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Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2001

Review of *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* By John P. Anders & *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* By Joan Acocella

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Carlin, Deborah, "Review of *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* By John P. Anders & *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* By Joan Acocella" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2288.

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REVIEW ESSAY

Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition. By John P. Anders. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 187 pp. \$40.00.

Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism. By Joan Acocella. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Notes, bibliography, index. 127 pp. \$20.00.

PLAIN TRUTHS AND SEXUAL POLITICS IN NEW CATHER CRITICISM

One wonders what Cather, arguably one of the country's finest novelists and an astute observer of human nature, would make of the tendency among critics of her work to choose opposing sides as earnestly and pugnaciously as they have throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Are the stakes really so high? Are Cather and her work such contested terrain that we need to expend so much energy and, indeed, rancor in defending our interpretive claims? Must others be wrong because *we* (however these affiliations are constituted) are so clearly *right*?

Rhetorical questions all, for the two books under discussion here—John P. Anders's *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* and Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*—speak directly to a divide in Cather scholarship between what Anders terms “traditional Cather criticism” (xii) and readings informed by theory. Both are currently practiced in Cather criticism, and both are performed by subtle, smart thinkers and writers. Traditional Cather scholars, Joan Acocella argues, focus on the textual nuances of Cather's language, imagery, and motifs and, in giving their intelligence and deft interpretive abilities over to the text, articulate the themes that haunt Cather's fiction: the loss of home and exile

with its attendant sorrow and anxiety; the harsh requirements of a life devoted to art; time; music; life's inevitable losses; ambition; intimacy; love; acceptance. The presumably less traditional critics, those who bring questions of history, economics, race, gender, psychoanalysis, and sexuality to Cather's texts, are represented by Acocella as antipathetic to textual criticism and common sense alike. Anders, on the other hand, seeks to bridge this critical divide. His intent is not to challenge “traditional Cather criticism,” but “to go beyond it, drawing from it while at the same time leading it in new directions” (xii), most clearly into a dialogue with gay studies. The literary arguments presented in both books are, essentially, conservative. Acocella's is a call to arms and bludgeoning of her perceived feminist and political foes, whereas Anders employs a carefully constructed compendium of Cather's readings in the American and continental traditions, highlighting themes of gay male writers that he believes appear in Cather's homosocial fictions of the 1920s. It is, in short, an influence study, based in bibliography and his own close readings of Cather's criticism and fiction. Both writers take as their primary audience these “traditional Cather critics,” Acocella to defend, Anders to persuade. And both, sad to say, fail in their attempts at defense

and persuasion, though for very different reasons. Yet Acocella and Anders also offer useful and sometimes illuminating insights into Cather's texts and into the politics of reading swirling so contentiously around them. They are timely and provocative books, if not wholly successful ones.

Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition is both a brave and a limited book. Its courage derives in part from its bold argument, made in as unthreatening a way as possible, that Cather's focus on male friendship in her fiction not only draws upon her own wide reading of the European and American male homosexual literary traditions, but is shaped by them. Anders spends much of his argument painstakingly recreating the bibliography of homosexual texts that Cather read throughout her life, particularly in her youth, and then illuminates their traces in her novels of the 1920s. Crediting Cather with the creation of "revisionary texts on manhood," Anders is most interested in revealing how she evokes "homosexuality to reenvision a masculine ideal" (5). Male friendship in particular is his focus, and he sees in Cather's works "a continuum from the social to the sexual" (xii). Ultimately, he concludes that Cather ought to be designated "a writer of gay fiction" because her texts reverberate themes and linguistic traces from a male homosexual literary tradition. Yet even as he makes this claim, Anders backpedals furiously, professing that his monograph is "a work of advocacy, it is not meant to be sexual politics; I emphasize instead a new aestheticism" (xii). These terms are never clearly delineated, however—especially the putative difference between advocacy and sexual politics. Nor is it entirely clear how the "new aestheticism" Anders outlines falls outside the realm of sexual politics, especially as it appears in Cather's fictions.

Anders locates aesthetics in Cather's fictional texts themselves; this, presumably, is why he believes he can separate his reading from the seemingly more dangerous category of "sexual politics." Yet, rooted as he seems to

be in certain key assumptions voiced by Sharon O'Brien and other queer theorists of Cather, Anders ultimately cannot cleave the distinction he so desires between acceptable appearances of homosexuality (safely ensconced in the text's aesthetics) and those that are more threatening of the heteronormative, those that are somehow both sexual and political, which one presumes has something to do with whether Cather herself was queer. He cannot do this because his argument depends upon an acceptance of Sharon O'Brien's claim that Cather's coining of the phrase "the thing not named" is indeed a reverberation of Oscar Wilde's "the love that dare not speak its name" and therefore suggests a homosexual subtext that can be read in the silences and ellipses of Cather's condensed prose. This claim that Cather practices a kind of homostylistics is not especially new in Cather studies, though Anders's intent is clearly to shift the focus from Cather's sexual identity to the texts themselves, particularly as they draw upon allusions from a tradition of gay male writing. His focus, he insists, "is not so much on homosexual definition as it is on how homosexuality defines her art" (13). He wants, in other words, to insist that homosexuality does indeed appear throughout Cather's major fictions of the twenties—in *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—but not because Cather was herself homosexual. Rather, he argues somewhat opaquely that homosexuality is "an innovative strategy" Cather employs to create "particularized men coming to terms with gender identity" (5). Why she does this is never explained, other than through Anders's suggestion that her early and omnivorous reading habits probably had an important influence on her later artistic productions.

Anders attempts to ground his claim in an early chapter painstakingly detailing the classical, continental, and American homosexual traditions in which Cather read in her youth. Sappho, Plato, Wilde, Verlaine, Swinburne, Housman, and Whitman are raised as likely influences, though Anders's insistence that

Cather was ambivalent about Wilde and Whitman rather than intensely scornful of their sexual self-evocation is not particularly convincing, mostly because he is unable to provide any textual evidence to underscore his claims. One of the more interesting links Anders does investigate in this early chapter is the influence of French writer Pierre Loti on Cather's "familiar treatment of male friendship and masculine desire" (43), a relationship previously unexplored in Cather scholarship. He then examines homosexuality in her early fiction before moving toward the body of his investigation, close readings of three of Cather's clearly homosocial novels. Yet what should be the strongest section of the book is, in fact, the least persuasive. This is, in part, because Anders's method is to read each novel through the template of specific homosexual literary motifs: Whitman's ideas of "manly love," allusions to Walter Pater, Platonic love and the Greek ideal, and, in his analysis, the ubiquitous Sacred Band of Thebes. Yet these allusions are not easily discovered in Cather's texts themselves. Rather, they depend completely upon the breadth of reading and association that Anders himself brings to the texts, as in this breezy summation about *The Professor's House*: "The text's reference to the story of the friendship of Amis and Amile affiliates her [Cather] with Pater's homosexual aesthetics in *The Renaissance*, where his essay "Two Early French Stories" indirectly places the medieval romance *Li Amitiez de Ami et Amile* in a gay literary context" (108). Though I admire the depth of Anders's scholarship here, I am skeptical that a single allusion produces the affiliation he claims, especially because it depends upon indirection for its effect. Moreover, Anders seems to relish detailing the plots and literary conventions of these influential homosexual texts more than he does Cather's novels themselves. As a consequence, for example, we are given another critic's reading of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* in lieu of a more detailed reading of *The Professor's House*, and in the chapter on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the Sacred Band appears virtually,

and tiresomely, on every page. Anders also has the unnerving habit of inserting the interpretations of other critics at crucial junctures in his argument rather than pursuing his own line of reasoning throughout the texts, a habit that seriously attenuates the authority of his own voice and perspective.

The major contribution of this book is Anders's insistence that the nuances of male friendship in Cather's fictions "exist along a continuum from the social to the sexual. . . . [S]ome friendships seem fixed, closer to the social end of the spectrum than to the sexual or erotic, while others are more fluid, oscillating between homosocial and homosexual experience" (xii). And he is surely correct that "naming the unnameable is the imaginative response" of readers to Cather's fictions (135). Indeed, this provocative engagement between reader and text is, I would argue, one of the qualities that moves her fiction into the category of great literature. Anders's book provides a wealth of scholarship that reveals the extent of homosexual literary allusions within Cather's *oeuvre*, and he offers interesting and evocative readings of homosocial and homosexual relations between men in the three novels he investigates. But that Cather correctly belongs within a gay male literary tradition, or that *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are "within the Cather canon comparable to Shakespeare's sonnets and Whitman's 'Calamus' poems" (72), is an interpretive leap that he does not, finally, convince me to make.

It is probably fortunate for Anders that his book appeared while Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* was in press, for he surely would have appeared on her hit list, along with me and any other number of critics who have written on Cather during the past twenty years. An expansion of her anti-feminist diatribe, "Cather and the Academy," published in the *New Yorker* in 1995, Acocella's work is a curious and unsettling combination of engagingly intelligent prose serving a mean-spirited, *ad feminam* attack on feminist and queer critics of Cather's work. And this is a

shame, really, for throughout the book Acocella reveals herself (especially in chapter 8, "The Tragic Sense of Life") to be a passionate, lucid, subtle, and enlightening reader of Cather's texts. It is only when she turns her attention to other critics that the book devolves into the anger and distortion that characterize Acocella's reaction to recent Cather scholars who have written about sex, power, and politics in the novels. It is a thin book, both literally and philosophically, animated by Acocella's disapproving, ungenerous, and frequently wildly ignorant interpretations of feminist criticism in general and the work of specific critics.

The tone of the book reflects this dual sensibility. Acocella provides a lively biographical sketch of Cather's early life, then summarizes thoroughly and convincingly the way critics responded to her work from 1910 through the 1960s. Indeed, one of the book's major contributions is the insightful attention Acocella turns toward Cather's appropriation by the conservative and religious right in the 1940s after being blasted as naïve, conservative, and nostalgic by leftists in the 1930s. Acocella also fairly evaluates the contributions of critics during the fifties and sixties. But with the advent of feminism in the 1970s Acocella's book shifts into another mode entirely, one of outrage and defensive posturing. Acocella would have us believe that feminist criticism has distorted and disparaged Cather's reputation, that its practitioners willfully misread the novels in favor of their own political agendas. Cather, she claims, "is a rebuke to the feminists. All the things they say a woman can't do—learn to write from men, create a life centered on writing, with no intrusions—she did them, and with very little wear and tear" (58). I don't disagree with Acocella's characterization of Cather's psyche as a woman artist; indeed, she did all the things Acocella claims and more. But I have to insist that Acocella's working definition of feminism is weirdly inaccurate. What she claims in this passage is true only if one understands feminism as nothing more than a catalogue of vic-

timization and oppression rather than what most feminists understand it to be, an ideological blueprint for the self-actualization of women. For Acocella, however, feminism offers nothing beyond a continual whine about the unfairness of patriarchy and, most bizarrely, a desire "to bring [Cather] down a peg" (59). This latter assertion is a consistent theme in the book; in her "Prologue," Acocella insists that because Cather "made her work her life . . . and therefore wasted no energy protesting against the forces that might have stood in her way," she has been "made to pay, mostly by women" (2). That Acocella offers not one whit of evidence to support this assertion reveals it for what it is, a grotesque projection upon feminists themselves, against whom Acocella clearly bears some special and private grudge. Rather than demonstrating how feminists take out their frustration on Cather, Acocella instead vents her spleen upon them. *She* is the only one who makes anyone pay in this book, though the root of her rage remains mysterious.

To be sure, Acocella advances some valid points, and I want to make certain I avoid indulging in the sweeping generalizations about her work that she so cavalierly favors with others. I share Acocella's skepticism that "the thing not named" must, a priori, signify homosexuality because Cather, according to Sharon O'Brien, was a lesbian. And I recall feeling a particular glee at Acocella's deft puncturing of Eve Sedgwick's vainglorious word play on "Berengaria" from *The Professor's House*. Acocella is right to be irritated at an argument that tries to compose a lesbian subtext from anagrams when it ignores altogether the fact that Berengaria "was the name of a real ship, a famous Cunard ocean liner, on which Cather had returned from Europe immediately before starting work on *The Professor's House*" (55-56). But this is a failing of scholarship and historical acuity rather than one of ideology; Acocella, however, refuses to acknowledge this difference. For her, Sedgwick's error is simply one more feminist outrage committed upon Cather's literary reputation.

Acocella reserves her most potent ire for Sharon O'Brien, whose 1987 biography, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, argued that Cather, in her youthful escapades of cross-dressing, her masculine self-address, her crushes on women throughout her early life, her lifelong romantic fixation on Isabelle McClung, and her long partnership with Edith Lewis, was, in all probability, a lesbian. Acocella seems to feel a particular urgency to discredit O'Brien, and in service of her view she offers a different interpretation of a crucial letter to Louise Pound upon which much of O'Brien's argument is based (49-51). Fair enough. But in addition to her desire to debunk lesbian interpretations of Cather's novels, Acocella spends an inordinate amount of time repudiating the possibility that Cather herself may have been a lesbian. Throughout the book, in fact, Acocella treats lesbianism as an insult to Cather and her reputation, a curious reaction from someone who has built a career writing about the overwhelmingly queer modern dance circuit in Manhattan. Another agenda seems to be at work here, but Acocella is too busy basking in righteous indignation to examine what her own profound antagonism might signify. Instead she spends her time psychoanalyzing O'Brien in what is the ugliest, most personal, and unnecessary attack I have ever encountered in Cather criticism.

Acocella also betrays an unhelpful habit of making categorical pronouncements that misrepresent the intentions, not to mention the actual work, of other critics. Indicting multiculturalism as an offshoot of feminism, for instance, she sums up the work of ten critics, myself among them, under the following categories of erroneous arguments: "(1) Cather was wrong, wrong, in her treatment of the blacks, Mexicans, Navajos, and Pueblo Indians who turn up in her work; (2) she wasn't wrong—it's just those unreliable narrators speaking; (3) she was wrong at first, then 'reconciled'; or (4) she was in conflict" (63). Footnoted alongside Toni Morrison (a compliment I'm certain Acocella did not intend), my 1992

monograph on Cather is dismissed as arguing that "Cather was wrong in her attitudes" (105). I must confess to being perplexed by this comment, and it makes me suspect that Acocella herself has perpetrated some shoddy scholarship on the unwitting reader. For not only does this comment possibly apply to only *one* of my chapters (on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*), it misrepresents my entire argument. Indeed, I begin the chapter by questioning the easy interpretation of sisterhood that many feminist critics have assigned to the novel, and throughout my analysis I read the permutations of whiteness and the rationale for slavery that I believe the novel subtly upholds; in this Morrison and I are close in our understanding of the book. But neither of us ever suggests that Cather herself was a racist, or that her attitudes are wrong. Our arguments are focused on the text itself, a stance that the belligerently New Critical Acocella should at least recognize. If Acocella truly means what she says, and one must presume she does, I can only deduce she has not read the rest of my book and has either misunderstood or purposely distorted what she *has* read. She needs to be held to the same standard of scholarship to which she holds Sedgwick, and in this instance, since I know my own book well, she falls far short of the mark of both honesty and accuracy.

Ultimately, what Acocella wants is a return to literalism. Indeed, one of her chief complaints throughout the book is that Cather's possible lesbianism meant that subtext had wormed its way into the garden and "the surface of Cather's fiction could no longer be taken literally" (51). And in chapter eight of her book, "The Tragic Sense of Life," she gives the reader what she herself believes is the literal, thus true, interpretation of Cather's works. I find her interpretations sound, beautifully written, and persuasive in this chapter. She demonstrates that she is a wonderful reader who feels deeply the nuances and the subtleties of Cather's prose. Yet Acocella blithely ignores one of the most basic effects of literature itself, that all texts open

themselves to different interpretations. Interacting with the text, giving substance to "the thing not named," is one of the essential practices of all literary enactments between reader and text. This is as true for Cather as it is for Chaucer or Byron or Eliot or Ellison. That Acocella's ear is attuned to the mixture of promise and pain in Cather can be illuminating for a reader; I certainly experienced this in my reading of her eighth chapter. But her interpretation of Cather's "tragic sense of life" is neither more nor less accurate than those of any of the other critics whose interpretations she disparages. That she insists on too easy oppositions of right and wrong reveals the fundamental narrowness of her vision and the true weakness of her book. It may even be true that Acocella is simply using Cather as a provocative subject through which to discredit the entire project of contemporary, postmodern

criticism. But if this is her purpose, she should at least be honest about it, rather than representing herself as the defender of a writer who is no more under the "attack" of feminists and multiculturalists than any other writer in the canon of American literature.

I agree with Acocella that Cather's vision of life is large. Surely, in our responses to and critical interpretations of her work there is room for a diversity of opinion. For if Cather is half the novelist Acocella thinks she is, her allegedly fragile reputation will outlast all critical commentaries, including Acocella's. The novels will always speak for themselves. And I'm guessing that at least in this Acocella and I can find a place of agreement.

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