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WILLA CATHER AND THE SWEDES

MONA PERS

Willa Cather's immigrant characters, almost a literary anomaly at the time she created them, earned her widespread critical and popular acclaim, not least in the Scandinavian countries, a market she was already eager to explore at the beginning of her literary career. Sweden, the first Scandinavian country to "discover" her books, issued more translations of Cather fiction than any other European country. In fact, Sweden was ten years ahead of any other Scandinavian country in publishing the translation of a Cather novel (see table). This article will investigate the publication and reception of Willa Cather's books in Sweden, compare that treatment with Cather translations in other Scandinavian countries, and also compare Cather's reception in Sweden with that of some of her best-known American contemporaries.

Although Eva Mahoney of the *Sunday* (Omaha) *World-Herald* was guilty of consider-

able exaggeration when in 1921 she maintained that "now all Miss Cather's books have been translated into the Scandinavian," the Swedish translations of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* whetted the Scandinavian appetite for more Cather. As the 1920s drew to a close, her reputation grew slowly but steadily. Her friend George Seibel was probably guilty of considerably less exaggeration than was Eva Mahoney when he recalled "mentioning her name in the Gyldendal Boghandel in Copenhagen, and being received almost like an ambassador from an Empress."¹

Willa Cather was introduced to the Scandinavian reading public by the Swede August Brunius, one of the most influential critics of the time. He wrote a full-page introduction to her work in a prestigious Swedish weekly in 1918, a year before the first translation appeared on the Swedish market. Later critics and literary historians have given Brunius credit for causing Sweden to be the first foreign country to publish a Cather novel in translation.²

It is not surprising that Brunius's article should have stirred a Swedish publisher into action. It argues persuasively for Willa Cather's artistic distinction as well as for her rare ability to depict Swedish characters "with real insight

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SCANDINAVIAN TRANSLATIONS OF BOOKS BY WILLA CATHER^a

Original Title	Year of Publication			
	Sweden	Norway	Denmark	Finland
<i>O Pioneers!</i> ^b	1919 1943 1948			
<i>The Song of the Lark</i>	1920			
<i>A Lost Lady</i>	1924			
<i>The Professor's House</i>	1927		1929	1950
<i>Lucy Gayheart</i>	1936	1936	1945	
<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>	1938	1940	1934	1956
<i>My Antonia</i>	1939 1961	1954	1931	1940 1963
<i>Shadows on the Rock</i>	1940		1939	
<i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i>	1941		1941	
<i>The Old Beauty and Others</i>	1950 ^c			

^aPhyllis Martin Hutchinson lists most of these items in her article, "The Writings of Willa Cather," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 60 (June 1956): 267-68. I have added some items and corrected a few dates, which are italicized here.

^bThe first Swedish title of *O Pioneers!*, *Hell banbrytare*, caused Cather to comment in a letter to Ferris Greenslet (18 October 1919) on its seemingly profane title. Bassett Digby, foreign correspondent in Oslo for the *Chicago Daily News*, mistook it to be *Hell, Pioneer!*

^c"Romansen" ("A Singer's Romance"), translated by Gun Årestad, was the short story of the week in *Femina*, 15 December 1963. It is the last Cather text to have been translated into Swedish.

and art as Swedes, viewed with a calm sympathetic eye by an artist who knows them and takes an interest in them. The case is so rare for us that it merits close study." The Swedish characters that Brunius, like most other Swedish critics, deemed closest to a mythical Swedish prototype are women, notably the strong and enterprising farm woman Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* and her artistic counterpart, the opera singer Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*. Brunius ends his article by declaring that "Willa Sibert Cather deserves to be read by Swedes not only because she has written about Swedes, but just as much because she is an artist who has something important to tell us."

Brunius told the Swedish readers what Willa Cather had known for some time. A letter she wrote to Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin testifies to her early interest in the Swedish market.³ Even though she doubted that the venture would be financially rewarding, it would give her a great deal of personal satisfaction to have her novels translated and published in Scandinavia. An attack on the Scandinavian market was very much on her mind, and she asked for Greenslet's help to establish contact with the "right" people. She was apprehensive about approaching Swedish-Americans, because they all had their own irons in the fire. Scandinavian immigrants wrote profusely and were

eager to have their work published in the old country. Nevertheless, according to Cather's letter to Greenslet, it was two Swedish women living in America who had initially drawn her attention to Scandinavia as a potential market.⁴ In their estimate the chances were good for Swedish and perhaps Norwegian translations of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*.

In his answer of 18 December to this letter, Greenslet conceded that, as far as her books were concerned, the Scandinavian countries were still virgin fields. When *O Pioneers!* was released in Sweden three years later, the reviews in the largest national papers were favorable, but the attention the novel attracted was limited in scope. In the main the critics echoed Brunius's praise of Willa Cather as a knowledgeable, skillful, and warmly sympathetic interpreter of the Swedish immigrant's personality and situation, comparing her artistic treatment of the immigrant favorably with that of Scandinavian immigrant writers of her own and earlier generations.⁵ When the novel was reissued in 1948, in time for the Swedish Pioneer Centennial, the Swedish reviewers agreed that, although by then there had been numerous imitators of it in American farm fiction, the novel had lost none of its freshness.

In order to explore the Scandinavian market for *The Song of the Lark*, Cather had suggested in her letter of 15 December 1916 to Greenslet that he contact Carl Hambro, a well-known Norwegian writer and critic then living in Princeton, who she claimed had translated her article on Olive Fremstad.⁶ Cather thought it might be a good idea to hint that the character of Thea Kronborg had been modeled after Fremstad, but in a later letter she begged Greenslet not to encourage such rumors and asked him to refrain from making any statements about the matter.⁷ Nothing came of a Norwegian translation, but the novel was published in Swedish. Although some critics had attacked the Swedish translation of *O Pioneers!* as at times obtuse and too slavishly close to the English original, *The Song of the Lark* was entrusted to the same translator. Cather herself, in a letter to Dorothy Canfield in 1921, ex-

pressed great satisfaction with both translations.⁸

Like *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* evoked positive though limited critical response in Sweden. The author was again commended for her truthful rendering of Swedish characters and her dignified, epic style of writing. One columnist expressed his gratitude that "this distinguished artist, one of America's greatest contemporary authors," should have chosen Swedish women for protagonists in her two foremost novels, assuring his readers that Willa Cather deserved a much larger audience than she had hitherto attracted in the Scandinavian countries.⁹

While *The Song of the Lark* was translated only into Swedish in Scandinavia, in the United States the second serial rights of the novel were sold to a weekly Danish-language newspaper in the Middle West in 1931. In 1944 Greenslet asked Cather if he could give its publishers permission to print the novel again, this time in English, because the language of the publication was being changed from Danish to English.¹⁰ Though Cather was probably right in suspecting that the Scandinavian immigrant writers were wary of promoting her books in their old countries, the Scandinavian settlements of the Midwest obviously welcomed them. As early as 1918, the editor Oliver Linder, a Swedish immigrant of wide renown, stated his belief that Cather was the only American author to have drawn upon Swedish-Americans as material. "In *O Pioneers!*, as well as *The Song of the Lark*, the chief characters are Swedish immigrants and their sons and daughters, who are pictured with truth to life and without overdrawing," he noted.¹¹

Ruben Berg's *Moderna Amerikaner*, the first Swedish critical study of American literature, was published in 1925. Willa Cather was one of five authors singled out to represent the American literary scene, the others being Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser. Although he all but ignores Cather's recently translated novel *A Lost Lady*, dismissing it as "an insignificant work," Berg dedicates the rest of a long chapter to

singing Cather's praise. He pays tribute to "the outstanding literary qualities" not only of the two so-called Swedish novels, but also of two novels as yet unavailable in translation, *My Antonia* and *One of Ours*. The latter novel Berg declared to be what *A Lost Lady* was not: a decidedly "significant work."¹²

Berg's pioneering effort to pave the way for American writers in Sweden may help to explain why *The Professor's House* attracted considerably more attention there than Cather's previous three novels had done. A widening circle of critics provided a more varied critical response. One critic could not see why this novel should be included in a Geber series called "The New Novel." In his opinion there was nothing new about it whatever.¹³ On the whole, the reviews of *The Professor's House* were both longer and more involved than the ones Cather had received before. What was seen as satirical treatment of American society won general acclaim, while there was less agreement about the effectiveness of the structure of the novels. Some reviews verify Carl Anderson's observation that Swedes could only appreciate social criticism that supported their own prejudices about America as a cultural wasteland or jungle, but the Swedish critics who appreciated Cather were generally not blinded by such simplified notions.¹⁴

Lucy Gayheart, published simultaneously in Norway and Sweden, received mainly positive critical response.¹⁵ By now Cather had secured a small but steady core of enthusiasts among the Swedish critics. In their reviews they invariably deplore the inexcusable ignorance on the part of other reviewers and the broad reading public of "this splendid American novelist." They commend her warm sympathy and tenderness, her magnificent portraits of women, and her simple and direct style of writing as "truly artistic, yet deeply personal." Given a warmer reception than *The Professor's House*, *Lucy Gayheart* is described as "a romantic story devoid of sentimentality, a tragedy without bitterness." This time the critics commented favorably on the choice of translator, Siri Thorngren Olin, who later did two additional

successful Cather translations, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*.

The Swedish translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* ran to two editions. When one of Sweden's leading poets and scholars reviewed the novel and expressed the wish that "this brilliantly artistic writer might finally have a sales success," that hope was on the verge of being fulfilled.¹⁶ Sweden's foremost modern critics, reviewing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in the leading national dailies, hailed it as a masterpiece by "America's number one novelist today." Willa Cather, they declared, held the same position in her own country as the Nobel Prize winners Selma Lagerlöf (1909) in Sweden and Sigrid Undset (1928) in Norway. Some Swedish critics even compared Cather to Strindberg for her incisive analysis of her characters' marital problems. The Cutters in *My Antonia* are thus seen as a dance-of-death couple in the Strindberg tradition, although they seem more accessible because they are depicted without bitterness or resentment.¹⁷

The Swedish reviews of *My Antonia* would undoubtedly have pleased Cather better than the American ones did.¹⁸ She had known all along that Scandinavians would like this novel and for many years she had been eager to have it published in Scandinavia, as a letter to Ferris Greenslet in the spring of 1920 clearly indicates. She urged Greenslet to send an advertising copy to Johan Bojer, a Norwegian writer who had traveled in America. Norwegians in America had told her it was the kind of book he would be willing to promote in Norway. She hinted to Greenslet that it probably would not hurt to point out to Bojer that *My Antonia* gives a true picture of pioneer immigrant life in a form with some literary merit.¹⁹

The Swedish translation of *My Antonia* ran to two editions, and the reviewers predicted an enthusiastic Swedish reception for *Shadows on the Rock*. Although the new novel was recommended as "pure medicine for troubled souls" in the dark autumn of 1940, Cather had to wait another year to have something approaching a best-seller.²⁰ Anna Lenah Elgström, Cather's staunchest supporter among the

Swedish critics, found it ironical that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in her opinion a low-water mark in Cather's production, should be the popular breakthrough in Sweden for her favorite American author.²¹ Most other critics did not share her disappointment in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* but saw it as a representative work by an author whose most valuable quality, according to one devoted critic, was "her inability ever to be banal." The mood and tone of the novel reminded this critic of the realism of old Dutch paintings.²²

Between 1941, the year *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was published in Sweden, and 1950 when *The Old Beauty and Others* appeared there, Willa Cather's literary reputation grew steadily. Her work was treated extensively in two new Swedish books on America written by recognized "America experts," the writer Artur Lundkvist and the critic-journalist Thorsten Jonsson.²³ Both of them praise Cather's work for its freshness, originality, and artistry. In the same decade, *O Pioneers!* was reprinted twice in cheap editions by well-known publishers of popular fiction. Willa Cather, for many years a critics' writer with an exclusive circle of readers, was at long last considered a money-maker in Sweden. It is doubtful whether she would have appreciated this distinction.

A year before Cather's *The Old Beauty and Others* appeared in Swedish, one of Sweden's largest national dailies published a review of the short-story collection by one of the most feared and respected critics of the time, Herbert Tingsten. A writer, scholar, and powerful newspaper editor who was known to be an exacting judge of language and style, Tingsten recognized Cather's stylistic excellence. His praise went far toward impressing the Swedish reading public. Tingsten stressed her rare ability to instill in the reader a mild sense of the despair and tragedy inherent in human life, the feeling of growing alienation and the longing for the past that is characteristic of old age. Subtle overtones of bitterness are conveyed by a style of writing where control and restraint have been worked to perfection.²⁴ The general critical reaction to the Swedish translation of *The*

Old Beauty and Others implies that the stillness and melancholy of what one critic calls these "exquisitely wrought miniature portraits" had not been lost in translation.²⁵

Looking at the Swedish critics' overall reception of Willa Cather's work, it is clear that her style of writing and her understanding of the pioneer spirit as depicted in her immigrant characters impressed the Swedes. The critics more often compared her to well-known Scandinavian writers than to her own countrymen, from whom they thought she differed markedly in tone, method, settings, and themes.²⁶ A recurrent complaint among her faithful critics was the limited attention and acknowledgment she received in Sweden.

Cather's books were slow to catch on. In his book *The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature*, which centers on Sinclair Lewis as the 1930 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Carl Anderson offers a plausible explanation as to why the Swedes did not generally acknowledge American literature to be on a par with European literature until the 1930s. Before then, Swedes stubbornly "denied that an American literature existed."²⁷ Willa Cather's fate was thus shared by most American writers. The exceptions were few. Twain, Poe, and Cooper were chiefly known as authors of books for young people. Along with them, Jack London and Upton Sinclair were the main representatives of American fiction in Sweden during the first two decades of the twentieth century. A writer like Stephen Crane was entirely overlooked, while Jack London set new book-selling records in a twenty-year-long "London vogue."

Before World War I the cultural orientation of Swedish intellectuals was toward Germany. After the war, critics turned from their disdainful indifference to American culture toward "a more vigorous reading of American books." Between 1920 and 1930, one hundred new writers were introduced in Swedish translations, and American literature finally acquired the stature of a world literature in Sweden. For this, Anderson suggests, "Sinclair Lewis's books were greatly responsible."²⁸

The Swedes received Sinclair Lewis enthusiastically because they saw his books, especially *Main Street*, as "an impressive corroboration by an American writer of what they already 'knew' was true of the soul-crushing banality and frustrating aridity of American life."²⁹ For almost a decade American writers were measured against Sinclair Lewis by criteria that were sociological rather than literary. Their works were seen primarily as social documents justifying European superiority.

Not until after Lewis had been awarded the Nobel Prize did the Swedish critics gradually shift to an evaluation of American literature as art. Thus it is not surprising that Willa Cather had to wait so long for widespread appreciation. She had caught the ear of a few alert critics from the beginning, but her champions increased after 1930. So did her readers.³⁰ It is a measure of Cather's acceptance in Sweden that only fifteen out of more than four hundred American authors translated into Swedish and published in that country between 1916 and 1946 surpassed her total of ten volumes.³¹

NOTES

1. Eva Mahoney, "How Willa Cather Found Herself," *Sunday* (Omaha) *World-Herald*, 27 November 1921, and George Seibel, "Miss Cather from Nebraska," *New Colophon* 2 (September 1949): 195-208. The Gyldendal publishing house issued all of the six Cather translations to appear in Denmark, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in Norway, where it was included in the prestigious "Gula Serien."

2. August Brunius, "Utlandssvensken som romanfigur," *Idun*, 17 March 1918, p. 170. Thus Carl Anderson's notion in *The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature* (Uppsala, 1957) that "it was Ruben Berg . . . who was first ready to try to give Willa Cather her due" (p. 69) is not quite correct. Berg did not write about Cather until 1925.

3. Willa Cather to Ferris Greenslet, 15 December 1916, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

4. The women were Miss Larsen, an editor at the *American Scandinavian Review*, and

Anna Fries, a writer and lecturer on Scandinavian literature who was married to a Swedish immigrant.

5. Her American publisher, Houghton Mifflin, ordered copies of the Swedish reviews of *O Pioneers!*, and they were in such great demand in the United States that in a few weeks' time they were all gone. In a letter of 10 December 1919 to Willa Cather, Henry Sell expressed surprise at both the number and the quality of the requests for reviews he had received (Houghton Library, Harvard University). As a basis for my estimate of Cather's critical reception I have used more than fifty reviews and articles gathered from Swedish books, periodicals, and newspapers. A complete bibliography of this material will be included in my forthcoming book, *Willa Cather and the Swedish Immigrant*.

6. I have not been able to verify Cather's claim that Carl Hambro translated her article "Three American Singers" or any part thereof. It is not entered in any of the Hambro bibliographies, including his translations.

7. Cather to Greenslet, 15 February [1932], Houghton Library, Harvard University.

8. Willa Cather to Dorothy Canfield, 10 April 1921, Fisher Collection, University of Vermont. Willa Cather chose the Swedish *O Pioneers!* for her Valentine gift to Isabelle McClung in 1920. The dedicated copy is in the rare books division of the Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

9. "Böcker och författare," *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 October 1920.

10. Greenslet to Cather, 29 December 1944, Houghton Library, Harvard University. The newspaper referred to is most likely *Det danske ugeblad*, its name in 1931 and until 1944, when it was changed to the *Midwest Scandinavian*. It was published in Minneapolis.

11. Oliver Linder, "Writers of Swedish Life in America," *American Scandinavian Review* 6 (1918): 158.

12. Ruben G:son Berg, "De nya invandrarna," chap. 4 in *Moderna Amerikaner* (Stockholm, 1925), pp. 18-100. The Swedish title of *A Lost Lady* is *Ett Förlorat ideal*.

13. M. N., "En amerikansk familjefar," *Göteborgs Morgon Post*, 14 November 1927.

14. Anderson, *Swedish Acceptance*, pp. 84-86. For an analysis of the picture Swedish prose

writers gave of America, see Lars Wendelius, *Bilden av Amerika i svensk prosadiktning, 1890-1914*, published with a summary in English (Uppsala, 1982).

15. In a letter of 3 December 1935 (which is now at Red Cloud, Nebraska), Alfred Knopf told Willa Cather that Sigrid Undset had informed him she was happy about her sister Signe's translating *Lucy Gayheart* because, unlike most of the new Norwegian translators, she translated well. The Norwegians retained the English title of the novel, while the Swedish title is *Av allt ditt hjärta*.

16. In a joint review of D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* and Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Anders Österling considers the latter to be superior in every aspect ("Ormen och Korset," *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 16 November 1938.) The Swedish title of the novel is *Landet långt borta*.

17. Attis, "Nybygggarbarn och pionjärkvinna," *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 October 1939. One of the most influential critics to compare Cather with Lagerlöf and Undset was Karl Ragnar Gierow in "Pionjär," *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 6 November 1939.

18. In an undated letter to Miss Roseboro, Willa Cather declared that she saw practically all the American reviews of *My Ántonia*, and there were in her opinion only two favorable ones among them. (This letter is now at Red Cloud.)

19. Cather to Greenslet, 19 April 1920, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Johan Bojer was a prolific Norwegian novelist who wrote some of his best books on the immigrant theme, e.g., *The Emigrants*, 1925.

20. S. M., "Skuggor från en annan tid," *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 29 September 1940.

21. Anna Lenah Elgström, "Willa Cathers nya roman," *Social-Demokraten*, 26 October 1941. Elgström was confident, however, that this novel was just a momentary slip.

22. Annie Löfstedt, "Från Virginia," *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, 14 October 1941.

23. Artur Lundkvist, *Diktare och avslöjare i Amerikas moderna litteratur* (Stockholm, 1942), and Thorsten Jonsson, *Sidor av Amerika* (Stockholm, 1946).

24. Herbert Tingsten, "Willa Cathers sista bok," *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 May 1949.

25. A. A-n, "Miniatyrkonst," *Morgon-Tidningen*, 24 October 1950.

26. Similar observations had also been made by American critics who then denounced Cather as "foreign." In a letter to H. L. Mencken, 6 February 1922 (now at the New York Public Library), Cather gratefully acknowledged how much she had been reassured by his defense of her as a "purely American" writer in the article "On National Letters."

27. Anderson, *Swedish Acceptance*, p. 34. This kind of prejudice had been nourished and spread by a number of Scandinavian writers; perhaps the most vehement among them was the Norwegian Knut Hamsun.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 45.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

30. I do not agree with Anderson that Cather's work "received in the twenties no more than polite notices," and that "she was tirelessly and unfavourably compared with Sinclair Lewis" (p. 69). The divergence between Anderson's opinion and mine is probably due to the difference in the scope of our source material. While Anderson based his evaluation of Cather criticism in Sweden on thirteen reviews, I have had access to more than three times that number.

31. These conclusions were drawn from statistics accumulated by Anderson in *Swedish Acceptance*, appendix C. Of the fifteen authors outnumbering Cather, ten are lightweight writers of popular fiction.