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WHY OBSCURE THE RECORD?
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF WILLA CATHER'S
BAN ON LETTER PUBLICATION

ANDREW JEWELL

In September 1930, while she was staying at an old hotel in Aix-les-Bains, France, American author Willa Cather chanced to meet Caroline Franklin Grout. The elderly French woman first impressed Cather with her personal dignity, the way she was “contemptuously intolerant of the limitations of old age,” and after they met and talked, she impressed her even more (Cather, “Chance” 5). Madame Grout happened to be the beloved niece of Gustave Flaubert, one of Cather’s favorite writers. Moreover, Cather knew something of Madame Grout from a book she had treasured: Flaubert’s *Lettres à sa Nièce Caroline*. Flaubert’s letters to his niece—published in 1906, twenty-six years after his death—stirred such emotion in Cather that when she met, in the flesh, the Caroline of the book’s title, she was struck dumb: “There was no word with which one could greet such a revelation,” Cather recalls, “I took one of her lovely hands and kissed it, in homage to a great period, to the names that made her voice tremble” (“Chance” 16). As a reader, Cather relished this book of letters: “It will always be for me one of the most delightful of books” (“Chance” 35). Her satisfaction came, in large part, from the glimpse the letters offered into the personality of the writer; aspects of Flaubert were revealed to Cather through his companionship with another, a companionship accessible through the letters that manifest it.

Cather was so moved by a book of letters that, upon meeting the person to whom the letters were written, she could only express herself with a kiss. A little more than a decade later, as Cather was considering her own correspondence, she did what she could to prevent a book of *her* letters from coming into existence. In the seventh paragraph of her last will and testament she asked those who survived her to prevent the “dramatization” of her work and

to prevent the “publication in any form whatsoever, of the whole, or any part of any letter or letters written by me in my lifetime.” This will, executed April 29, 1943, when Cather was sixty-nine years old, deeply affected Cather’s legacy. Her considerable body of fiction has remained in print and has been widely read, translated, and celebrated. But the voice of her correspondence has been obscured; the loving letters to dear nieces—Cather wrote them, too—were inaccessible. Biographers are always confronted with a limited set of facts and documents with which to write a life. The work of Cather’s biographers has been further circumscribed because her letters, key pieces of evidence accessible to researchers, could not be directly quoted. The writer’s sentences could only appear in her biographies blurred by paraphrase. Books of Cather’s letters, which may have delighted readers enough to kiss the hands of her correspondents, were impossible for over sixty years after her death.

This essay considers the challenge to life writing that emerges from a recalcitrant subject, one that sought to manage her public representation even after her death. How do we approach a biographical subject who is unwilling to be scrutinized? How do we respond to the resistance in the record, to silenced voices, to stories of destroyed documents and obscured facts? I contend that the proper responses to each of these questions must emerge from the specific context of the biographical subject: Why is the subject unwilling? Why is the record obscured? Is there a reason to hide, a secret to conceal, or is the motivation something different and more complicated? And, if we can determine a reason for the opposition, does it matter? What are the ethical considerations when revealing an uncooperative subject?

To some degree, these questions will never be answered, as there are no stable answers to be found. Like Nancy K. Miller in her essay “The Ethics of Betrayal,” one can wrestle with obligations to “Truth” and “Art,” with the need to make sure “readers can be served,” but the end of the passage is a question mark: “What is important for a given community, at a given historical moment, to know? If it is sometimes possible to justify violating the privacy of others by telling, whom can we trust to adjudicate these acts of exposure? How can we tell whether to trust the teller?” (151). Even so, in this piece I want to consider the resistance of one biographical subject, the author Willa Cather, in the hope that the specific details of her life, the particular psychological context of her decision to ban the publication of her letters, will begin to reveal a path toward answers. As detailed below, various explanations have been offered to account for Cather’s decision to ban the publication of her letters, thereby limiting access to her non-public writings and her non-public representations of self. This essay is the first, however, to situate the explanation in the psychological moment of her decision; it is a biographical analysis used to interpret the unwillingness of a biographical subject.

My own pursuit of this question emerged in a somewhat backward fashion: in 2013, with fellow editor Janis P. Stout, I produced *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, breaking (with the full support of the current executors of Cather's estate) the long-enforced ban on the publication of Cather's letters. In publishing such a volume, we risked contributing to the legends of academics and editors who seek to distort the character of their subject, or at least control the biographical narrative, through the editing process. Consider, for example, the complicated history of Henry James's editors, executors, and biographers, as explored in Michael Anesko's *Monopolizing the Master*. Academics with distinctive access to a writer's unpublished letters (an apt description of Stout and myself) can be tempted to construct an idealized—or sensationalized—representation of that writer through the selection process. Similarly, academics with sole access, the sort Leon Edel had to James's materials in the mid-twentieth century, can feel possessive or entitled to control the materials: A. S. Byatt's 1990 Booker Prize-winning novel satirizing this phenomenon was titled, appropriately, *Possession*. Our work on *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* was, I believe, motivated by something quite different than distortion or possession: we wanted to make the documentary evidence available to support broad and varied interpretive analysis. I'm certain that this goal is what motivates most editors of historical and literary materials. The machinations of James's executors and editors are an exception to the ethical rules that guide the editorial community. Like most editors, Stout and I wanted to open the documentary record to readers as transparently as possible, and our editorial choices—like never excerpting or altering an original letter and following the publication of a book with a free, digital edition of all of Cather's letters—support this motivation.

In the process of opening the record to Cather's readers, though, we had to consider Cather's ban on letter publication in her will. Our primary consideration was whether or not we thought Cather's preference in 1943 ought to outweigh the value of publishing the letters; clearly, we decided it should not. Cather's reason for the ban was a secondary consideration. Though we had some ideas about why Cather resisted publishing her letters, ideas we articulated in the introduction to the volume, there remained a mystery about the motivations of her decision. Since the publication of the book, I have been asked many times about Cather's will and her choice to prohibit letter publication, and I have continually disappointed myself with the answers I have been able to muster. But the questions—and my current work with Stout and others on the digital, scholarly edition *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather* for the *Willa Cather Archive*—have compelled me to look for better answers. This essay posits, I think, a better answer, one located in the specific years of her decision and the mental climate of those years.

CATHER'S BAN AND THE EFFECT ON BIOGRAPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP

In the decades since Cather's death in 1947, scholars who have been able to consult her letters have been very sensitive to what they have to offer and to the limitation Cather's ban imposed on their work. The biographers who tried to create a portrait of Cather with restricted access to her correspondence probably felt the limitation most keenly. In the earliest complete biography of her life—the 1953 volume *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, written largely by E. K. Brown but completed by Leon Edel after Brown's death—Edel notes in his “Editor's Foreword” that Cather's ban on the publication of her letters is “a loss to the corpus of her writings, for Miss Cather gave freely of herself in her correspondence, and her letters are touched with the cadence, as with the radiance, of her style; they reflect also, as letters can, the directness and generosity and charm of the personality, its courage and steadfastness” (xxiii). James Woodress, in his preface to his 1987 biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, begins by pointing out the “traps, pitfalls, and barricades [Cather] placed in the biographer's path” (xiii). Sharon O'Brien, in her 1987 biography *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, is even more pointed. She begins the introduction to her book, “Willa Cather did not make it easy for her biographers,” and continues, “Cather set about destroying letters in her possession and urging friends to do the same. . . . She sought to control interpretations of her life and her fiction in the only way that seemed certain—by reducing or eliminating the evidence on which interpretation could be based” (3). And though these biographers did consult letters as they constructed their books, the specific language of the letters was, by legal necessity, obscured by summary and paraphrase; Cather's words were replaced with the biographer's explanation of her words. The cogency of Cather's personal articulation is not present in any sustained explanation of her life.

The seventh paragraph in Cather's 1943 will created a distance between her personal identity and her reading public. This gap was, one can safely assume, precisely what Cather wished to create. Though, as a reader, Cather valued books of correspondence—for example, in addition to her love of Flaubert's letters, she gave her friend Yehudi Menuhin a volume of Franz Schubert's letters in 1938 (*Selected Letters* 541)—she chose to obstruct the routine so common for literary figures of her caliber and prevented a collection of her personal correspondence from being published shortly after her death.¹ She left no surviving explanation for this decision. Her first executor, Edith Lewis—Cather's partner with whom she shared a home for nearly forty years and who upheld the ban on publication in her management of the estate—similarly did not explain *why* Cather wished to keep her letters from being published, if she, indeed, knew why. Banning the publication of

personal papers implies, of course, that one wishes to keep personal things from mass circulation, and perhaps an explanation of the decision seemed unnecessary, seemed, even, to contradict the very motivation of the ban. In any case, no explanation by those in a position to explain was ever offered, and interested readers and scholars have been forced to draw their own conclusions. From this fog grew the story of Cather, fixated on keeping herself protected from the public, throwing her letters into an incinerator. It was a story that was easy to believe. It fit with the conclusions many drew when they learned of the ban: Cather must have been fiercely protective of her personal life, must have wanted to make sure no stranger could hear that intimate voice, must have had something to hide.²

In recent years, more and more letters written by Cather have emerged, new research has been done on them, the long-held ban on letter publication has ended, and *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* has been published. The legend of systematic letter-burning is slowly evaporating as a myth born of bad information: despite a couple of isolated incidents of probable letter destruction by Cather and, after her death, by Lewis, there is no evidence of a comprehensive effort to collect and destroy all the letters. Many have referenced Cather's presumed systematic letter destruction, as when Woodress claims, "[Cather] and Edith Lewis destroyed as many of her letters as they could lay their hands on" (xiv), or when Lindemann notes the "few letters that survived the search-and-destroy missions of Cather's later years" (*Willa Cather* 5), but few if any provide citation or evidence for their claim. Instead, for decades, scholars have accepted it as a commonplace in Cather criticism, an oft-repeated but rarely examined piece of conventional wisdom.

The origin of the story is not clearly known, though it may emerge from Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's 1953 memoir of Cather, which reported that after Jan Hambourg returned to Cather all the letters she had written across the decades to his wife Isabelle McClung Hambourg, she was "burning them up, as quickly as she could" (275). Anecdotes have swelled into generalized statements about systematic "search-and-destroy missions," but such generalizations are unwarranted. Thousands of letters survive, and Cather's inner circle left evidence at her death that her letters were something to be protected and cherished. Her niece Virginia Cather Brockway writes in the days after Cather's death, "I will be very careful of everything of Aunt Willies—books, pictures, letters. M. [Margaret Cather Shannon] wanted me to take charge of all the letters but now I think they should be divided up—just in case of a fire or something unexpected" (Cather, *Selected Letters* 676). Though the apparent destruction of the McClung Hambourg letters and the absence of surviving letters between Cather and Lewis create a great "chasm" in the record

(Lindemann, “I Did”), one cannot conclude that Cather wanted to destroy *all* of her letters. Thousands have survived, including a great many Cather or Lewis could likely have destroyed if they had wanted to.³

Those who have had the opportunity to read portions of Cather’s correspondence have understood their value, as they are a distinctive part of her corpus of writings. They are the only surviving documents that might be considered “private” writings, in that they convey ideas and information not designed for a broad public audience. Yet each letter is a communication act between the writer and the specific reader or readers designed to receive the letter, and therefore each letter is a performance for an audience. Though letters are “private” in comparison to published novels and essays, they do not provide unfiltered access to the writer’s private thoughts. Instead, they show the writer in relationship to another, in conversation. Each letter is, as Elizabeth Hewitt points out, “located at a communicative node—not only at a point of intersection between particular correspondents, but also within the larger system of correspondence into which these readers and writers have entered” (4). These conversations, fixed in communicative networks, are full of insights into the life and character of the writers. Cather’s letters offer intimate reflections on her experiences, relationships, and contexts that are not found elsewhere in her work. When she is writing to a correspondent with whom she has an intellectual or emotional affinity, she gives of herself and reflects, in Edel’s words, the “directness and generosity” of her personality (xxiii). The letters are performances, to be sure, but they are also often “authentic” self-representations; the writer, after all, discovers aspects of the self through the performance of writing.

We now know about and have access to far more of Cather’s letters than any biographer has ever had in the past. When Woodress and O’Brien wrote their influential biographies in the 1980s, they had access to something around 1,500 known letters in various repositories. When Stout published her “biographically based critical study” of Cather in 2000, she was able to find around 1,800 letters. We now have over 3,000, and the “new” materials are of remarkable importance. Hundreds of detailed and open-hearted letters to family members—particularly her brother Roscoe Cather and his family—and to publisher Alfred A. Knopf are now available to scholars. Importantly, this new access to thousands of letters has provided clues to help us better understand the decision she made in 1943. This essay draws on the letters and other evidence to explain why Cather decided, in the final years of her life, to keep her personal letters away from the reading public. The letters reveal that Cather’s last decade was fraught with grief, despair, and distrust. The desire

for control and privacy in her later years corresponded with a depressed mental state. Her grief in response to personal loss, her frustration with a failing body, and her despair in a world at war created a mental climate that resisted public access. In these final years, Cather lived “while struggling against depression, concern about the state of world events, and a deepening proclivity toward withdrawal” (Stout 301). The period was a distinctively difficult one in Cather’s life, one with more persistent mental and physical agitation than any other. Her “later years,” O’Brien notes, were “marked strongly by illness and disability, periods during which she felt herself defective and marginal” (“Willa Cather in the Country of the Ill” 155). Her decision to ban the publication of her letters may well have been symptomatic of her mind in a time of psychological crisis.

Though scholarship has, over the years, noted the struggles of Cather’s final decade—the final chapter of Stout’s *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* is a particularly sensitive and thoughtful evaluation—this essay departs considerably from previous scholarship in a few key respects. Crucially, this essay draws on the actual texts of the letters themselves and is not limited to summary. This opening of access allows for a criticism that is more specifically drawn from Cather’s language of self-expression and, therefore, can be more detailed in its analysis of Cather’s frame of mind. Virtually all existing biographical criticism draws heavily on Cather’s published work rather than the text of her letters because most of the letters, as texts, have heretofore been unavailable for close reading unless the scholar was able to undertake extensive travel to numerous repositories, and none of the available letters could be quoted directly.⁴ This essay is also the first analysis to consider her final years as the atmosphere for her famous ban on letter publication. Though many have referenced the ban, none, to my knowledge, have contextualized the decision in a particular psychological period or have offered a detailed explanation for the decision. Instead, the ban (and the myth of letter destruction) is used as evidence for Cather’s “obsession with privacy” (Lee 330) or to note that “as she grew older [she] became increasingly obsessed with privacy” (Woodress 141). But generalizations about Cather’s privacy “obsession,” particularly in light of her continued socializing and letter-writing in her late years, does not adequately explain her choice to obstruct publication of her letters. What was happening within her that led to this sweeping and influential decision? To understand more fully the psychological climate that led to the ban on publication of the letters, it is important to reconsider the story of Cather’s final decade and the specific shape of her grief.

CATHER'S TROUBLED FINAL DECADE

In 1937, ten years before she died, Cather was working actively. Houghton Mifflin was preparing to publish the Autograph Edition of her works, and she was reading proof and attending to details on those volumes. More important, she was beginning to write a new novel. This book had a basis in some early memories, but it would need to be researched carefully. In October 1937, after months of at least intermittent work on the manuscript, Cather wrote her sister Elsie and told her that she believed the new book would “be pleasant company” during the winter, but that she needed to consult a book that was still in her parents’ old house in Red Cloud, Nebraska (Letter to Elsie Cather).⁵ It was her father’s rebound copy of *The History of the Valley of Virginia* by Samuel Kercheval. She was writing the book that would become *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a novel of antebellum Virginia that drew on family lore and the community the Cathers left behind when they migrated to Nebraska in 1882. In early November, she told her friend Zoë Akins that she was “working on a new book which is such a pleasure to me,” though the Autograph Edition was taking so much of her time that “God and man seem agreed that I shan’t get ahead with it” (*Selected Letters* 538).

Later, in December 1937, her brother Douglass Cather came to New York for a visit. Though Cather regretted how busy she was with work matters when Douglass was in town, they managed to have some fun together. Together with Edith Lewis, they had a celebratory dinner on December 7 in honor of Cather’s birthday. Douglass came to the offices of Cather’s publisher, Alfred Knopf, and Alfred took a snapshot of him with his little Leica camera. They went to Carnegie Hall together to hear a concert by Cather’s friend, violinist Yehudi Menuhin. Douglass also consulted with a heart specialist in New York, and Cather told her sister Elsie that, according to the specialist, Douglass’s heart was “absolutely all right” (*Selected Letters* 539; 554).

But in early June of 1938, Douglass died suddenly of a heart attack at age fifty-eight. Shortly after hearing the news, Cather wrote her sister expressing the shock she felt at his death: “Nothing in my life has ever hit me so hard. Father’s death and Mother’s seemed natural. They had lived out their lives, but this seems unnatural altogether, and I cannot get used to it or feel reconciled to it” (*Selected Letters* 548). She did not go to California for the services, but in New York, at the hour of the funeral, Cather went into the nearby Church of the Dominican Fathers and quietly honored her brother. She told her sister that she could not find an Episcopalian church that was open in the evening, but that the Catholics understood “that in this world grief goes on all night, as well as all day” (*Selected Letters* 549).

Cather was floored with grief in the months after Douglass died. In September, she confessed to another brother, Roscoe, that all summer she could not sleep without medication, that her hair fell out in big chunks, and that her hands were shaking. But she was able to find some comfort with Lewis at their cottage on Grand Manan Island, and reported, “My hands are steady again, I sleep fairly well, but I am not very happy” (*Selected Letters* 554). She was planning to sail that autumn to Italy to see her old and beloved friend Isabelle McClung Hambourg, who was ill with kidney disease at the Hotel Cocumella in Sorrento. Then, on October 10, Isabelle died. Cather told her friend and editor Ferris Greenslet, with whom she corresponded about many aspects of her life even when she wasn’t publishing with his company Houghton Mifflin, that Isabelle’s death was “another great change in life for me” (*Selected Letters* 557). She wrote her old friend from childhood Irene Miner Weisz that after the death of both Douglass and Isabelle, “I scarcely know how I shall go on” (*Selected Letters* 557). In a letter about the loss to Isabelle’s sister Edith McClung in later October, Cather confessed, “You can understand that living will never be the same for me again. I don’t yet know where I am or what kind of future there will be for me in a world in which there is no Isabelle to write to or to go to” (*Selected Letters* 560). A couple of weeks later, from the Shattuck Inn in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, Cather wrote to her brother Roscoe:

You cannot imagine what [Isabelle’s] death means to me. It came just four months after Douglass’ death, before I had got my nerves steady again. No other living person cared as much about my work, through thirty-eight years, as she did. As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end. (*Selected Letters* 561)

The repeated claim in these letters to long-time friends and close family members is that the deaths created a fissure in Cather’s life, a break in her very sense of self. These losses and their devastating effect on Cather are the beginning of the last, troubled stage of her rich life. Cather’s claim that “living will never be the same for me again” was not an overstatement brought about by recent pain but recognition of an apparently very real shift in her sense of the world and her place in it. Her assertion that “car[ing] too much” will “break” her “in the end” is an acknowledgment that the deaths of her brother and longtime friend have unmoored her; she felt severed from the world she had been devoted to, one defined in part by the companions with whom she shared it. Though Isabelle lived far from her, “I often went to her,” Cather wrote her niece, “and in mind we were never separated. Now we have no means of communication; that is all” (*Selected Letters* 562).

Cather's personal grief was compounded by increasing physical instability and the war news from Europe. In the winter following the deaths of Douglass and Isabelle she suffered from a bout of influenza, and then, on March 16, 1939, she wrote to her acquaintance Dayton Kohler: "My Dear Mr. Kohler; What is the use? Hitler entered Prague last night. . . . However much we may try to live in a nobler past, this thing has come upon us and lowers our vitality and our wish to live" (*Selected Letters* 568). On May 20 of that year, she commented to Zoë Akins that "the wrongness of the world is a cloud over us all." Under this cloud, however, she did manage to complete her Virginia novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in time for publication on her sixty-seventh birthday, December 7, 1940. And, for a time, the novel and its success brightened her life; she told Ferris Greenslet, "I wrote many chapters of Virginia ways and manners, just as things came back to me, for the relief of remembering them in a time of loss and personal sorrow. That 'eased' me, and comforted" (*Selected Letters* 593). But the novel also, in a way, precipitated a physical decline. In the autumn of 1940, she signed five hundred copies of the *de luxe* edition of the book for Knopf in three days, which sprained a tendon in her thumb. The pain grew worse and she was unable to write. In late December, partly in response to the frustration of her ailing hand, she spent a couple of weeks in the French Hospital of New York, a place that was as much a retreat for Cather as it was a place for medical attention. That provided some relief, but her hand continued to burden her in the winter of 1941 until Dr. Frank Ober, of Boston, was consulted. He designed a metal brace that kept Cather's writing hand immobilized and allowed it to heal. Cather wrote to her brother Roscoe in March 1941:

I have not written you very seriously about [my injured hand] before, because I am afraid that I have a rather bad reputation in my family—a reputation for howling about my ills. But somebody in the family ought to know the facts. Of course when a hand gets in this shape, a painful arthritis sets in, and the question is whether I can ever use it again to write books or even letters. (*Selected Letters* 599)

Cather's hand was never completely stable again, and for the rest of her life she would cycle between times when she could write without significant pain and times when her hand again collapsed and she was forced to immobilize it in the metal brace. Though the discomfort of a hand in pain would be enough to deeply frustrate anyone, for Cather, the immobilization of her right hand hurt in another way. Out of a conviction that she could not dictate her fiction, she almost stopped writing. She wrote Carrie Sherwood on November 15, 1941, that dictating fiction "would be like playing solitaire with one's back to the card table—dictating the play. You have to see the thing before your eyes, it

forms on the sheet of paper like a picture,” and so an injured hand meant that the solace of work and creation was taken from her. She dealt with her grief, in part, by losing herself in her writing. Now that comfort was threatened, underscoring the frustration and disconnection clouding her experience.

Cather’s hand was not her only physical burden. In the summer of 1942, she had her gall bladder and appendix removed, a procedure that used to be much more invasive and complicated than it is now, and after the surgery she had an extended period with no appetite and considerable weight loss. She couldn’t bring herself to eat the hospital food, and so Lewis lovingly brought food cooked at their home over to the hospital every day in a taxi (Letter to Irene Miner Weisz). But even after she recovered from surgery and returned home, Lewis writes, Cather “never got back any true health” (*Willa Cather Living* 191).

Burdened by illness, Cather, who had always been a frequent and ambitious traveler, stayed closer to home. A vacation in California in 1941 with her brother Roscoe and his family was her final trip west. She was also unable to go to her cottage on Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy during the war, so she stayed in New York or went with Lewis to retreats that were relatively easy to access, like the Asticou Inn in Northeast Harbor, Maine. She did work intermittently on a new, longer work of fiction called *Hard Punishments*, and in 1944 and 1945, she wrote two stories, “Before Breakfast” and “The Best Years.” This last story, drawing on Cather’s childhood memories and her relationship with her brothers, was completed in the late summer of 1945. But just as she was preparing to send it to her brother Roscoe, she got word that he had died in his sleep in California. She wrote his widow, Meta Schaper Cather, that it was a story that she had really wanted to share with him: “It is about our childhood. I can’t bear to look at it now” (*Selected Letters* 653).

The death of Roscoe was a terrible blow to Cather. Not only was he a brother and a man she deeply cared for, but he represented her last connection to the earliest part of her life. She told her sister-in-law Meta that:

several times in my life I [had] bitter losses, but never before have I felt heart-broken—felt that things were done for me. Roscoe was the only one of my family who felt about things as I did, and he was the only one who saw, from the beginning, what I was trying to do. He was my best critic, because he knew both ends of the process; knew the material, and what I had been able to do with it, or had failed in the handling. (*Selected Letters* 653)

Before receiving the news of Roscoe’s death, Cather was beginning to write in earnest again, beginning to feel the old enthusiasm growing within her at her retreat in Maine. But after his death, she was finished. In the fall of 1945, she

wrote Weisz: "I have been ill ever since I got home from Maine. I don't even try to do anything. I brought a new book home with me, but I have not had the energy to put it in order for Alfred Knopf to see, and I don't care whether it is ever published or not. Roscoe's death broke the last spring in me" (*Selected Letters* 657).

With the exception of letters, many of them long and full of rich remembrances, she does not seem to have written again after Roscoe's death. She told Meta Cather that she preferred, instead, to live very quietly: "It seems that if one has, for many years, cared a great deal for a great many people and great many things, one suffers a kind of emotional exhaustion in the end, and has to rest one's power to care" (*Selected Letters* 660). In April 1947, about eighteen months after the death of her brother, Cather died of a cerebral hemorrhage. The last letter Cather is known to have written, to her old friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, begins with the news that her hand has been bothering her again, moves on to memories of their visit forty-five years before to the British poet A. E. Housman, and ends, in a handwritten postscript to a dictated, typewritten letter, "Curse my metal thumb!" (*Selected Letters* 673).

"THE TIME IS VERY DARK"

The grief and physical trauma that filled Cather's final decade affected her life tremendously and colored her decision-making in these final years. As O'Brien notes, "because she felt worthless when ill, she could easily descend into depression" ("Willa Cather in the Country of the Ill" 152). But a proclivity to depression does not explain what, specifically, motivated Cather to ban the publication of her letters. To understand that, we need to look in more detail at what evidence we have in letters to certain correspondents about the particular state of her mind. We need to trace the path her logic might have taken when she decided to put the ban in her will. There are a few suggestions in surviving correspondence that explicitly represent Cather's attitude about the publication of passages from her letters. For example, after acknowledging in a postscript to a January 1930 letter to Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin that she liked Oliver La Farge's *Laughing Boy*, a new novel the firm had just published, she was startled to see her name on an advertisement for the book. She immediately wrote Greenslet and reprimanded him: "Wasn't it faithless of you (and, incidently [*sic*], most illegal) to use my name, without my permission, in your ad. for Laughing Boy?" (*Selected Letters* 425). A few years later, when she was asked by University of Michigan English professor Carlton Wells if he might publish part of a letter she sent to him, she refused and responded tartly, "I take for granted that a person who writes a discriminating and intelligent letter is the sort of person who would not use

any portion of my letter for publicity of any kind" (*Selected Letters* 511). She loathed the idea of people using her for their own advancement, of being a pawn in somebody else's game. "[S]ome of my old friends have used my letters in such insidious [*sic*] ways that I've grown cautious and suspicious," she wrote George Seibel in 1932 (Letter to George Seibel). She explicitly objected when she believed that her words from private letters were used for advertising value without her permission.

But she didn't object to every publication of her letters. In 1931, she gave Wilbur Cross permission to publish a letter she wrote to him about her 1931 novel *Shadows on the Rock* and told her publisher Alfred Knopf, probably in October of that year, "I don't remember the text of the letter at all, but I probably did not write anything very silly to Dr. Cross, whom I like and respect" (Letter to Alfred A. Knopf). It was published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* on October 17, 1931. Years later, in October 1940, she allowed some paragraphs from a letter concerning her 1925 novel *The Professor's House* to be published in the *News Letter of the College English Association*. There are a half-dozen other examples of letters Cather permitted to be published in her lifetime, some of them likely written with publication in mind.⁶

One might conclude, then, that though she acknowledged some letters might very well be seen as "public" texts, she established the wholesale ban on letter publication in 1943 in order to cautiously prevent what she especially detested: widespread transfer of private correspondence (the content of which she had largely forgotten) into the public realm. But to hold this as a personal policy while living is a different act than perpetuating the ban posthumously in a last will and testament. She was not just limiting personal exposure or controlling her public persona, she was preventing—or at least delaying—readers of the future from encountering the words of her correspondence. She knew that letters can have special significance for readers, can offer "sharp and unexpected flashes of . . . personality" that are distinctive from other published writings (Letter to Polly Damrosch Howard).⁷ She even acknowledged that published letters allowed her to create one of her masterpieces, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. "Without these letters [from Father Joseph P. Machebeuf to his sister Philomene] in Father [William Joseph] Howlett's book to guide me," she writes, "I would certainly never have dared to write my book" ("On *Death*" 8). Yet, even with this appreciation for the value of letters, for the way the specific language of correspondence can reveal details and colors about a subject which other forms of writing cannot, Cather decided in 1943 to do what she could to keep these insights about *her* away from readers.

Cather's attempt to withhold her correspondence from audiences of the future is a decision that emerged from a time in her life when she was

convinced that such an audience would be alien to her. As briefly referenced already, Cather's state of mind was not only influenced by the happenings in her private life, but also by the state of the world and, especially, the events of World War II. Her letters suggest that she believed something had dramatically altered in the world, that the values and culture that had shaped her were evaporating. Her perception of the world at large, a philosophical response to the events of the war aggravated by personal distress, led her to attempt to keep her personal life away from the generations of the future.

To illustrate this point, I want to consider a few key passages from letters Cather wrote during the war. These letters were written during the same time Cather codified her ban on the publication of letters in her will, and they are prime examples of the outrage and fear Cather often expressed in letters of this period. The first is from a February 12, 1944, letter to Viola Roseboro'. Cather had known Roseboro' for many years; the two women met through *McClure's Magazine* and had been corresponding since 1903. Roseboro', like Cather, was a well-traveled professional writer with roots in journalism. She was also a woman of Cather's generation who had come of age in the late nineteenth century. In the 1944 letter, Cather finds a kinship with Roseboro' in their shared curiosity about the world and love of travel. "I have been thinking of you in connection with the death of the world—the death of the world you loved so well, and roamed about in so much," Cather writes, "What a grand old sailor you were!—just drinking your fill of that beautiful old world which we thought would last forever." But her focus in this letter is not on reliving old memories, but on the fragility of the world the two both loved: "Why should the beautiful cities that were a thousand years a-making tumble down on our heads now, in our short lifetime? What is the sense of it?" She acknowledges that they—and the world—had already survived one cataclysmic war in the twentieth century, and she sensed that World War II was engendering destruction on a different scale: "We saw one war, and there was sorrow a-plenty. But why do we have to see our world destroyed? See countries sponged off the map, as we used to erase them from the blackboard—after we had drawn them at school?" Cather accounts for her despair philosophically, recalling a line she heard in a lecture by British physicist and mathematician James Jeans. "Next to man's longing for personal immortality, he longs to feel that his world is immortal and will go on indefinitely as he has known it," Cather remembers Jeans remarking, and she continues, "This has been the feeling of human beings in all ages. Why on earth do we, in all the countless stretch of years, just in our little moment, have to witness everything laid waste?" Cather acknowledges the despairing tone of her letter but justifies it by telling Roseboro' that she is "one of the few people I knew who

cares intensely and personally about” the cities of the world (*Selected Letters* 631). Savoring the pleasure she has known in travel and learning about the “beautiful old world,” Cather suggests in this letter that the world is not just at war, but has seen its “death.” It is gone. The places and cultures she and her friends had treasured from their youth were now “sponged off the map.” “Beautiful cities” have been “laid waste.”

This letter is partially about the physical destruction of places Cather had seen and loved, like England, Italy, and, especially, France. But it is also about the destruction of something else, something more fundamental to human experience. The “beautiful cities” are embodiments of a cultural legacy that Cather sees as threatened. She explains her sense of the threat’s magnitude more pointedly in a letter to Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset written around the same time as the letter above, the winter of 1943–44. Undset knew the horrors of the war more immediately and personally than Cather, as she fled Norway when the Nazis invaded in April 1940, and her oldest son died in action that same month. Undset was not a woman Cather had known for a long time, but she was an intellectual and artist whom Cather deeply respected and who knew the costs of the war. “This is such a terrible Christmas,” Cather writes Undset, “it seems like a preparation for horrors unexampled and unguessed at. For the first time in my life I feel afraid—afraid of losing everything one cherished in the world and all the finest youth of the world.” She goes on to identify, somewhat opaquely, the source of her fear: “The new evils we all know, but in their nature they destroy our power to combat them. The cold pride of science is the most devilish thing that has ever come into this world. It is the absolute enemy of happiness. The human mind, not the spirit, has disinherited human nature.” The darkness Cather senses in the world feels not just like the suffering of people in a time of war, but like the very stuff of humanity—“human nature”—has been transformed, been “disinherited.” She ends the letter, “This is a maudlin note to send out on Christmas day. Please forgive me. The time is very dark” (*Selected Letters* 623–24).

Though the language in the letter is vague and emotional rather than carefully analytical, it suggests that Cather perceives the presence of “new evils” that have created this transformation. The specific nature of the “new evils” Cather mentions are unclear—one only has to consider the unprecedented human and material devastation of World War II to get a general sense of her meaning—but her declaration that “in their nature they destroy our power to combat them” suggests she is not merely thinking of war machines. Rather, she is considering the power of terrible ideas and prejudices, of the way a nation like Germany, with a long history and remarkable cultural output, can be susceptible to the evil of Nazism. The “cold pride of science” likely refers

to Cather's notion that scientists and engineers have pursued technology for technology's sake, that scientific and technological innovation has been uncritically valued in the twentieth century, and that much of what has been developed has, in fact, endangered the very existence of human beings on the earth. Only a few years before, in November 1939, at the outbreak of the war, she remarked to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "If only gasoline had continued to slumber in depths with prehistoric remains where it belongs, we'd be no worse off than human tribes and races have always been" (Letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher). But, of course, gasoline was powering the war, and humans were facing unparalleled threats to their lives and communities. Cather is terrified of a world where humanity is overpowered by machinery, and she senses that the analytical processes of technological innovation have created a posthuman world, one where "human nature" as it has been known for millennia is "disinherited."

The philosopher Samuel Scheffler, in his book *Death and the Afterlife*, provides a keen insight into Cather's remarks and the depth of emotion they represent. Scheffler's major point in his book is that the actions, judgments, and decisions of our lives are inherently reliant on our belief that human life on earth will continue long after our own deaths. The "afterlife" of his title is not a spiritual afterlife of the soul, but rather the lives that go on after ours end in death, the lives of others that follow after ours are done. He points out that dependence on this kind of "afterlife" is fundamental to the shape and meaning of our lives. Our values, wrapped up in relationships and traditions and creations, depend upon believing humanity and its culture will persist beyond our lifetimes. Scheffler writes,

So if by the afterlife we mean the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some significant respects, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence. . . . Without confidence in the existence of the afterlife, many of the things in our own lives that now matter to us would cease to do so or would come to matter less. (26)

He notes that when people make arguments about the importance of actions that will help human survival in the future, they often appeal to a sense of "moral obligation" and the notion that our descendants depend on it. Scheffler says in an interview about the ideas in his book, "it's not just that they're dependent on us. There's also a sense in which we depend on them. Without them, if there are no future generations, the value of what we're doing here and now is threatened" ("A Philosopher's 'Afterlife'").

Scheffler's assertion about the present's dependence on the future—or, rather, a belief in the viability of the future—helps illuminate the profundity of Cather's despair during World War II. She lost her faith in the humanity that would survive her. I am not claiming that Cather had an apocalyptic vision of the end of humanity (though she did note in an otherwise brief business letter in August 1945 that “the atomic bomb has sent a shudder of horror (and fear) through all the world” [*Selected Letters* 652]), but that she felt a rift between herself and the future generations as she perceived them. Though she continued to take pleasure and interest in the lives of individual young people, like her nieces and nephews, she felt alienated from what she understood to be a more general shift in human culture. Importantly, in the James Jeans quotation she shares with Roseboro', the focus is not on the world just surviving, but on the world going on “indefinitely as [one] has known it.” Cather's despair at the frailty of the world was enmeshed with her own sense that she no longer belonged in it. Her insistence on the world's decay was perhaps dependent upon her own notion that *her* life, *her* world, no longer made sense, that she could not survive in the world of the 1940s.

Indeed, her last decade is filled with evidence of retreat. Intellectually, she found solace in literature of an earlier era: Shakespeare, Chaucer, and, especially, the Scottish historical fiction of Walter Scott. According to Lewis, the Scott novels were particularly entrancing for Cather: “She talked of them, lived in them” (*Willa Cather Living* 195). The little fiction she wrote during her last decade, too, mostly concerned the past and may have signaled Cather's preference to escape the pain of the contemporary world through imagination. Her last published novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is based on family history in antebellum Virginia, her short story “The Best Years” remembers the Nebraska of her youth, and her last unpublished and unfinished work, *Hard Punishments*, is set in medieval Avignon.

But signs of Cather's retreat, though plentiful, must be understood alongside the signs that she was paying close attention to her contemporary world. Lewis tells us she loved to read the old poets and novelists, but her letters also suggest she was reading contemporary literature, particularly literature about the war. She wrote Alfred Knopf in June and July of 1944 that she loved Joseph Kessel's novel *Army of Shadows* about the French resistance movement (Letters to Alfred A. Knopf). She even agreed to provide the Knopfs with an advertising blurb for the novel, something she almost never did, though the lines she provided apparently came too late for the firm to use them. Her letters also contain many references to the war, often very specific references that indicate she was actively following the daily war news along with most of the rest of the world. For example, in a letter to Ferris Greenslet on June 10,

1940, she notes that she is writing him on a “dreadful and discouraging” day, which is a reference to the news that Italy was abandoning its neutrality and declaring war on France and Great Britain (*Selected Letters* 584). In other letters, she sent along clippings of war news from the newspaper that held some particular interest, like when she sent Undset a clipping from the *Red Cloud Commercial Advertiser* that reports on a pilot from her hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska, who shot down four Japanese planes on Christmas Day in 1941 (*Selected Letters* 609–10).

It is this combination of imaginatively retreating from the present while actively following its horrors that led Cather to conclude that the world she loved was disappearing and that the future would be unlikely to value the things that mattered to her. Indeed, Cather had indicated a loyalty to an older world in 1936, when she declared in a prefatory note that the essays in her book *Not Under Forty* were “for the backward, and by one of their number” (v). Some may counter that Cather’s resistance to the present is similar to the mindset of many people who are aging, that her longing for the past is but part of the typical pattern that accompanies advancing years. But Cather wasn’t just nostalgic for golden-years-gone-by in the early 1940s; she had developed a conviction that the world she loved was crumbling and that the destruction was chiefly caused by a fundamental shift in human character. Such a conviction was a distortion wrought by her grief and pain, but it was a conviction that undergirded the decision-making of her final years.

However, there is also levity in the written record she left from this period, a few signs that she understood her own sense of distance from the world with some awareness of its evasiveness and even foolishness. One sign is the theme of her short story “Before Breakfast,” written in the summer of 1944 but only published after Cather’s death in the posthumous volume *The Old Beauty and Others*. This short story, not very well known, is the only late fiction of Cather’s to have a relatively contemporary setting, and it directly confronts an aging person’s sense of alienation from the world. Though other Cather works, like “Old Mrs. Harris” and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, also consider the challenges of aging, “Before Breakfast” is distinctive as the only surviving piece of fiction written in the 1940s that considers these issues directly. Its composition is nearly contemporaneous with many of the letters quoted above, so it provides striking evidence in the effort to understand Cather’s viewpoint in this specific period.

Because most are unfamiliar with the story, it is helpful to briefly summarize it: Henry Grenfell, a successful businessman who began his working life as an underprivileged child, has come to his cabin on an island in the North Atlantic, an island undoubtedly modeled on Grand Manan Island in the Bay

of Fundy, where Cather and Lewis owned a modest cabin. On the boat ride to the island, he has what he considers an unpleasant conversation with a geologist and his daughter and, after a sleepless night fraught with anger and doubt and memory, emerges from bed and begins his morning routine. Filled with unease and frustration, he soon leaves for a morning walk through the spruce woods to a treeless headland that looks out over the sea. While sitting on a rock, he sees the geologist's daughter preparing for a swim. He fears she is risking her life to swim in such cold water and starts to head down to rescue her but then observes that, before he gets very far at all, she successfully swims from shore to a rock and back again. After witnessing her private accomplishment, he walks back down to his cabin in an improved mood and ready for a hearty breakfast. There the story ends.

Like much of Cather's work, a plot summary does no justice to the real meaning and effect of this story. Central to the experience is Grenfell's psychology, and particularly his own sense of his relationship to the world. We learn that he is a married man with three sons, that his family is the epitome of success and sophistication, but that he feels distant from them and believes they are as "cold as ice" (400). He flees Boston, his work, and his family with regularity—not even telling them where he is going or for how long—to his retreat on the island. He also struggles with "dyspepsia" and feels ashamed that he is physically "delicate" and must eat a special diet. His response to this shame is to spend months of each year proving his manhood with rough physical recreation, like big game hunting. According to Henry Grenfell, one must kill a polar bear as recompense for having a stomach that can only tolerate graham crackers and milk.

The bad night that precedes the action of the story is inspired by Grenfell's conversation with the geologist on the boat. Responding to Grenfell's polite questions, the geologist provides considerable scientific information about the island and reports that it was 136 million years old. This information infuriates Grenfell. It is a "childish bitterness" toward "'millions' and professors," Cather tells us, inspired by "several things" (397). More specifically, Grenfell resents having his romantic notions of the island disrupted by scientific knowledge. It isn't that the professor's report provides information that contradicts Grenfell's conclusions; it is that Grenfell does not want geologic time burdening his conception of the world: "Why tear a man loose from his little rock and shoot him out into the eternities?" Grenfell thinks. "All that stuff was inhuman. A man had his little hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to his endurance. If you took that away from him you left him spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything" (399).

Grenfell has constructed a sense of his own value that is vulnerable when subjected to the realities of the natural world. Science destroys his conception of self, as it contradicts his notion that his limited perspective, his humanity, is meaningful in relation to larger patterns and longer histories. Significantly, Grenfell's own articulation of his angry vulnerability comes in the form of private declarations to the planet Venus in the sky at daybreak. Anthropomorphizing the distant planet, he bursts out, "And what's a hundred and thirty-six million years to you, Madam? . . . You were doing your stunt up there long before there was anything down here but—God knows what! Let's leave that to the professors, Madam, you and me!" (397). And later, his mind turns to Venus again: "there was that planet, serene, terrible and splendid, looking in at him . . . immortal beauty . . . yes, but only when somebody *saw* it, he fiercely answered back!" (403).

Grenfell's reaction, which Cather labels in the story as "childish," is a veiled effort by Cather to meditate upon—and poke fun at—her own psychological fixations of the period; the story is, as Stout remarks, "an act of reflection on herself as a person" (309). Grenfell is not exactly an avatar for Cather, but his pompous, foolish response to geological information and the modern world is, I think, Cather's private self-satire. Grenfell's focus on Venus, even, is an echo of her own private life and thoughts. In a 1936 letter to Lewis—the only known surviving full letter to her—Cather writes about witnessing Jupiter and Venus in the sky above Gap Mountain in New Hampshire and, as she does in the story, speaks of Venus as "she." "I can't but believe that all that majesty and all that beauty, those fated and unfailing appearances and exits," she writes Lewis, "are something more than mathematics and horrible temperatures. If they are not, then we are the only wonderful things—because we can wonder" (*Selected Letters* 520). Her private comment to Lewis in 1936 admitting to a longing for anthropocentric meaning behind the physics of the universe, and respecting the human habit to invent such meanings, is echoed by Grenfell in his insistence that human seeing was needed to make Venus beautiful in the sky. Grenfell, then, is an exaggerated mouthpiece for some of Cather's own thoughts.

Grenfell is an autobiographical character only in the sense that Cather empathizes with his anxieties; his life story is very different than hers, but she understands where he's coming from. In creating the character, she drew on her own need to retreat and the distance she felt from the world. Like him, she longed for a human scale when understanding the complexities of life and the universe. But, tellingly, Grenfell, isolated on his island, is also a little ridiculous, and Cather knows it. He's hurting, and his pain is real, but he is irrational and crabby, too. Cather must have seen a little of this quality in herself

as well. She knew, at some level, that her fear of the death of the world was exaggerated and emerged not solely from rationality but also from her own personal grief and frailty. And the ending of “Before Breakfast” underscores Cather’s awareness: Grenfell, upon witnessing the geologist’s daughter swim in the sea, feels, at least temporarily, a gentler relationship with the world. He watches her, but she doesn’t know she is being observed. He sees that she has not fully anticipated how cold the morning would be, and yet, solely for herself, because she does not know she is being observed, she accomplishes the task anyway: she takes off her robe, jumps into the cold water, swims to the rock, and swims back to shore. In this simple action, Grenfell sees courage and determination, and it gives him hope. “Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age,” he thinks (407). His last thought in the story, before he eats his breakfast, is in evolutionary time: “when that first amphibious frog-toad found his water-hole dried up behind him, and jumped out to hop along till he could find another—well, he started on a long hop” (407). Grenfell, who has felt himself part of the past and dying world, begins to envision a world that will outlive him. In the pluck of the geologist’s daughter, he realizes that humans will continue, that they have the tenacity for the “long hop” it will take to make it through a trying time, and that the values of his life will not completely fade with his passing.

This ending must be a glimpse into Cather’s own muted hopefulness in the summer of 1944. “Even at the advanced age of seventy-plus,” Stout writes, “she regarded attentively a humanity that had come a long way, hopped a long hop” (312). It was a time that corresponded to more hopeful war news, too: the summer of 1944 saw the liberation of Rome, the Allied landing at Normandy, and the beginning of the liberation of France. Perhaps this news mitigated Cather’s conviction that the world she loved was on the cusp of extinction and she could again believe that happier, more peaceful days lay ahead. But that moderately improved outlook darkened again with Roscoe Cather’s death and the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945, and Cather never revisited the decision she made in 1943 to keep her letters from being published. The will was not altered.

A close look at Cather’s final decade and the psychological context of her will suggests that Cather’s decision to ban the publication of her letters was not a result of an abstract belief in privacy or a dismissal of the value of books of correspondence. She was not trying to hide any secrets. It seems far more likely that Cather banned the publication of her letters because she believed that the world as she knew it, people as she understood them, would not long survive her death. The humanity left on earth would somehow be “disinherited”

from what came before, and there would be no “afterlife” for people of her kind. She felt that the future, whatever it might be, would have no place for her, and that, therefore, the future could not and should not be entrusted with her personal correspondence, especially those hundreds of letters written to family and friends that revealed her relatively unguarded self.

One brief section of the will, however, suggests that Cather left the door to the future open a crack. After the strongly worded direction to her “Executor and Trustee” not to allow the publication of her letters, a clause admits that the rights may one day vest “in my legatees or distributees,” people of the future not directly named as executors in the will. She states that she hopes these future generations will also prohibit the publication of the letters, but that it is not her intention to “charge” those who own the rights in the future with legal enforcement of the ban. Instead, she leaves it to the “sole and uncontrolled discretion of my Executors and Trustee” to decide whether or not to enforce the restriction she has requested. Observing this part of the will, Norman Holmes Pearson commented that she understood “The future must make its own decisions. All Miss Cather could do was to make the future as remote as possible” (8).

Perhaps Cather made the future remote in her will because it *was* remote to her, unknown and untrusted. We are, of course, that future she feared. I am, as the author of this essay and the editor of her letters, even more specifically the thing she dreaded in 1943: a person who would help expose her personal writings to the public. I’ll admit, though, I don’t feel even the slightest bit guilty about it. Partly this is because the Cather I know and study is not just the Willa Cather of 1943, but a Willa Cather who is unstuck in time. For me, she is at once the vivacious youth anticipating her life, the young woman driving forward with fierce desire, the mature person generating fiction of incredible artistic quality, and the woman deeply engaged with the world and the people she loves. She is the woman who is so moved by a writer’s book of letters that she can only express herself with a kiss. The despairing older woman, though a very real Cather, is only one Cather among many, and *that* Cather’s voice, as I hear it, is overwhelmed by the vital voices that came before.

I realize that in pointing toward Cather’s grief and depression in these years I risk accusations of a self-justifying argument: as an editor of her letters, it may seem I need to find a way to dismiss her preference not to publish her correspondence. I don’t think self-justification is my motivation, however, if only because I’ve never felt any hesitance about our justification for publishing her letters. It has always felt like the right thing to do. In 1962, the poet John Neihardt traveled to Red Cloud, Nebraska, to dedicate the new Willa Cather Museum, and at the dedication he commented,

It is usual, I believe, to regard such ceremonies as being concerned with honor paid to the dead, and yet those whom we call the dead can need nothing that we who linger here a little while can give . . . it is for us, the living, and for the living who shall follow us, generation after generation, that we set this Willa Cather Memorial against the flowing years, lest we forget the precious heritage that is ours through her. (1)

Likewise, we published Cather's letters for living readers, those who (like us) are enriched by them and by the lives and relationships they witness. The dead, including Willa Cather herself, need nothing from us.

NOTES

1. We have ample evidence of this trend among authors who were arguably Cather's peers in the early twentieth century: Sarah Orne Jewett died in 1909, and *The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* was published by Houghton Mifflin two years later; Sinclair Lewis died in 1951, and *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919–1930* was published by Harcourt, Brace, and Co. in 1952; Ellen Glasgow died in 1945, and Harcourt, Brace, and Co. published her *Letters* in 1958; H. L. Mencken died in 1958, and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., published his *Letters* in 1961; F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940, and Scribner's published *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* in 1963; and *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* was published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 1964, only one year after the poet's death.
2. One interpretation is that Cather destroyed or restricted access to her letters to hide evidence of her lesbian identity. For example, the apparent destruction of letters to Isabelle McClung Hambourg, reported in Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (275), has been assumed to be the elimination of "evidence" of Cather's "romantic attachment" to McClung Hambourg (O'Brien, *Emerging Voice* 128). The connection between Cather's letters, their partial destruction, and her sexual identity is a highly complex issue. However, I resist the notion that letters were destroyed *because* Cather wanted to hide her love of women. First, the surviving letters include a few that are explicit declarations of love and physical attraction to a woman (her college letters to Louise Pound) and many that demonstrate profound intimacy with both Edith Lewis and Isabelle McClung Hambourg (in her frequent mentions of both women in letters to family and friends). Second, the only other batch of letters that is known to have been destroyed, those Edith Lewis got rid of shortly after Cather's death, were quite clearly of a different nature. According to the summaries Lewis privately made as she destroyed them, they were polite letters Cather wrote as a young woman to an older hometown acquaintance who had moved away (Lewis, Notebook). Though it seems unlikely Cather suppressed her correspondence just to hide her lesbianism, it certainly may have played a role. See Lindemann, "I Did Feel Queer," for more on this issue.
3. See Jewell and Stout's introduction to *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* for more discussion of the myth of Cather and Lewis's destruction of letters.

4. Many biographies—like those written by Brown, Lee, and Woodress—devote the bulk of their final chapter of Cather’s story to a reading of her last works of fiction and include little or no analysis of her letters from the period.
5. In this essay, I cite many letters, only some of which are published in *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. For all letters that do appear in that book, I have included a parenthetical citation with page numbers. For those that do not, I have provided date and addressee information in the text so readers can identify the appropriate letter in the Works Cited list or, when necessary, have included a parenthetical citation. The four-digit WCA identifiers at the end of the individual letter citations in the Works Cited list correspond to the *Willa Cather Archive* identifiers developed for *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather: An Expanded, Digital Edition* (Jewell and Stout, *A Calendar*) and used in the forthcoming *Complete Letters of Willa Cather* edition (Jewell and Stout, *The Complete Letters*).
6. For further examples of Cather’s “public” letters, see Bohlke.
7. Cather made her comment to Polly Damrosch Howard in response to Howard’s request for copies of any letters her husband, playwright Sidney Coe Howard, might have written to Cather, as she was putting together a collection of his correspondence. Cather responded that she had no letters, but that she understood the value of such an endeavor.

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