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AN EXPLORATION OF CATHER’S EARLY WRITING

BERNICE SLOTE

Willa Cather has been fairly well studied as a novelist of the Nebraska pioneer, a writer whose books have a lyric nostalgia for other times that were nicer than ours. This may be an oversimplification. One might say, for example, that she wrote about Nebraska no more than she wrote about Rome; that it was not man’s retreat that concerned her so much as man’s extension into other planes, other powers; that she may belong not with Sinclair Lewis and Edith Wharton but with Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann. I suggest these possibilities after several years of fortunate exploration into the first twenty years of Cather’s writing career—the twenty years before her first novels, Alexander’s Bridge (1912) and O Pioneers! (1913). I say “fortunate” because it has been like opening the curtains wider on a stage, revealing other windows and a new landscape. The room is larger than we thought, the design grander, the problems more complex.

Perhaps we are better equipped to address those problems now. More than a half century has passed since she did her major work, but the gap that sometimes comes between the artist’s creation and the reader’s understanding may be a time for the tuning of the ear. Critical terms and concepts now at hand seem curiously appropriate: alienation and the search for identity, archetype and myth, antinovel and antihero; theories of simultaneous time, of double selves, masks, and images. Cather would understand some of these concepts, as she would understand André Malraux and the search for the Grail, because she knew Homer, Virgil, and Ovid; Heine, Lucretius, and Ruskin; Keats’s Endymion, Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, and a good many generations of the always-changing gods.

When Cather began her career as a novelist she was forty, with one career of some distinction as a journalist and editor already behind her. Her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), was published when she was in her late sixties. The public novels, stories, and essays that appeared during this second career are nearly matched in volume by the body of
writing—much of it in a journalistic underground—that was published during the twenty years of her first career: newspaper columns, articles, reviews, and stories. This is not too different from the careers of other writers who began as journalists except in two respects. First, little of her early writing has been read, even by Cather scholars; and second, all of the early writing relates to the major work after 1912 in an unusual way. The two careers were not separate; rather, the writing (both good and bad) shows extraordinary continuity, with links, repetitions, recurrences, developments, and personal relationships—a Proustian sense, one book, with the writer more at the center than she ever intended or wanted to be.

Much of Cather's early material has been unavailable or unknown—buried in old newspapers and magazines, published unsigned or under pseudonyms, and sometimes virtually erased by the writer herself (for it was her choice to isolate the novels from the writing that led up to them). Cather's work has not been accurately read, I believe, in part because so much of it has been unknown. Reading out of context is always difficult, but in a writer whose total work has special unity and interrelationships, it is likely to be misleading as well. We must admit also that we have handicapped ourselves by fashionable judgments; by critical assumptions made, held, and never reexamined; by our own ignorance of the nineteenth-century milieu in which Cather developed (who now reads Alphonse Daudet, Alexandre Dumas, Pierre Loti, or George Sand?); and by the neglect of clues and allusions within the work that in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (to give only one example) would have drawn forth tomes of analysis. Cather's own clarity and precision may also have concealed as well as revealed, but one need not have expected notes from the novelist. With a severe artistic integrity, she chose to suggest, but never to explain.

A definitive appraisal of Willa Cather's accomplishment probably will not be possible for years to come. Yet it is possible to offer some conclusions and identify new directions based on her early writing. This work, which proved to be more extensive than I had thought possible, consists of weekly columns published in Lincoln newspapers from 1894 to 1896, including a number of essays in which she expanded her ideas of art and artists. Taken together, they reveal a remarkable measure of continuity with her later, better-known work.

The extent of Cather's writing is one thing, but its continuity is more significant. The first newspaper pieces have implications for the interpretation of her major work, both in tone and in content. For one thing, she was a romantic and a primitive. She wrote, often with sweeping, insistent rhythms, in a passionate voice about elemental things. Often she suited style to subject. She seemed to think allegorically, write figuratively. And she knew a great deal more than I thought she did: there is hardly a paragraph without some blending of quotations, a figure of speech, or an allusion to the Bible, Shakespeare, classical writers, French writers, classical and Norse mythology, oriental themes, new books, old books, theater gossip, or theories of history and of fate. Critics in the 1920s and 1930s sometimes thought that Cather's books should have had more realistic social criticism of Main Street and Babbittry. But she had written that book before 1896 in her newspaper columns—a running attack on Philistia and especially its stupidity and pretensions and values. Honorable ignorance was allowed, but not pedantry or analytics about art. Some themes are not surprising, only that they were in her hand that early: art and religion are the same, she said, and she had a habit of religious-chivalric reference (Our Lady of Art, Our Lady of Beauty); the idea that Dumas needed only four walls and a passion appears in her mature statement of her theory of art in "The Novel Demeuble," but she first used this reference in her newspaper columns as early as 1896.

When the newspaper comments stop after 1900, it is harder to find her direct voice. But it is natural to wonder what happened to the free-wheeling Willa, reckless and sharp and
dominant, full of old passions and incantations of joy and beauty; whether the first part of the story did indeed fit the last. So I read everything—columns, fiction, essays—from beginning to end, in order. I could see then the growth and variation of theme and style and the final absorption into the body of her fiction. In the first stories, elements of the newspaper columns were in plain sight (themes, references, habits of speech, and even variations of whole passages taken from the earlier work). Increasingly the comment and allusions were woven into the substance of her style. She used quotations, or parts of them; myths, or fragments of myth recombined; old themes in modern dress—eventually so smoothly refocused that one might read the story (or the novel) and never think beyond the primary conscious level, though the allusions were there to be recognized. Continuity and development were unmistakable, and knowing the origins of themes made recurrences more dramatic and significant. I can give a few examples of these connections.

In Cather's first published essay, an unsigned piece on Carlyle (1891), we have the Norse tree of life, Ygdrasil, and it blooms again in My Ántonia. For surely that tree, kept ever green by the Norns who sprinkled it each day with the water of life, grew straight into the Christmas tree of the Burdens in My Ántonia, which was "the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches."3 At the end of the book we see Ántonia with her hand on an apple tree. She is called a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. This Ántonia of mature life was also prepared for twenty years earlier in Cather's description of the singer Madame Scalchi (1897): "the Ancient of Days. . . . her voice is full of saw teeth, her upper notes are worn to the bone, but for all that there is no contralto living who can sing the page as she can. That old stirring quality that is like the tone of a trumpet is still there. . . . Yes, it's Scalchis we want, Scalchis who take up that noble Aria like an old war horse that says 'ha, ha!' to the trumpets."

Other accounts of singers and actresses from the early days are deeply infused into The Song of the Lark and into the concept of Thea Kronborg herself, and Cather's statements before 1896 on the nature of art are transmuted into the fiction. Stories, too, move into other works: the wild Aztec moon of "The Enchanted Bluff" (1909) blends into the mesa world of The Professor's House (1925);4 both story and book have foreshortened endings in which dreams and distance come down to the cold light of the usual day. The Professor's House, it is especially interesting to note, has absorbed most of the elements of Alexander's Bridge (1912).

Reading the total work is also a corrective. Before 1896 there are allusions to Henry James but never the outright devotion the young Willa Cather gave to the French Romantics, Dumas or Daudet; or to Stevenson or Tolstoy. She did write of James, but ambivalently, admiring his sentences and phrases: "You are never startled, never surprised, never thrilled or never enrap­tured; always delighted by that masterly prose that is as correct, as classical, as calm and as subtle as the music of Mozart" (November 16, 1895).5 She wrote of Whitman a few months later with the same ambivalence: Whitman was unselective and formless, but he had the joy of life. So I wondered: How did Madame Bovary get so much credit for Cather's work? That book is not discussed in the early writing, though hundreds of others are. Years later in Not Under Forty (1936) she did make an effort to state her position on several matters. In "A Chance Meeting" (1933) she avoids answering when Flaubert's niece asks if it is not Madame Bovary she likes best. Some pages later she says as plainly as she can, in the present tense, that Salammbo "is the book of Flaubert I like best. I like him in those great reconstructions of the remote and cruel past."6 She liked best—I repeat—Salammbô and the pagan moon of Carthage.

I also began to realize with particular force what Maxwell Geismar had said in 1947, that Cather's was "one of the most complex, difficult and contradictory minds in our letters";
and what W. C. Brownell had said, “I don’t know of any art more elusive.”7 I believe that we have not given Cather the full benefit of our intellectual attention. It is partly the strong emotional force of her best books, partly the deceptiveness of her extraordinary style, as clear and open as day—a style and a control achieved through sheer practice and volume as well as genius. But it has never occurred to her critics that there might be undercurrents and involvements in art, music, history, and literature to be found in that open countenance, the landscape of Nebraska. Of course she never explained, but she always gave clues or indications of the other dimensions of the world created through and around the page—or in the living imagination. Sometimes epigraphs established the aura of the fictional world or set its pattern. Internal allusions are carried on the double, the triple thought. The books may be read not as allegories but as orchestrations of fact, symbol, and theme; or viewed as luminescent stones that respond to different lights as they are turned in the mind.

For brief examples: The Troll Garden (1905) has two epigraphs, one from Christina Rossetti’s “The Goblin Market” (“We Must not look at Goblin men, We must not buy their fruits”), the other from an unidentified work of Charles Kingsley (“A fairy palace, with a fairy garden; . . . inside the trolls dwell, . . . working at their magic forges, making and making always things rare and strange”). Though critics have ignored this title-epigraph, it may be the most revealing of all Cather’s allusions, for at this early time it points to a subject matter and a conscious technique that continue throughout her work. The quotation is from Kingsley’s The Roman and the Teuton.8 In his parable the Trolls are the Romans—a rich, civilized, luxurious world that has in it the seeds of its own decadence. Opposing the Trolls are the Forest Children—the Teutons or Barbarians—who in their strength and innocence desire and eventually conquer the Troll Garden. The seven stories in Cather’s The Troll Garden center in “‘A Death in the Desert’” and its themes of both the poison fruit and the Roman conflicts. Other stories pair off in contrasts and correspondences: East and West, desire and defeat, real and false values. The opening story, “Flavia and Her Artists,” is a set piece saturated with allusions to Rome. The last story, “Paul’s Case,” shows in effect the Forest Child and his attempt at the Troll Garden (notice that the New York hotel is like an enchanted palace, and Paul covers himself with a Roman blanket). The oncoming train that kills Paul completes the cycle begun with the first sentence in the book: “As the train neared Tarrytown . . .” That the Troll Garden epigraph indicated the structure of the book is shown when four of the stories were reprinted in Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920) but three were omitted. Since the Roman-Teuton design was broken, the epigraph from Kingsley was omitted; the Rossetti theme and its epigraph were retained.

The cyclic movements of decaying civilization and reconquering nature, best illustrated in the historic rise and fall of Rome, were Cather’s themes for more than ten years before The Troll Garden. In 1895 she had written that America is like Rome, buying but not creating; and we recognize some of the same themes in The Professor’s House (1925), with a Norwegian mansion on Lake Michigan filled with Spanish furniture, and more European plunder to come in through Mexico City, figuratively meeting the real American art of the cliffdwellers sold out of America by the same route. (Notice the Roman name “Mar­sellus,” spelled not with a c but an s.)

Cather also used themes and allusions to link the Slavic world (Russia, Poland, Bohemia) and the American West. In 1923 an anonymous reviewer in the New York Times said of the first pages of A Lost Lady: “Except for the American names, might not this have been the opening of a long short story by Turgenief [sic], say, out of The Annals of a Sportsman?”9 It is actually a close parallel to the opening of the epic poem Master Thaddeus (Pan Taduesz) by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, where we see among fields and by a river, a white wooden house set on a hill, in a birch thicket and contrasting with dark-green poplars. “The gate
wide-open gave its invitation / To passers-by, and generous behests / Inviting all to enter it as guests.”

The house of the Forresters in *A Lost Lady* was “well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere.” The house stood on a low, round hill—a white house in a cottonwood grove, approached across a creek and marshes, along a lane bordered with poplars. In part this is the Silas Garber house near Red Cloud, Nebraska, but that house and the aura of the world it represented did not exist alone in history. It is joined to the world of *Master Thaddeus*, in which Mickiewicz evoked his childhood home in Lithuania. After a long exile he remembered his homeland as it was just before the coming of Napoleon in 1812—the people, their folkways, and the life of a manor house—in stories, legends, and lyrical descriptions of landscape. In *A Lost Lady* Nebraska blends with Slavic Europe—and not for the first time in Cather’s work.

*O Pioneers!*’, ten years earlier, took its title from Whitman but an epigraph from Mickiewicz and the same *Master Thaddeus*: “Those fields, colored by various grain!” This combination, I believe, gives an insight into Cather’s themes in her pioneer books. Even the forms of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* suggest the ballad-like repetitions and organic digressions of folk literature. The Great Plains region joins a universal geography. Here in Nebraska, she is saying, are people with the love of homeland, both past and present; the sense of place, the mingling of races and people characteristic of other histories. In her 1923 article “Nebraska: The End of The First Cycle,” she pointed out that “Nebraska resembles the wheat lands of Russia, which fed the continent of Europe for so many years.” A comment of 1895 implies a deeper linking: “It is strange what mighty geniuses that great barren, barbarous country of Russia brings forth. . . . Left to herself in the wilderness with the mixed blood of strange nations nature will do wonderful things sometimes.”

Then there is the lovely, sad, pastoral epigraph for *My Ántonia*: “Optima dies . . . prima fugit” (The best days are the first to flee). The classical world of Homer and Virgil also had the universal theme of voyage, exile and return, chaos and creation. But the line from Virgil is not decorative. Note its context in the *Georgics*: a passage on breeding animals, on generation. It is now, Virgil is saying, now before it is too late that you must remember ongoing life. Cather had every right to expect us to know what the *Georgics* is about and she referred to it where she did for a reason. Jim Burden is studying one spring evening in his room and turns to that passage in the *Georgics* (a lesson in school). It is at that moment that Lena Lingard knocks at the door. Ironically, of course, neither Lena nor Jim will have families. It is Ántonia, after all, who is the heroine of the book, Ántonia who is like the founder of races.

These are a few examples out of hundreds of allusions that literally burst the books out of their presumed boundaries and give material that reshapes into other more complex forms.

Every allusion I have explored so far is not only relevant but active within the structure of the book. Cather spoke often of the deliberate techniques of fiction. In the beginning she stressed the use of contrast, the placement of opposites. The quartet from *Rigoletto*, she said in the *Lincoln Journal* in 1897, “so matches pleasure and the cost of pleasure against each other.” In a speech at Brunswick, Maine (May 14, 1925), she spoke of techniques of the novel, such as the use of several levels of narrative line: “Shakespeare thought so little of plot that he never made one, but even in him there is always a spiritual plot inside; the crude, coarse, often violent plot he borrowed from Plutarch or someone else. Sometimes they fuse beautifully, as in *Othello*; sometimes not so successfully. All the lovely writing in *A Winter’s Tale*, on the contrary, is in the pastoral places.” She, too, used combinations of plot, occasionally turning Shakespeare’s crude plot into her own spiritual theme or universal situation. Note the internal suggestions of *Hamlet* in *A Lost Lady*, of *King Lear* in *My Mortal Enemy* (and how the structure follows Keats’s
sonnet on Lear and "the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay"). In her memoir of Cather, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant often refers to techniques. Miss Cather, she says, admired Proust, Joyce's Ulysses, and Lawrence in Sea and Sardinia (and recognized that he used the language of cubism in it).  

We might then notice the insistently geometric landscape in the early pages of Death Comes for the Archbishop. Time and perspective are compacted in that book; antediluvian figures and landscapes are brought into the present. It is sometimes a prehistoric nightmare, the underworld, chaos; at other times a divine union of earth and sky. Cather described Flaubert's historical manner as standing in the present and looking back, Thomas Mann's as starting from the beginning and moving toward the present. Her own, it seems to me, is rather like some modern theories of the eternal and simultaneous existence of elements in time. We see all things at once, though in different lights the separate lines of relationship can be focused and traced. The Professor's House is built rather strongly on a scaffolding of Anatole France's four books about Monsieur Bergeret (to which we are deliberately directed), and with them in mind we cannot miss one level of logic and relevance—but only one. If we do go on to find a double Grail and the Fisher King, the book is still one book, and Willa Cather's.

And what has happened to the pioneer and the Nebraska landscape? I suggest that Cather attempted first of all to explore, fuse, and shape into new things the central elements of her own primary experience, which included exile, the voyage onward (over desert or sea), creation out of chaos, the cyclic process of life. In her writing we can find the first plain statements and then the intricate interleaving of allusion and reference.

Cather's own account of her arrival in Nebraska from Virginia at the age of nine appeared in 1913 in a long interview published in the Philadelphia Record. Parts of the interview continued to be reprinted in other accounts for many years, but I had never seen this particular version until I found it in a box of Cather clippings. This is the story she tells, quoted in her own words:

"We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality.

I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on pretty well during that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something—I don't know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I should go under.

For the first week or two on the homestead I had that kind of contraction of the stomach which comes from homesickness. I didn't like canned things anyhow, and I made an agreement with myself that I would not eat much until I got back to Virginia and could get some fresh mutton. I think the first thing that interested me after I got to the homestead was a heavy hickory cane with a steel tip which my grandmother always carried with her when she went to the garden to kill rattlesnakes. She had killed a good many snakes with it, and that seemed to argue that life might not be so flat as it looked there.

The early writing is full of deserts and wilderness—Pierre Loti's desert, "which the ancients quaintly called a sea" (November 9, 1895), or Hall Caine's Iceland, "a country beyond the end of the world, dark and remote,"
where the impossible is always possible” (January 12, 1896). With a nonhuman landscape man must make a country, enact the process of creation: she saw it as the land turned to fields and the air changed from the light tang of youth to the heavy odors of growth and maturity. But like all elemental things, the rise of sun and civilizations implied also the going down. As Professor St. Peter’s primitive self says, This is it. But one is caught in so many turnings, simultaneous cycles of desire, achievement, and change, that he must protest even while part of him knows, It is time. The cyclic rise and fall of human life and civilizations is very nearly the heart of Cather’s theme.

If we are interested in biography: Whitman said, Look for me under your bootsoles; Cather said, Look for me in my book. To suggest one of many stories: In the period before 1896 she wrote many times of a double ideal in art, exemplified by the passionate color of Bernhardt (the serpent, fiery chaos, and old night) and the cooler, hidden art of Duse (a veiled nun on the icy heights above the world). A related theme was the artist’s concentration to her art as linked to a corresponding loss of humanity, her womanhood—like Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark, who blooms and flowers but impersonally, on the stage, as Sieglinde. And in Coming, Aphrodite! we see Eden Bower in the orange light of the street lamp, her face hard and settled, like a plaster cast.

Perhaps it is remembering the young idealization of Duse that makes the description of the religious recluse in Shadows on the Rock so horrifying to me. Jeanne le Ber, who had shut herself completely away from the world in religious service and martyrdom, is seen after many years. A candle shone upon her: “It was like a stone face; it had been through every sorrow.” Her voice was inhuman, “hoarse, hollow, with the sound of despair.” (Is there really much difference here from the look of the turtleneck like people on Acoma in Death Comes for the Archbishop—ancient, hardened, shut within their shell?) This sequence is a story. I am not saying it is Cather’s, but it is a plot she understood. The ending could not have been written in 1896, but the stone face of Jeanne, like an awful warning, would not have existed without the beginning.

As a more positive statement, read “Before Breakfast,” one of Willa Cather’s last stories. There you find the pagan joy of life, the stubborn hold on elemental things, the old rakish grin of the young Willa Cather. In it the old man feels the wonder and ruthlessness of a turning cosmos and geological ages, with man small in space and time. But even more ancient than trees is the girl plunging into the cold ocean and rising out of it again, eternal Aphrodite on the waves. So it is that man can salute the ancient oak, smile, and pass on.

The most personal story is always the deepest metaphor. Cather’s might be the way she described the great journey of art and the artist. In a major essay of March 1, 1896, she wrote:

Art is not thought or emotion, but expression, expression, always expression. To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means, that is the voyage perilous, and between those two ports more has been lost than all the yawning caverns of the sea have ever swallowed.

Like so many other themes it stayed with her to the end: the perilous voyage between two ports, the brain and the hand. It was even transmuted, as in The Professor’s House: St. Peter sometimes does not risk going from his attic workroom to get another light, making what is called “the perilous journey down through the human house.” Any full or accurate reading of Cather’s work will involve that journey through the human house and will touch both ports—the brain and the hand, the beginning and the end. In it I believe that we will recognize that she was an innovator in the
technique of the novel, as E. K. Brown pointed out, and more so than many others of her time; and that what she said of Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* was also said for her own work: “Its theme is the first and last of all our questioning and speaking and all our necessity; the nature of man . . . this is a double nature, struggling with itself.”19

NOTES

1. I have presented Cather’s early work, along with two essays of my own, plus new biographical facts and documents, in The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893–1896 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).


5. *Kingdom of Art*, p. 74.


12. Manuscript in the possession of the author.


14. The newspaper clippings are in the possession of the author.


