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Willa Cather as Equivocal Icon

Guy Reynolds

A talk given at the Cather International Seminar, Breadloaf, Vermont
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Why 'equivocal'? There seems to me something deeply equivocal in Cather's iconicity, not in the sense that she might or might not be an icon, but in a deeper, more fundamental sense: all icons are ultimately equivocal. When we think about icons, how they are created and destroyed, and when we think about the meaning of the word 'icon', it is apparent that this sense of ambivalence or equivocation or doubleness is built into the very term itself. If there is one word that carries its opposite around with it like a twin, then it is 'icon.' You can't really think of an icon without thinking about smashing icons, about iconoclasm. One might speculate that this is a basic, underpinning dynamic of Western cultures, and that this pattern of icon-creation and icon-destruction is a foundational model of how reputations are created. It's also worth recalling that the most famous instance of icon creation and iconoclasm in English literature came in 1649, with the publication of *Eikon Basilike*, the anonymous, hagiographic portrayal of the executed King Charles as divine martyr, followed by John Milton's rebuttal on behalf of the English Republic, *Eikonoklastes*, where Milton repudiated Charles's iconic status. *Eikonoklastes* was to become a dangerous text during the Restoration: the creation of icons, and their destruction, can quite literally be a matter of life and death.

One thing we can say about both iconicists and iconoclasts is that they share a strong sense of place. In order to set up an icon, you have to somewhere to place it; and in order to destroy icons, you have to know where to look. Iconicity is a function of place. A seventeenth-century Englishman, say a member of Cromwell's New Model Army, knew where to look when he wanted to destroy Popish icons. Clearly, American culture has evolved its own sites of iconicity: the grassy knoll, the Vietnam memorial, Graceland, the twin towers. And within the literary culture, there is a recurrent coupling of place to iconic status: Hannibal, Missouri and Oxford, Mississippi. So where does this leave Cather? Everywhere and nowhere. Neither a literary traveller or expatriate in the way that Hemingway was, nor a writer of single region in the manner of Jewett or Faulkner, Cather's iconicity has often seemed vexed because while American culture might celebrate mobility, ultimately we tend to fix US writers in one place or another. And by a synecdochal process, the local then becomes national – most strikingly in the case of Frost. Even the travellers can be fixed in their very mobility: they become definitively 'expatriate' or 'international' writers. Furthermore, the difficulty of relating Cather's iconicity to place is further compounded by the shifting significance of her homeland, Nebraska, in the national imagination. As I have argued elsewhere, the moments when Cather has seemed to lose significance have been moments when Nebraska – and by extension the broader region of the Great Plains or Midwest – also seemed to lose significance. This was the gist of Quentin Anderson's 1965 attack on Cather. 'The country has shrunk, and our sense of the weight and relevance of Willa Cather's observation has shrunk with it. Nebraska is no doubt still there, but as a distinct imaginative possibility it has for the moment simply disappeared.'

But there might be local, historical conditions, too, which inflect Cather's iconicity, and it's these local conditions (of history) that I want to attend to today. Cather was a late-Victorian, a writer on the cusp between two different models of what a 'writer' might be. Cather thus occupies a transitional, equivocal place in the history of the literary icon. She grew up in the twilight of the Victorian model; but she lived on into the more fluid and perhaps more trivial days of modern iconicity. She knew about the marketing of literature, and had met and in many cases worked with the key figures helping to propel American writing forwards into modern modes of literary production. Think about one iconic moment in Cather's career, a moment where her life changed through an encounter with a major player on the literary scene. She was plucked out of Nebraska by one of McClure's literary scouts, who heard about the talented young writer from Will Owen Jones. Hermione Lee characterises McClure as a '*deus ex machina*' who rescued Cather from provincial obscurity. But her description of this encounter is less indicative of sheer luck than of the sophistication and technological acumen of the publishing industry at this time:

S.S. McClure – this *deus ex machina* – sent his cousin talent-scouting in the provinces for the McClure syndicate, and the cousin had Cather's name put to him in Lincoln by Will Owen Jones. McClure then wrote asking to see her stories...A week after they arrived, he summoned her to New York by telegram.¹

¹ Lee, *Willa Cather – A Life Saved Up*, p.62.

Ironically enough, McClure's office had already received Cather stories, and turned them down; but she got a second chance. It's customary, in Cather biography, to look for a point-of-origin where Cather's creativity and career take on decisive formation. Most notably, Sharon O'Brien sees the 1912 trip to the Southwest as the moment where the professional writer becomes the creative author. I would see Cather's route to iconic status as receiving its decisive turning-point here, in 1903, not in the sense that McClure 'made' Cather, but in the sense that McClure was symptomatic of wider shifts in publishing culture at the century's turn. McClure ran a syndicate; he employed talent scouts; he could transmit material via telegram (and could do the same when it came to sending material to London). Cather's professional world, in its networked and technological sophistication, is recognisably modern to us. The late-Victorian, Progressive era of publishing was clearly one where new networks, new markets and new ways of thinking about writing were beginning to emerge. Cather took advantage of the modernity of the world of Anglo-American publishing. I say Anglo-American because Cather was an Atlanticist figure in her connections to the vibrant London literary scene (ten years before Pound and Eliot she was working the London salons and publishers' offices during her trips on behalf of *McClure's*). As a professional writer, Cather lived through radical change in terms of what 'writing' and 'being a writer' might mean. Technologies were changing the means of communication for writers – photography and recording equipment would mean that writers would now be more than their words, would have an image and a spoken voice. The market was changing, too, and a writer such as Cather would have the kind of diverse, restless, highly professionalised,

status of an author whose creativity had also to take account of what would become known as a literary marketplace.

The icons that fascinated Cather at the beginning of her career offered significant models of female creativity (Fremstad; Jewett) or masculine figures whom she would admire but ultimately move away from (Henry James). Again, we see an entwined pattern of iconicity and iconoclasm. But it is also worth noting that the icons of her early years reflected in a striking way the cultural changes I am gesturing towards. Moreover, Cather's first steps into the world of American iconicity were entangled in this web where literary artistry meets the marketplace, and where technological and marketplace change were throwing up new models of literary iconicity. She was to work with McClure on two key projects that were, in essence, 'about' the creation and manipulation of texts that created and fashioned images of American icons. In working on Georgine Milmine's *The Life of Mary Baker Eddy* (1909), and then ghost-writing, 'writing', helping with S.S. McClure's autobiography, *My Autobiography* (1914) Cather contributed to twentieth-century iconoclasm and iconography. The Milmine and the McClure works seem to me fascinating projects, and more important to Cather's intellectual development than we have recognised. Each represents a kind of cross-over between literary discourses: biography and investigative journalism; biography and autobiography. Each creates a hazy, shady area where the 'writer' sits – a kind of indeterminacy Cather would later use in fictions such as *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*. It is difficult, as many scholars have found, to come to definitive conclusions about what these two books say about the evolution of Cather's creative intelligence. But we can say a handful of things with certainty. First, Cather's career had an overture, a momentary interlude before she became a novelist

but when she was 'producing' (in one way or another) long prose works that took as their focus American icons. Second, reading out the implications of these works, we can see a certain productive ambivalence; Cather had learned to celebrate and to become sceptical, more or less at the same period in her career. Third, that the writing of icons had produced in Cather's technique a highly productive technical indeterminacy. What I mean by this is that these two books had a blurred narrative origin; they come from an authorial space occupied by 'Cather/McClure' or 'Cather/Milmine'. The processes of writing about the lives of the icon had gone hand-in-hand with an extremely strange, highly idiosyncratic compositional process that has very few parallels in twentieth-century literary history. Cather would carry forward the lessons of these books into her novelist's career. Now she would also write long proseworks for the first time; now she would pursue what I have termed 'productive ambivalence' in her American iconography; and now, too, she would mine a blurred narrative origin.

Her work for McClure created an interesting model for how journalism and a kind of 'life writing' (the profile, the character sketch) might interconnect. They are suggestively indeterminate when they come to questions of authorship or, as with 'Tom Outland's Story', whether they are written or spoken narratives. As Robert Thacker notes of *My Autobiography*, 'his wife and his closest associates – many of whom had known him from youth – thought she had captured his characteristic ways of speaking.' This is an important note, because it demonstrates, first, that Cather was developing prose rhythms that seemed mimetic in their supple cadences and their ability to give the impression of the 'thereness' of a voice. Second, that the immediacy of a voice seems to readers to be a

guarantee of authenticity. We read the prose; we seem to hear a voice; we believe in the authenticity of the persona; we are led to believe in the character. This process of mimetic speaking is, I think, closely related to Cather's creation of icons in her work, and in a deeper sense relates to her interest in opera and theatre: the conjunction of voice, authenticity, iconicity; the 'thereness' of the icon.

Cather trained in the late-Victorian world of professional writing where an early form of ghost-writing and boosterism had met the investigative model of modern journalism. *McClure's* had created a mass-market, modern incarnation of the dialectic between icons and their iconoclasts. On one hand, the iconoclasm of muck-raking and investigative journalism, as seen in the sensational Eddy project or the debunking of city politicians; on the other, the boosterism familiar from turn-of-the-century culture, as seen in McClure's own biography, with its celebration of literary heroes. *My Autobiography* is, in a sense, a compendium of icons: R.L.Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Kipling, Maria Montessori. It takes the first person possessive -- *My Autobiography* -- but then presents a gallery of literary and cultural masters who have achieved for McClure an iconic status.

This early overture, a kind of initiation into American icon-writing, had other reverberations for Cather, and perhaps helped to lock her imagination onto motifs that would later become threads running across her patchwork writing. First, the McClure biography is an immigrant narrative. It is a familiar text, an Americanization narrative, as it tells the story of a poor Irish boy moving from European, rural poverty to the center of the literary business in the United States. That *My Autobiography* is a key to the iconicity of immigrant lives seems beyond dispute. But what is also interesting is how the level, even tone

of the work (that McClure speaking voice) helps to create a democracy of icons in the book. *My Autobiography* shares with other Americanization texts (those of Jacob Riis, Edward Bok, Mary Antin) a strongly democratic approach to the creation of American icons. By the end of these texts, the speaker is moving in the world of the famous and the clearly iconic; but the life-story begins, and remains shadowed by, the ordinary, domestic iconicity of the families that the migrant has brought with him or her. Hence, McClure places a photograph of his mother in the text, as well as images of Kipling and Stevenson: the effect is to create a heterogeneous notion of the icon, both written-about and photographed, both famous and marginal. I think we can see how Cather would develop this 'gallery-effect', with juxtapositions between the famous and the unknown, the mythic and the marginal, in later works. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in particular, is an exercise in remaking the notion of the icon, of mixing the obviously iconic (Kit Carson) with invented icons (Sada).

Again, we might speculate about the broader significance of this manoeuvre within American literary history. Whitman's 'Preface' to the *Leaves of Grass* had raised the question of how icons -- in his case, the iconic figure of the poet-prophet -- could be harmonised with democratic ideals. Surely, democratic ideals preclude icons, since the icon, whom we look up to, will inevitably suggest the social and cultural hierarchy which American democracy has transcended? Whitman's solution is to see the seer-like figure of the poet as a conduit through whom the aspirations and the ideals of the people can express themselves; he becomes a representative icon, both distinctive and representative simultaneously. We can see this dialectic between iconicity and representativeness working its way out in many American texts, and McClure creates one solution by

placing literary stars on the same footing as his family snapshots.

Cather had been introduced via her work on the Eddy text to the resonant topic of how we represent religious icons. This would prove to be a tremendously important *topos* for her. Quite literally, her work is in one way a thoroughgoing speculation on icons in the most fundamental sense: the spiritual icons who recur throughout her fiction. The Eddy text had been the life-story of a real-life figure, but a real-life figure whose biography had achieved iconic status. Note how Cather's writing of icons attempts to create a difficult middle-way: a *media via* between celebration and radical scepticism. This is the position occupied in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (a compendium of icons): a space where the icon can exist, sceptically celebrated or admiringly critiqued. This is the tone of Cather's sketch of Kit Carson. One way of thinking about Cather's fiction is that it creates scenarios where real-life and invented icons are subjected to a form of careful scrutiny. What then becomes important is the tone of this iconic discourse: a fictional discourse blending analysis, scepticism, historical distance. This discourse represents one of Cather's finest achievements: a coolly judgemental prose that both encounters the icon, while remaining unswayed by the figure's stature. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* makes extended use of free indirect discourse to create a characteristically blurred or hazy narrative voice where the narrator/Latour meditates on Carson. The tone is mildly jaundiced, sceptical, realistic; but Carson remains Latour's friend. Is the narrative point-of-view the narrator or Latour: it is both. The judgement here really does seem to be a judgement: laconic and authoritative, unimpressed by icons even as it weaves icons into the foreground of the text:

It was his own misguided friend, Kit Carson, who finally subdued the last unconquered remnant of that people; who followed them into the depths of the Canyon de Chelly, whither they had fled from their grazing plains and pine forests to make their last stand. They were shepherds, with no property but their live-stock, encumbered by their women and children, poorly armed and with scanty ammunition. But this canyon had always before proved impenetrable to white troops. The Navajos believed it could not be taken. They believed that their old gods dwelt in the fastnesses of that canyon; like their Shiprock, it was an inviolate place, the very heart and centre of their life.

Carson followed them down into the hidden world between those towering walls of red sandstone, spoiled their stores, destroyed their deep-sheltered corn-fields, cut down the terraced peach orchards so dear to them. When they saw all that was sacred to them laid waste, the Navajos lost heart (*DCA*, 293)

Cather had turned the creation of icons, and the sceptical deconstruction of icons, into a form of narrative quest that could animate a whole fiction. This, surely, is the lesson of *A Lost Lady*, the text Cather wrote at the moment that she had begun to attain an iconic status within the national literature. Niel is fascinated by Marian Forrester; but his increasing knowledge leads him towards a growing awareness of her failures, her vanity and sexual profligacy. But Niel remains loyal to his image of Marian, he remains committed to the iconic significance he first saw in her. Gradually, the narrative has shifted the questions it asks. At first the question seems to be: does the icon deserve the attention we are lavishing on her? By

the end, we realize that this is in a sense an unanswerable question. Now the question is how we can create a kind of narrative, a discourse, that will hold in fluid suspension that mixture of fascination, wonder, scepticism and repugnance aroused by the icon. *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady* seem to me texts that aim to create this iconic discourse, this mature synthesis of fascination and scepticism. As such, they then have further significance within the development of American modernism. First, the texts themselves seem to create answers to the vexed question of Cather's own iconicity. If we read *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady* in the way that Cather seems to be encouraging, then we will fight shy of the categorical and the judgemental, since both texts contain premonitory attacks on the dangers of judgement. The texts themselves create counterpoints to Cather's own problems with iconic status; they are secret narratives where issues of fame and reputation move decisively to the foreground.

A great writer brings into being a new way of reading: writers create readers. In a way, then, Cather's fiction is teaching us something about the notion of what icons might be, and by extension her work is a long induction into how we should be reading her: a model of how we might celebrate even as the growing accretion of knowledge about figure might be leading us towards a more tempered judgement (like Latour's judgement of Carson). And among the readers of Cather are other writers, who would find this model of writing (an icon presented; an icon maintained against the attrition of knowledge) deeply seductive. The exchange between Cather and Fitzgerald in the 1920s turns on the ways in which Cather had given Fitzgerald, a writer acutely aware of his own iconicity, a mode of writing about icons, wonderment, scepticism. As we know, Fitzgerald wrote to Cather about the connections be-

tween *The Great Gatsby* and *A Lost Lady*, citing an 'instance of apparent plagiarism' in his portrayal of Daisy – it echoed a description of Mrs. Forrester. But beyond this intertextual connection there is a broader communality, since the Cather text and *Gatsby* share a common thread as parables of iconicity. Niel Herbert and Jim Burden need their icons; but life teaches each of them that sheer experience, life, maturity, wisdom, change will wear the icon down. Fitzgerald's text is a fable about icons, onlookers, wonderment and scepticism. As with various Cather texts, *Gatsby* places its wondering onlooker in a symbiotic embrace with the icon: Nick/Gatsby, Niel/Marian, Jim/Antonia, St. Peter/Outland. The long narrative sweep of Cather's fiction, we might note in passing, is itself anti-iconic since the life-stories of her characters takes them from youthful iconicity to a more complex, weathered reality. This is what gives the endings of her novels their peculiar power, as the onlooker maintains the care of the icon, even as we move towards a more complex and realistic appreciation of what the icon signified. I say 'care' because this is the word Neil uses at the end of *A Lost Lady*: "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end... Thank God for that." Contrast *The Great Gatsby*, with its references to the 'vast carelessness' of Tom and Daisy, and its brutally deserted funeral scene: "Poor son-of-a-bitch."

Gatsby is also a tale, as Nick says, of Midwesterners who have travelled East. As I said earlier, iconicity is a function of place, and Jay Gatsby's troubled status is partly a result of his own mobility: most characters do not know where he comes from. After Cather's death, her own coterie, another group of Midwesterners who had come East, were faced with what to make of an iconic heartlands figure who had moved to this region. Perhaps the most remarkable set of Cather letters comes

not from Cather herself but from the friends and writers who had, in the early years after her death, to act as custodians of her memory, while formulating the first responses to her career. We can say quite precisely where the site of this struggle – a struggle straight out of a James text such as ‘The Aspern Papers’ – now lies: folders 8,9 and 10 of Box 6c, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher papers, Bailey/Howe library, University of Vermont. In these letters we see exchanges between E.K Brown and his widow, Peggy, writing to Dorothy Canfield about the writing of the first Cather life, and negotiating a kind of Jamesian struggle over the icon as they fend off Edith Lewis and Alfred Knopf in the quest to tell their story. What happens when a writer dies? How quickly does the life, with all its contingencies and loose-ends, become the ‘life’, fixed in the annals of literary history? Cather, whose life was the subject of extraordinary biographical speculation, conjecture and legal wrangling, had already anticipated some of these questions in a writing career haunted by the idea of reputation. It’s tempting to impose a narrative on these letters; but I’ll try, in the spirit I have suggested, to see how the discourse of the icon emerges in these letters. So, a few tentative suggestions that arise from Box 6c.

First, the importance of blurred narrative origins: who tells the story? Where does it come from? McClure’s biography follows this pattern, as does the elaborate impacted structure of *My Antonia*. But so does Cather’s own life-story, as written by her first biographers. Brown began working on his Cather text (itself a kind of composite, part critical study and part life); he then died in April 1951. Peggy Brown, the widow, writes to Dorothy Canfield five days after his death, to say that the book is 4/5 finished, but that the Pittsburgh section is incomplete. Who, then, will be the inheritor of the Cather story? She writ-

ers, ‘But my worry is that Miss Lewis doesn’t “fall apart” over this and cause any trouble.’ The story becomes one of possession, and an elaborately shifting game as various friends and commentators lay claim, in effect, to Cather. ‘Nothing less than a guard posted on each door of my house, and a (loaded) sub-machine gun in the front hall would apparently satisfy Miss Lewis that her material is safe,’ writes Peggy Brown. For Peggy Brown, the inheritance of the icon’s estate would now become crucial. ‘One thing that I thought of is that as this is a very limited biography, due to Miss Cather and Miss Lewis, I think I will save a lot of the material that Edward collected and which he obviously did not use, and which in several instances can not be collected again, for possible use by someone in the far future.’ Through the months of 1951 a struggle ensued, not so much over Cather’s iconic status (already acknowledged by the key players: ‘Miss Lewis is trying to protect her Idol,’ quipped Peggy Brown), as about the narrative of the icon – who will tell her story? Already, Knopf, Canfield Fisher, Peggy Brown and Edith Lewis (along with lesser players such as George Seibel) were dancing around one another. Peggy Brown’s interpretation points one to a reading where Lewis was protecting a figure already seen as an ‘Idol’ – the implication being that Lewis would resist the possession of the icon by other players in this game.

What is particularly interesting – and poetically just – is that the text that resulted should have a rather Catheresque fractured structure: Brown’s book, completed by Leon Edel, just as *The Professor’s House* is, as it were, taken over and ‘told’ by its secondary figure and putative object, Tom Outland. E.K.Brown, first on the scene, was a Professor at Chicago, with links to the formalistic traditions of that School (also seen in Morton Zabel’s work on Cathre). But Brown was Canadian by

birth, and his study *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) and his work for the *University of Toronto Quarterly* have recently been seen as major contributions to the evolution of Canadian literary studies.² In becoming a subject for Brown, Cather had already been internationalised – a process that had begun with Rene Rabin’s study in 1930. In fact, three of the first major Cather studies were written by foreigners: the Frenchman Rabin, the Canadian Brown, the Scot Daiches. Bringing in Edel changes the whole tone of the project. Edel was a Jamesian. To boot, he was a Freudian, thus creating the ironic frisson of a Freudian helping to finish one of the first books about American literature’s most vehement anti-Freudians. And the whole saga of the Brown text becomes a rather Freudian process of exchange, re-telling, suppression and displacement. Peggy Brown pointed out to Dorothy Canfield (August 17th, 1951) that her husband had used notes made by Edith Lewis, notes now taken by Peggy and Edel as the inheritors of the project. ‘Now that we don’t have the notes any longer to know Edward’s from Miss Lewis’s, that will no doubt be a problem too.’ Again, the intersection of questions of authorship with issues of legal possessions, bound around the memories attached to a significant figure. The full irony of the situation finally emerges in a file of letters from Edel to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, all of which reveal Edel’s awareness that the whole saga had, indeed, turned into a narrative of possession and memory such as Henry James had imagined. As Edel said of Lewis’s interventions over the last Avignon manuscript, ‘It’s a real-life story that Henry James might have written – which is perhaps why I am so fascinated by it’ (31st July, 1956). So we have a

² See Laura Smyth Groening, *E.K. Brown: A Study in Conflict* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1993).

neatly circular pattern here: the young Cather, inspired by Henry James, writing under his shadow and then against the master; the legacy of Cather becoming a Jamesian master narrative of conflict over an author’s remains. Edel shows a highly scrupulous awareness of the strange intersections between life, life-writing and fictional narrative, as when he says to Fisher how strange it must be to see her friend’s life ‘thus reduced and filtered, so to speak, and analysed’ (16th July 1952). But this, we might reply, is exactly what Cather’s narrators and protagonists had done throughout her career: reduce, filter, analyze.

Second, letters show that Cather’s reputation was indeed coloured by a kind of regionalist dislocation. Cather and her friends had left Nebraska, had moved East; but for post-Freudians such as Brown and Edel, the ‘solution’ to her life might well lie West, in the early days. The letters echo the quest in *Gatsby* to find the psychic origin of the gifted Midwesterner in what Nick Carraway calls the ‘dark fields of the republic.’ Just as Nick will search for the key to *Gatsby* in his strange adopted childhood, so the Canfield Fisher letters turn back to Cather’s childhood in Nebraska as a key to the current rows. As Dorothy poignantly notes of Edith Lewis: ‘I have known her all my life – she and I were little girls together, both playing violins in the local orchestra. But I can’t predict, any more than you or Alfred Knopf, what her reaction will be to the present situation’ (May 4th 1951). What is happening here is, perhaps, a paradox of modernity (especially well displayed in American culture): Freud teaches us to look for childhood origins for explanations; modern life (mobility, social change) removes us from our origins in extraordinary ways. I only know who I am by means of reaching back to my childhood; my childhood is now lost.

This folder of material is also important for the light it sheds on the academicisation of American literature. Cather’s

network of friends, publishers, editors, partners, co-writers had created a range of interlocutors with very different desires and aspirations. But now the academic steps into the writer's network; nineteenth-century writers had had the good fortune to die before literary academics emerged as a distinctive constituency in the advocacy, maintenance and destruction of icons. One might point to the very newness, the sheer novelty, of the scene described in the letters in Vermont, as a literary executor turns this way and that between publisher, other friends, academic (and academic's wife). New social relationships create awkwardness as the participants search for viable protocols. The sub-machine toting Lewis can be defended on the grounds that she was in a remarkably new situation: executrix of a literary estate, at the moment when such estates were becoming the hunting grounds for the professoriate. By yet another irony Cather's death occurred at a historical moment where we can see that the terms of the debate about writers' lives in America were beginning to shift and re-shape themselves in ways that would not always seem attractive to someone such as Edith Lewis. First, 'American Literature' – as subject, discipline, canon – was decisively taking shape at the start of the Cold War. The stakes were raised; the drive to position writers within an American literary canon would hencefore structure the debate about Cather's standing. Second, modernism's culture of impersonality and authorial effacement (James Joyce's image of the writer 'refined out of existence') was giving way to the more fluid post-war culture of literary celebrity, image-making and pop iconicity. It now looks as if Cather passed away at an important historical crux, just at the moment when pressure would begin to be put on the interiority of a writer's experience in ways that would, surely, have seemed simply impertinent to authors of an earlier generation.

In conclusion, I would want to mount a defence of Lewis on the following grounds: that theories of personality change through time, and that it's very easy to be caught on the wrong side of the historical fence. We can historicize Lewis's quandary by means of the following example. It is highly likely, probably inevitable, that twenty-first century science, specifically genetic analysis, will give us tools of enormous precision for analysing personality. Should a modern literary executor provide DNA samples of a dead author for future biographers? Many of us would recoil at such a notion. Yet, if the genomic revolution is all that it promises, then one could argue that not only would this be in the interest of understanding an individual life, but also that it would contribute to a broader understanding of the nature of literary talent.