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WILLA CATHER AND NEBRASKA

AN INTRODUCTION

The essays in this issue were presented at the seminar "Willa Cather and Nebraska" held at Hastings College and Red Cloud, Nebraska, June 14-20, 1981. The week-long program involved one hundred registered participants from twenty-five states and Canada in a series of discussions, lectures, films, and performances on the topic of Willa Cather's Nebraska fiction. Both the attendance and the reactions to the program were highly encouraging and indicate that Cather is a writer with universal appeal. Although I did not attempt to direct the lecturers except to indicate the general topics to be treated, their essays are complementary in approach and subject.

In the first essay James Woodress, a Cather biographer, establishes the purpose of studying the life of a major author like Cather and describes the difficulties for biographers that are often caused by authors themselves and their friends and families. Cather's attempt to preserve her privacy by destroying her correspondence with Isabelle McClung and restricting the publication of all her own letters is an unfortunate roadblock because in much of her fiction she wrote from her direct experience. Woodress explores the autobiographical aspects of *My Ántonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and especially *The Professor's House*, a key to the profound crisis of Cather's middle years. Whatever the exact nature of this crisis, it is what painter Leon Bakst approached in his portrait of Cather. But approach the creative secret is all we can do;

if we could completely expose, Woodress concludes, "we probably would wish . . . we had not done it."

In her essay Mildred Bennett introduces the scenes of Cather's childhood—of her infancy and early years and the persons and places she knew as a young girl in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Bennett describes Cather's relationships with Red Cloud's cultured families and shows how various persons, including a transient music teacher, a local doctor, and a money lender, as well as friends and family members, served as originals for characters in her fiction. Cather's involvement in amateur theatricals, the play town she created with her friends, and her interest in dissecting animals in her own laboratory offer glimpses of her intelligence and imagination as a child.

Bernice Slote describes her explorations of Cather's early writing, particularly the articles in which the young journalist expressed ideas about art, music, and literature that are reflected in her mature work. Through twenty years of weekly columns and magazine contributions we are able to follow Cather's development in a nineteenth-century literary milieu and to trace many of her ideas from the early reviews to later absorption in the body of her fiction. Attention to neglected clues and allusions are necessary, says Slote, for a definitive appraisal of Cather's accomplishment. Her apprenticeship work reveals the worldly sophistication she brought to the landscape of Nebraska and to the local stories she told.

Cather ended her long apprenticeship and "hit the home pasture" in *O Pioneers!*, replacing the "literary" inspiration of much of her early fiction with memories of her Nebraska childhood. She rejected the literary plot as well, argues Bruce Baker, and managed a significant experiment in form. After summarizing several attempts by critics to disparage or excuse the two-part structure of *O Pioneers!*, Baker analyzes Cather's poem "Prairie Spring," the novel's epigraph, as a key to the relationship of the two parts, and "Winter Memories" as the section that successfully unifies them. He concludes that Alexandra Bergson's story, as well as her brother and Marie's, is a love story and that, through the structure she chose, Cather created in Alexandra a heroine at once human and mythic.

David Stouck discusses *My Ántonia* from an autobiographical perspective. After the marriage in 1916 of Isabelle McClung, who had satisfied Cather's need for emotional attachments to women, Cather returned to Red Cloud to reassess her career and early friendships, particularly those with the Miner family and Annie Sadilek Pavelka. She explored friendship and marriage in *My Ántonia* as the pairing of opposites, and tested those relationships against a shared purpose for living together, whether it be children, work, religion, or art. The real purpose of the novel is to celebrate the Cuzak marriage and narrator Jim Burden's friendship with Ántonia, both creative and fulfilling relationships. Stouck considers *My Ántonia* as "less a novel about the growth and conditions of the country than of the recalling of one's youth, a taking stock of life."

My own essay attempts to redeem Cather's critically maligned *One of Ours* by assessing its meticulous presentation of Nebraska life and by clarifying the literary tradition in which it was written. This novel is Cather's only attempt to deal directly with large contemporary issues and should be considered within the context of turn-of-the-century American realism and naturalism rather than in comparison to the typical Catherian novel *démeublé*. The cluttered

Nebraska setting manifests hero Claude Wheeler's imprisoning environment, and the voyage and war settings form a dreamlike, romantic world where Claude's delusion grows and where he dies. *One of Ours* presents such a thorough genre picture of Nebraska during the second decade of this century that the later novels pale in comparison as pictures of the place.

Continuing this exploration of Cather's craft, Susan Rosowski examines the manipulation of historical and symbolical narrative modes in *A Lost Lady*. Cather expands the symbolic meaning of Marian Forrester through observer Niel Herbert and through a form of incremental repetition of descriptive phrases "so that the significance of the reference changes in the progress of the novel." Tension is built up "between the encroaching real world of change and experiences of unity—of symbolic meaning—that become increasingly difficult to reach in that world." Variations in point of view from the public meaning of the storyteller to the private meaning of subjective experience reinforce this tension. *A Lost Lady* is perhaps the finest achievement of Cather's narrative art.

There are two requirements for a great author, and Cather seems to meet them both: The writing must appeal to all levels of the reading public, and the work must provoke and sustain analysis over the years. It is this continuing aspect of Cather studies that the late Virginia Faulkner of the University of Nebraska Press meant when she would say, "Willa goes on and on."

I am indebted to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Hastings College, and the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities for their support of the seminar, and to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant enabling me to help prepare the essays for publication. The other writers join me in dedicating our work to the memory of Virginia Faulkner, who was involved in the planning of the seminar. We trust she would have been pleased with the results.

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