision of the pictorial and narrative male Western, predicated on violence and adventure. Reading against a long critical tradition, Geneva Gano cleverly aligns Tom Outland with Louie Marsellus in the *Professor’s House* and thus positions Tom as a cosmopolitan, not an American type, and Cather’s West as a cosmopolitan space. Using Judith Halberstam’s concept of “female masculinity” to read Cather’s frontier

women, Daniel Worden also reconfigures critical understanding of Cather's West, describing it as a space that enables "human relations that exceed, or fluctuate within, normative gender roles" (280). In a compact and dazzling essay, Joseph Murphy reads the engagements of Anton Rosicky in "Neighbour Rosicky" with urban and frontier spaces through the lenses of early 20th-century urban sociology, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (to which Cather was clearly indebted), and the modernist iconography of hands. Similarly, Marilee Lindemann reads the "elastic" and flexible bodies of women performing artists in Cather's fiction of the teens through the cultural history of "turn-of-the-century feminism; scientific and reform discourses on work, efficiency and the body; and an emerging culture of consumption and commodification" (199).

Note

1. The "uncatalogued" Cather file in the Reynolds archive at Butler Library, Columbia University, includes internal memoranda about telephone conversations and letters to Edith Lewis from 1928 through the mid-1930s that testify to Cather's disaffection. See especially Paul Revere Reynolds, memorandum dated 1 Oct. 1928.

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