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WILLA CATHER'S WOMEN

GENDER, PLACE, AND NARRATIVITY IN *O PIONEERS!* AND *MY ÁNTONIA*

DAVID LAIRD

In a dissertation submitted to the Department of Rhetoric and Oratory at the University of Wisconsin in 1895, Zona Gale argued that American writers were a timid lot, lacking originality and unwilling or unable to see what was happening around them, the harsher truths of a social reality. They drew their material from art rather than from nature, books rather than life. "They had," she said, "all drawn from the same sources, imitated the same models and had not won their material so much from men as from books."¹ Like Zona Gale, Willa Cather was critical of writers content to work within the boundaries of established narrative patterns and formations. She likened "the old-fashioned

American novel" to a chemist's prescription with "its unvarying, carefully dosed ingredients . . . its plots always the same, its accent always on the same incidents." She was especially harsh on those women writers she judged to be sentimental scribblers and purveyors of cold cream fiction.² Her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), and earlier short stories manifest some of the same symptoms she had diagnosed in others. She came to feel that she had "laboriously" imitated Henry James and Edith Wharton and was determined not to do so again. Her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), completed after a trip to New Mexico and Arizona, marked a recovery from what she termed "the conventional editorial point of view." It was, as she put it, "a book entirely for myself."³ A major stylistic shift coincided with her discovery of a new landscape and a deepening appreciation of the importance of place. Responding to the greater openness and variety of the American Southwest, she felt less constrained by the influences that had shaped her earlier work. In the broader reaches of prairie and desert, she found new materials to explore, stories that needed to be told. And she proceeded to tell those stories with startling precision and accuracy and with special attention to the crucial

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role of culture and region in the construction of social identities and relationships.

Breaking fresh ground is one of the things pioneers do and, with her second novel, Cather laid claim to a narrative space at some remove from the familiar situations and accents of popular fiction. She set her course in the direction of an area of American experience where she felt there had been no adequate or authentic register and where she could employ her talents as "a reporter in fiction." She defied the New York critic whom she quoted: "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it."⁴ She showed herself to be a pioneer both in what she chose to write about and in how she wrote about it—the strategies deployed, the narrative functions and devices, the several voices by means of which she fashioned and re-fashioned her material.⁵

Those pioneering efforts were prepared for and seasoned by a long apprenticeship in an activity that she was quick to acknowledge was dominated by men or by women who, at least professionally, had assumed male identities. In this latter category were two of her major literary mentors—"the great Georges," as she called them, George Sand and George Eliot. Cather's devotion to these kindred spirits, rather than discouraging her quest for artistic autonomy and independence, served only to intensify it. Her work surprised, even unsettled, a public used to easier, more conventional fare. It continues to exercise an unsettling influence, especially on readers bent on defending established ideologies or those no less passionate in their desire to create new versions of them.

This essay explores what is most original and unsettling about two of the Nebraska novels, what sets them apart from that "old-fashioned American novel" that Cather had rejected. Cather, in her representations of life on the frontier—long the domain of a male-centered mythology—was up to something strikingly new in both subject matter and technique. Among points I will consider are, first, Cather's passionate concern to record the experiences of frontier women in their struggle against resistances social or gender-based as well as geograph-

ical, those imposed by the "place" or standing assigned to women in frontier society as well by the conditions of material life, the rigors of an often hostile environment; second, her cultivation of a troubling double-mindedness about that environment, about the Nebraska country, at once a landscape of desire, nourishing and productive, and a vast, impersonal space, daunting, alien, unable to be grasped or taken in at any sort of conscious level; and, third, her awareness of the limits of narrative, of the gap between the actuality of things, the lived event, and its subsequent narration, together with a persistent skepticism about the capacity of any narrative to get things straight. I shall try to reckon with what is most original and daring in these novels according to categories of gender, place, and narrativity.

Before turning to individual texts, I need to tackle a claim recently advanced by several feminist critics about the possibility of a genuinely female voice within the confines and conventions of the narrative mode.⁶ They argue that to enlist novelistic structures and techniques is to surrender to them and to the masculine inscription they bear. Juliet Mitchell, for example, believes that the attempt to raise an authentic female voice is bound to fail because, quite simply, the language of narrative discourse is too slanted in favor of the masculine world to cope with feminine experience. Women novelists confront a double bind, so goes the argument: to engage in the craft of fiction constitutes "simultaneously the woman novelist's refusal of the woman's world—she is after all a novelist—and her construction from within a masculine world of the woman's world."⁷ Thus the woman novelist endeavors to express herself as a novelist only to find her efforts inevitably embedded in and betrayed by an alien discourse. Against that view, this paper argues that Cather, at least insofar as we can tell from *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, was not subject to these constraints, that she succeeded in creating her own narrative space and idiom.⁸ Especially in the vivid evocation of the land and its inhabitants, in the brilliant re-construction of a variety of intimate social dramas staged against the back-

drop of a carefully observed locale or region, and in an unprecedented command of the intricacies of narrative discourse, Cather moved well beyond the familiar paths of traditional narrative. I should like now to consider in more specific detail what marks that departure in Cather's first Nebraska novel.

O *Pioneers!* begins with Swedish homesteader John Bergson's initial settlement of the land and continues with the history of the Bergson family from one generation into the next. How tenuous a beginning it is and what is at stake in the risky and uncertain business of scratching a living from the land are suggested in the extraordinary opening paragraph:

One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling-houses were set about haphazardly on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain.⁹

The town is caught in the act of breaking up, about to disappear into a surrounding vastness; its buildings, casual add-ons without foundation, tremble in fear of being blown away. No promise here of a continuing city, only the unrelieved desolation of a windswept landscape. The few inhabitants, when they do finally appear, are strangely out of place, threatened, and, for the most part, no match for the forces with which they must contend. Here, then, are the granite-hard circumstances into which Cather introduced the young Alexandra Bergson.

Of the novel's five parts, the first three concern Alexandra's struggle to understand the land and make it productive. Her devotion to the land is matched by her dedication to her youngest brother, Emil, whom she sees into adulthood

and to what she hopes will be a richer, freer life than the one she has known. Part IV tells the story of Emil and his passionate, tragic love for Marie Shabata, a beautiful Bohemian girl trapped in a loveless marriage. The concluding section focuses on Alexandra—her near death following the murder of the young couple by Marie's jealous husband, her trip to Lincoln to meet with the murderer, and finally her decision to marry Carl Linstrum and to leave the family for whom she has labored and the country she loves, abandoning both to the vulgarity of a world defined by cash markets, rising land values, and the clutter of "utterly unusable objects . . . the reassuring emblems of prosperity" (98).

Throughout the novel, Alexandra responds to and tries to mediate among the various and conflicting demands made upon her. She is charged by her dying father to take responsibility for the family and the land by which he has been impoverished and finally broken. She gives herself to the task, cultivating the land, understanding its rhythms and seasons, finally making it serve her purposes: "it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (63); "her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things" (205). Alexandra's intense relationship with the land is projected in strong, deliberately gendered images, sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine. She perceives the land in intimate, even passionate terms, drawing strength from it and, in return, giving of her spirit and imagination. But the exercise of her artistry and the inscription she imposes are subject to rival claims and aspirations.

In every side the brown waves of the earth rolled away to meet the sky. "Lou and Oscar can't see those things," said Alexandra suddenly. "Suppose I do will my land to their children, what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while." (229)

Legal title and control of the land pass to those indifferent to its preservation, bent on turning real assets into the categories of commodification, transactions that, from Alexandra's point of view, violate the trust in which the land is held. She feels threatened and defeated even as she had earlier been sustained by her attachment to place, her rootedness in the land. Her faith in both land and people takes on an increasingly ambiguous, ironic cast. She identifies with the old Ivar, who lives a Thoreau-like existence in a sod house at the edge of a remote pond and whom others view with deep suspicion and fear. Alexandra befriends Ivar, eventually bringing him into her household, and together they joke about starting an asylum for old-time people (95). Her loneliness and isolation are evident when she confides to Carl Linstrum that she would rather have had his freedom than her land (122) and again when—after her prison visit with Frank Shabata—she recalls lines from "The Prisoner of Chillon": "Henceforth the world will only be / A wider prison-house for me" (298). She had reconciled herself to a present poverty through a belief not in her future but in the future of the land and in what she had envisioned for Emil.

Yes, she told herself, it had been worth while; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. . . . She had always believed in him, as she had believed in the land. (213, 239)

With Emil's death, Alexandra succumbs to an overwhelming sense of failure. Events leave her displaced, marginalized. She will no longer participate in society's attempt to certify or institutionalize its claim to the future. The first chapter concludes with the image of Alexandra holding fast to a lantern and "going deeper and

deeper into the dark country" (18). At the end of the novel, Alexandra and Carl turn their backs on that dark country, "leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star" (309).¹⁰ The gesture is unmistakably one of rejection and renunciation. Their gaze now fastens on each other, their new-found intimacy, the future they hope to share. Like that disenchanting hero of an earlier American fiction, they escape from a society in which they are no longer at home, from social practices they can no longer tolerate, "to light out for the territory," in this case, Alaska.

The final paragraph makes another, more ambiguous point as well. The darkness that Alexandra and Carl leave behind is somehow qualified by what the narrator tells us about the future of the land, the better times to come. There is the rather bizarre suggestion that one day "hearts like Alexandra's" will be absorbed into the Nebraska soil, producing an abundance to be given out "in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth" (309).¹¹ Anticipation of this multi-staged, complex interaction between individuals and the environment in which, significantly, Alexandra does not participate and especially the figure of the shining eyes of youth are not, I think, as transparent or innocent of irony as they have appeared to some readers. They must be shadowed by the recollection of various disappointments and miscalculations including the failure of youthful promise that had earlier caused such anguish and dismay.

The novel's ending, far from triumphant, leaves us anxious and perplexed before what no single idea or interpretive construction is able to encompass or represent. One effect of such contradictoriness is to put into question a range of reductive, commonplace assumptions about the history of Nebraska and perhaps more generally about the winning of the West, western expansionism, and the myth of the frontier.

Alexandra, a participant on the stage of history, a player in what Annette Kolodny has called "the drama of contact between human participants and the landscape," is involved in

actions and events she seeks to understand as she carries on a succession of hard-edged, uneasy negotiations in which her freedom and independence are at issue.¹² Initially she gives herself wholeheartedly to those negotiations, extending the boundaries of the original homestead, increasing crop yields, and managing the farm in more productive ways. Her success in what the community considers to be man's work is met with suspicion and hostility by members of her family, from whom she is increasingly estranged, her "place" or standing very much at issue. Alexandra's efforts to succeed against the gender restraints that govern in frontier society constitute a major development in the novel and significantly extend its reach.

There is the suggestion that in Cather country, the high plains between the Republican and the Little Blue rivers, gender equality and economic stability are inversely proportional, that poverty enforces gender equality while prosperity imposes more restrictive, more determinate gender roles. Alexandra is permitted to exercise a good deal of power and authority, is able to cross class and gender barriers for just so long as her family struggles against the harsh conditions of an unyielding physical and economic environment. With an improvement in those conditions—an improvement for which she is chiefly responsible—she must accept a loss of status in the family, in effect, is marginalized by her achievements. It is, of course, ironic that with the rescue of the family comes a demand that she bridle, if not altogether relinquish, her claim to independence and autonomy, renounce the very emancipation upon which an economic recovery had depended. Alexandra falls victim to attitudes and practices reflective of class and gender differences in what becomes an increasingly shallow, money grubbing, fragmented society.

In this aspect, the narrative brings into question Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that the frontier encouraged an egalitarian or democratic spirit. Cather was at pains to show that, while such liberating influences may assert themselves through an initial stage of settle-

ment, they are likely to fade with the advent of greater ease and prosperity. While the frontier may initially liberate, it soon sees the reenactment of those various constraints and limitations that characterize the social landscape of more settled, more traditional societies, an eventual improvement in the conditions of material life bringing the enforcement of restrictive gender and class divisions and discriminations.¹³

In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra Bergson finds it increasingly difficult to sustain herself in an environment marked by the reemergence of restrictive social roles meant to determine her behavior. In the end, her self-sacrifice in the service of others has accomplished little beyond the sacrifice. There is the chilling recognition that whatever breathing room she might still hope to find lies elsewhere. The narrative acknowledges the darker edges to which Alexandra's authority cannot reach, rebuking those readers in search of a consoling or a sentimental fiction, imparting a subtler message, even a voiceless one, that arises from the silences at the margins of coherent narrative, haunting, subverting, supplementing in ways that defy the literalness of language.

Susan Rosowski points out the several parallels between Alexandra's story and Virgil's *Eclogues*, and there are important echoes in Alexandra's sacrifice of the personal to the communal or familial, her determining sense of duty to land and family beyond whatever other, more personal satisfactions life might hold.¹⁴ Against the severity of that discipline and dedication, the story of Marie and Emil takes on a special poignancy and sadness. It, too, has its literary analogue—the Pyramus and Thisbe story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the blood of the lovers turning red the white fruit of the mulberry tree. Shakespeare, of course, drew upon the story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and again in *Romeo and Juliet*. Cather wove a composite narrative by drawing multiple strands from previous literatures and thereby managed to complicate the reader's task. The effect of this inclusiveness is to problematize or make puzzling what might

otherwise be more confidently, more simply read, more easily brought to resolution and closure. The text resists containment within the conventions of the traditional novel. It does not permit easy or reductive interpretation, does not resolve itself according to the predictable patterns of narrative discourse. It recalls earlier texts in ways that underscore differences from them, evoking them only to defeat the expectations to which their evocation gives rise.

In one sense, *O Pioneers!* is a failed pastoral, its very allusiveness becoming the vehicle of an anxiety-provoking, destabilizing irony that deprives the reader of transport into the hypersphere of romance, myth, or unconditional certitude, denies the satisfaction that literary containment or resolution might otherwise provide. To the extent that Cather undermined or subverted conventional narrative solutions, she made her presence felt indirectly, obliquely, pervasively. Her quarrel was with the deceptions engendered by a too artful or constraining narrativity, by artistic production divorced from the everyday world, from spaces that in Mircea Eliade's sense of the term are "sacred."¹⁵ Cather was able to open her narrative not by writing herself into the past but by writing the past into the present, not by turning life into art but by dwelling on the difference between the two, between the artfulness of coherent narrative and the crowding immediacy of nonlinguistic phenomena, between writing and, as Margaret Drabble puts it, "the other thing, which is called life."¹⁶

One is reminded of another artist—one also employed in the task not only of weaving but of unweaving, of deconstructing previously woven patterns in an effort to maintain her freedom and autonomy. Like Penelope's unweaving, by which she held off the suitors during the absence of Ulysses, Cather's strategy undoes the tapestry that more traditional novelists had woven.¹⁷ This technical agility is made to serve the imperatives of redescription, a freer, less historically or ideologically coherent representation of experience and one that imposes on the reader the need to read between the

lines, to decode the messages that are both voiced and voiceless. Cather was quite explicit in describing the effect she hoped to achieve.

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.¹⁸

The awareness of what lurks in the silences of narrative, the feminine complement to a more strongly gendered voice, becomes a leading concern in *My Ántonia* and one that goes a good way to account for its very special quality. Cather's second Nebraska novel is no less sharply focused on the social and familial roles assumed by or assigned to women, but the treatment of these and other gender-based concerns is complicated by the introduction of a surrogate narrator who is by no means disinterested or beyond construing people and events in ways that answer to his various needs and vacuities. I will return to Cather's use of a narrative voice, but here it need only be recalled that *Ántonia*, who occupies the center of the narrative, commands no such position in the social landscape that the novel surveys. She is presented from the beginning as an outsider, an immigrant, a "hired girl" working for wages among townspeople unwilling to accept her on anything like an equal footing. Eventually the victim of an unfortunate love affair that leaves her pregnant and abandoned, she survives a variety of threats and denials to fashion for herself a role profoundly expressive of her sexuality, her distinctiveness as a person, and her vital, spontaneous, boundless energy as wife and mother. She is portrayed as having little choice but to accept the conditions that define her domestic and social situation and she proceeds to ground her practice in a simple and abiding faith in the life she nourishes, in the land she cherishes, and in the

small community she manages to sustain.

It is a composite portrait, rendered from multiple perspectives that reveal both triumph and defeat, a serenity of spirit and at the same time a sense of anguish and exhaustion, loneliness and loss. It manages to celebrate the vitality and glowing energy with which *Ántonia* endows her life and the lives of those around her. It captures a distant, elegiac quality suggestive of what once took root and flowered at a particular moment in history, the-once-upon-a-time incarnation of an engendering femaleness on the remote and windswept reaches of the Nebraska prairie. We witness the effort of Jim Burden, the narrator, to transform *Ántonia* into a mythic figure, to turn history into myth, or, as Roland Barthes puts it, to make the contingent appear eternal.¹⁹ We are encouraged to see what Jim sees and we see a good deal more as well. We see the extent to which a male-dominated society can justify itself through the construction and elaboration of gender difference.

Unlike *Ántonia*, Alexandra, or even Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, Jim escapes responsibility for his own life by locating himself in a carefully constructed version of the past where he can exist by proxy or substitution, without risk of loss or love, infantilized as one of "Cuzak's Boys," the title of the first chapter of the final section of *My Ántonia*. The appropriation or exploitation of an exceptional woman by her family or associates is a recurrent theme in Cather's work.²⁰ Jim's project is illustrative of the process; he seeks to author himself, to affirm his existence, in the fiction he creates about *Ántonia*. His appropriation of her is evident in the title he gives the novel. Including "my" in that title is, of course, his way of claiming authorship, but it signals as well an identity-sustaining, almost childlike dependency that runs deeper than the story Jim constructs. Thus the novel unsettles a range of complacencies about roles assigned to women in the self-serving, self-dramatizing stories men construct for themselves. It draws attention to the various evasions and inequities such selective, gender-based textualizations are likely to promote.

Ántonia emerges uninstructed, uncon-

tained, by the structures and the strictures Jim is determined to impose. The surface plot unfolds as he recounts the experiences of his youth and of his subsequent return to the Nebraska prairie, his meeting with *Ántonia* and her family, and, at the same time, there is an implicit commentary that shadows and qualifies what he tells us, threatening his reliability as narrator, denying "authorial" authority to the interpretive schemes by which he habitually reckons with people and events. Paul de Man remarked that "the presence of a fictional narrator is a rhetorical necessity in any discourse that puts the truth or falsehood of its own statement in question."²¹ About a similar narrative strategy in *A Lost Lady*, Cather is on record as having told the journalist Burton Rascoe

that in order to portray Mrs. Forrester it was necessary to show her as she was reflected in the minds of a number of men; the young man who was disillusioned was no more necessary to the portrait than the butcher boy who brought the flowers at the time of Forrester's death, but he was more directly connected with Mrs. Forrester's career than the butcher boy, and therefore he figured more importantly in the story.²²

Jim's construction of events, like Niel Herbert's in *A Lost Lady*, must remind the reader of what gets lost in easy, self-congratulatory, single-minded narrative solutions. Both *Ántonia* and Marian Forrester decline, in Albert Gelpi's phrase, to be "killed into art."²³ And Cather was at great pains to distance herself from Jim's historical reconstruction, telling us, in her introduction, that she had failed to write her own account and was substituting for it the one that Jim had brought to her. Disclaiming any part in the authorship of the novel, she left the reader to reckon with her silence and Jim's telling. We follow his efforts to compose a narrative, to impose meaning on events, and we do so at a distance, only to discover that his impressions and judgments, his role as appreciative recorder, are increasingly suspect.

Cather's narrative strategy casts her in the

role of ventriloquist, Jim as stage dummy. The text he is allowed to speak becomes a version against which another, contradictory one is brought into play. The result is to foreground the inadequacies, the limitations of the explicit narrative—of Jim's version of events—and to feature instead the streaming immediacy of individual lives to which he is unprepared to respond. It puts his telling in opposition to an unspoken narrative struggling to assert its presentness against closure and memory.²⁴ It permits the voicing of the unvoiced, a kind of *écriture féminine* without precedent in American fiction, which, even today, struggles against appropriation and containment. Once, when discussing the techniques of the novel as taught in creative writing courses, Cather observed:

They can only teach those patterns which have proved successful. If one is going to do new business the patterns cannot help, though one does not deliberately go out to do that. *My Ántonia*, for instance, is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern.²⁵

Cather's disavowal of authorial authority, her refusal to appear without benefit of a surrogate, is variously interpreted. Some critics see it as motivated by the desire to protect her privacy or to conceal or repress personal or sexual anxieties. Others suggest that it constitutes the privileging of a masculine sensibility. However much or little such factors may have figured in the author's decision to interpose a narrator between the text and herself, they do not speak to the effects that follow from that interposition. What is at stake in the handling of narrative point of view turns as much on a theory of narrative and of how words work as it does on anything else. For Cather, any interpretive construction or explanatory model was precisely that and not to be confused with what it purports to represent. The evident deficiencies in

Jim's version of events, his frequent misreadings, serve to remind us of the partiality, the inevitable ideological bias of a single telling, the unreliability of any description that undertakes to recover the manifold of experience. The competition among voices that Cather staged in *My Ántonia* reminds the reader of what she already knows—that experience is likely to be both more and less than can be said about it.

By means such as these Cather strove to represent the people and the region of the Nebraska Divide. Her approach extended beyond the sentimental rehearsal or idealization of the past.²⁶ It fastened upon and held up to critical examination the attitudes and assumptions nourished and imposed by the region, by the conditions of material life, formative, even determining, in the lives of individuals and social groups. We are confronted with a range of practices and beliefs, aspirations and prejudices that made up the emotional and intellectual climate of the Divide. In this capacity, the Nebraska novels redescribe or recuperate an important phase of the American experience. In an interview appearing in 1925, Cather was quoted as saying:

I must have the American speech around me, touching the springs of memory. America works on my mind like light on a photographic plate. I seem to be the sort of person who really is a reporter in fiction. I can only write about what I have seen and felt and been close to. I must write things as they are.²⁷

Here the role of the "reporter in fiction" would seem to merge with that of the social historian almost to the point at which novelist and historian are heard to speak the same language. The materials of history may or may not be foreign to those of literature, but an interpretive process directs the ordering and the representation of events and actions for writers of fiction no less than for historians. Criticism has recently foregrounded this relationship. The new historicism seeks to identify the political

and ideological subtexts to which a literary work gives unspoken assent, to situate that work in relation to assumptions and attitudes resident in a larger culture, assumptions and attitudes that are reflective of class or gender difference, economic privilege, or ideology. The new historicists and certainly the feminists as well have succeeded in situating literary texts within a social and economic setting; they have made contemporary readers acutely aware of the political implications and the implied power relationships presupposed by those texts. Cather anticipated this line of inquiry by requiring of her readers a participation critically alert to a variety of pressures that figure in the production and consumption of cultural artifacts.

Cather's originality shows itself most decisively in the strategies and techniques deployed to represent the struggle of her female characters against resistances encountered in the iron-hard world of the Nebraska prairie and in the developing political societies of the region. At a more general level, it shows itself in the careful undermining of the rhetorical stances associated with a variety of social attitudes and practices. We are made aware of the ideological bias that lurks beneath the rhetorical constructions and interpretive patterns to which individual characters resort in their effort to exert some sort of mastery or control over their lives or, at the very least, to render those lives intelligible, to author for themselves some sort of coherent meaning or purposefulness.

If this aspect of narrativity is more difficult to reckon with than those of place and gender, the attempt to do so is especially rewarding for what it allows us to hear from within that special register where Cather scored and orchestrated the subtler tones and silences of her narrative. Cather's treatment of gender and the related themes of patriarchy and property falls easily enough within the frame of the social novel and carries the weight of its conviction well beyond the confines of fiction or, as Toni Morrison puts it, "Cather permits the novel to escape from the pages of fiction into the non-fiction."²⁸

The difficulty arises when we recognize that

the concern thus created is made subject to a discursive irony, is caught in the critical, unblinking light of a linguistic skepticism from which, in Cather's world, no description or conceptualization is permitted to hide for long. Cather has enlisted narrative both to convey a social vision and, at the same time, to sustain an attitude of detachment, even alienation, from that vision, suspicious as she seems to have been of any rhetorical construction that purports to contain or represent the irreducible presentness of things. While seeking to expose gender injustice and prejudice, Cather came perilously close to despair over the likelihood of effecting a change in social practice and certainly did despair of the more militant, aggressive forms of advocacy. In Cather's view, literature can at times succeed in changing patterns of thought and behavior, but must be content to do so indirectly, obliquely, exposing the finiteness and insufficiency of the ideological fixities and fictions that characters and cultures construct for themselves and others. The Nebraska novels engage issues that beset a political society. They achieve their distinctiveness and authority by creating a series of ironic perspectives and a new self-reflexivity in which the legitimacy of both ideology and narrativity is brought into question. And it should, perhaps, be acknowledged that Cather's ironies are not especially restricted to the interpretive strategies of her characters; they have a way of catching out her readers as well, particularly those who might aspire to have a last word.

Michel Foucault speaks of the role of the money changer whose task it is to watch perpetually over representations, distinguishing the fake from the authentic, differentiating the real from the counterfeit, the false material from the true metal, the false effigy stamped on a coin from the true representation of the sovereign's image, someone who verifies the representations, vigilantly testing metal, weight, and effigy.²⁹ Cather set herself a similar task, assuming the role of money changer of commonplace representations, organizing, ordering patterns of interpretation and control, testing, authenti-

cating, discarding, in search of a true currency and a legal tender, a language of representation that rings true. Cather voiced a deep suspicion about a range of conventional attitudes and patterns of organization that surface in the lives of her characters as they struggle against not only the contingencies of nature and the rawness of the land, but also the arbitrariness and artificiality that beset their quest for satisfaction in the narrowing social dramas in which they are constrained to play out their lives. It is a matter of bringing into the light the strategies by which characters cope with the circumstances and the conditions of their lives. More precisely, it amounts to an interrogation of the various ways, sometimes competing, contradictory, and opposing, in which characters choose to organize their lives, how they explain themselves to themselves. In Cather's house of fiction there are empty spaces, gaps, and silences, and occasionally a window opening on a vastness beyond the sheltering intelligibility that reigns within. Often we are encouraged to identify familiar patterns of explanation or interpretation and at the same time to test those patterns against what remains somehow beyond their explanatory power, beyond the scope of historical or psychological interpretation, something unthematized, dramatic, immediate, and disordering. We are reminded of the extent to which we are at times authored by the stories we tell ourselves, are even goaded into assuming responsibility for finding our own meanings or none at all.

My approach must seem well off the mark to those who find in the novels an idealized, essentially reassuring version of the past. It must seem no less so to those who would enlist their support in pursuit of narrow political goals or interests. Just how we use the texts will depend in no small measure on the extent to which we are prepared to respond to the sweep of Cather's ironies. The two novels under consideration serve, I think, to underscore the intensity of Cather's attack upon a too convenient or self-serving narrativity. They supplement each other in important ways. Together they clarify the

standing of each in a literary or institutional setting by locating themselves in relation to other texts past and present. Additionally they foreground and help to define concerns beyond literary or formalistic ones and, thus, enter into the larger currents of social history and gender politics. One effect is to expose the moral blind-side of some familiar social attitudes and practices, including the ways in which particular societies have managed to console themselves through the roles they have traditionally assigned to women.³⁰ It is, perhaps, as much a matter of reading lives, expressly not our own, as it is of reading texts, also not our own, and of attending to the ways in which those lives are formed and deformed, figured and refigured, according to the determinants of language, place, and gender. Cather's texts, their insistent problematizing of experience, their emancipatory suggestiveness, extend the reach of narrative form. They bring home a sense of what goes untold in the telling.

NOTES

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1. Zona Gale, "Regional Writers in America," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1895, p. 42.

2. *New York World*, 21 May 1923, rpt. in *Willa Cather in Person*, ed. L. Brent Bohlke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 58-59.

3. Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 92.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

5. According to James Woodress, "Willa Cather always believed that the pioneer women on the Divide possessed many of the traits of the artist, the drive, the perception, the energy, the creative force" (*Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* [New York: Western Publishing Co., Inc., 1970], pp. 163-64). We might extend the analogy to include Cather as well, her career marked by many of the traits with which she endowed her pioneer women. Her courage and independence displayed themselves in various and remarkable ways, not least of which was in her struggle to find a voice independent of other, mostly male

voices, by which she believed the house of fiction and the literary establishment to be possessed.

6. See, for example, Cora Kaplan's "Language and Gender," in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 57-69.

7. Juliet Mitchell, "Femininity, Narrative, and Psychoanalysis," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. D. Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), p. 427.

8. It is noteworthy that Toni Morrison in her recent Harvard lectures includes Cather among those who tried to correct "a centuries-long, hysterical blindness to feminist discourse and the way in which women and women's issues were read (or unread)" (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992], p. 14).

9. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1913), p. 3. All further references will be cited parenthetically.

10. Susan Rosowski has recently argued that Alexandra's faith in the land remains unshaken, that "her union with the country is one of passion and procreation" that carries with it "the promise of continuity, love, and stability" (*Cather Studies I* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990], p. 74). Enthusiasm for an upbeat ending may have led Rosowski to misremember the final passage of the novel, "the evening star" of the original appearing as "the evening sun." The substitution takes on more than minor import when she goes on to suggest that the energy of the sun symbolizes a life of action. It is worth noting that Cather left this passage unchanged in the Autograph Edition of 1937, though she did delete the two preceding paragraphs. The effect of the deletion is to darken the mood of the scene, to enforce a sense of relinquishment and loss, of time's sad waste, of leave-taking and endings.

11. To Hermione Lee "it seems an ambivalent apotheosis for Alexandra to be metamorphosed . . . into a kind of spiritual manure" (*Willa Cather: Double Lives* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1989], p. 118). It should be noted that Cather does not include Alexandra among those destined to participate in such an apotheosis, ambivalent though it may be. The passage may recall the one in which Hawthorne describes Hester Prynne's efforts to console others in the hope that "at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed . . . a surer ground of mutual happiness" (*The Scarlet Letter* [New York: Norton, 1988]), p. 177.

12. Annette Kolodny, "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers," *American Literature* 64 (March 1992): 3.

13. Luna Kellie, a prominent Nebraska woman, experienced much the same sort of betrayal by the social and economic order she had helped to create (*A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, ed. June Taylor Nelson with foreword by Albert E. Stone [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992]). See Stone's discussion of the theme, especially p. xvi.

14. Susan Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 46.

15. For a suggestive reading of the division between modes of production in Cather, the artisanal or domestic against the artistic or the conceptual, see Josephine Donovan, "The Pattern of Birds and Beasts: Willa Cather and Women's Art," in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 81-95.

16. Margaret Drabble, "Interview with John Hanan," quoted by Pamela S. Bromberg, "Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 24 (Fall 1990): 7.

17. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher and David Bellos (New York: Grove-Weidenfeld, 1987), p. 160.

18. Willa Cather, "The Novel D  meubl  ," *On Writing* (note 3 above), p. 50.

19. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 155.

20. See, for example, the short story "The Diamond Mine," which appeared in McClure's in October 1916, when Cather was beginning *My   ntonia*: "It seemed never to occur to them that this golden stream, whether it rushed or whether it trickled, came out of the industry, out of the mortal body of a woman. They regarded her as a natural source of wealth, a copper vein, a diamond mine" (rpt. in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920], p. 119).

21. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 294.

22. Bohlke, *Willa Cather in Person* (note 2 above), p. 64.

23. Albert Gelpi, "Emily Dickinson and the Deer-slayer," quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 14.

24. David Laird, "Willa Cather and the Deceptions of Art," *Interface: Essays on History, Myth and Art in American Literature*, ed. Daniel Royot (Montpellier: Universit   de Montpellier, 1985), pp. 51-60.

25. Bohlke, *Willa Cather in Person* (note 2 above), p. 77.

26. As discerning a critic as Stephen Fender has recently written that "nostalgia becomes the predominant mood in *My   ntonia* . . ." ("American

Landscape and the Figure of Anticipation: Paradox and Recourse," *Views of American Landscapes*, ed. Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 56).

27. Bohlke, *Willa Cather in Person* (note 2 above), p. 88.

28. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (note 8 above), p. 27.

29. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Pa-

trick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 37-38.

30. See, for example, Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990). Stout believes that "the careful reader can no longer rest comfortably in a belief that Cather's fiction, late or early, is centered on 'sunny' assurances" (68).