Book Review: Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War

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Steven Trout offers a fresh approach to the study of Cather as a writer of war fiction and situates her squarely among the principally male writers of World War I. In lucid prose, Trout presents a convincing argument that Cather's prize-winning but much maligned novel One of Ours is "far more modernist than most critics have assumed" and merits a place
alongside works by Hemingway and Remarque as a realistic account of the American experience in the “War to End All Wars.”

Trout’s extensive archival research presents a fascinating array of what he calls the iconography of remembrance—from private letters and pamphlet covers to battlefield memorials and public monuments like the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City. He argues that Cather was fully aware of such iconography and of the dubious attitudes toward the conflict they embodied. Trout further asserts that Claude Wheeler’s romantic idealism in the latter half of the novel reflects the blending of idealism with a sense of dissolution that the iconography of the time captured and does not, as earlier critics have protested, undermine the satiric thrust of the book’s first part.

Particularly germane to Trout’s thesis is his focus on the cultural milieu of the Great Plains as materialism and mechanization invaded small-town America. The novel’s first half, Trout writes, “confronts us with an increasingly consumer-oriented and homogenized American Midwest” that Claude resents. The people of the region, though, like Claude, have not abandoned their belief in the war as the Great Crusade. Claude’s much criticized heroic last stand at the Boar’s Snout thus becomes an extension of the Midwest values he embraces, not as a dreamy Francophile but as part of the “American collective.” Unlike Victor Morse, who assumes an identity that would reject his Iowa roots, Claude becomes “an increasingly patriotic American soldier,” truly one of ours, a representative of the Midwestern farm boys who went to war.

A strength of this important study is Trout’s unbiased approach. While admitting that he believes the novel “abandons its realistic trappings at its climax,” Trout objectively notes the novel’s ambiguities and its shifts in point of view that are likewise reflected in the war’s iconography. Presenting a detailed study of the Lost Battalion, a story Cather undoubtedly knew, Trout defends One of Ours as an icon of “a deeply imbedded cultural myth” whose contradictions coincide with Americans’ attempts to make sense of the war.

Equally interesting, if less extensively and effectively examined, is The Professor’s House, a novel that Trout contends explores the war as the “thing not named.” The Professor’s discomfiture with modernism mirrors the nation’s search for closure that commemorative forms failed to provide. Trout discerningly concludes that the “fallen soldier,” Tom Outland, as opposed to Claude Wheeler, “remains consigned to an interpretive ‘vacuum’” and that the memorials designed to honor him fail “to form a coherent body of myth.”

Memorial Fictions, a superb interdisciplinary study, thoroughly researched and cogently argued, suggests new ways of reading One of Ours and The Professor’s House as war literature. What this work offers that others do not is a focus on the cultural icons that surrounded Cather during her writing and that shaped her literary vision. Trout’s defense of One of Ours as a modernist text embracing contradictory views of the time is a provocative and welcome addition to Cather studies.

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