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Willa Cather on a “New World Novelist”: A Newly-Discovered 1920 *Vanity Fair* Essay

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The ability to quote from and publish Willa Cather’s letters is a relatively recent development for scholars. However, the republication of her critical prose began shortly after her death, when Cather’s partner, Edith Lewis, appointed literary executor in her will, facilitated the publication of *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (1949). In line with Cather’s own approach to her early career, which she often dismissed or mischaracterized, this volume collected only her critical prose published from 1920 forward, including magazine essays, prefaces, and one previously unpublished fragment. This volume supplemented Cather’s own collection encompassing critical essays she had published during roughly the same time span, *Not Under Forty* (1936). However, beginning in 1893 as a university sophomore and for a year after her 1895 graduation, Cather was an active and strongly opinionated critical presence in Lincoln, Nebraska, publishing regular columns in the *Nebraska State Journal* and later also the *Lincoln Courier* in which she reviewed stage productions passing through Lincoln and wrote widely about literature. When she moved to Pittsburgh in 1896, she continued her career as a critic, writing under her name and pseudonymously in Pittsburgh magazines and newspapers and also sending work back to the *Journal* and *Courier*. Bernice Slote in *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893–1896* (1966) and William Curtin in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902* (1970) located and republished this early critical prose. In their wake, bibliographer Joan Crane enumerated Cather’s

critical writings in *Willa Cather: A Bibliography* (1982), and more recently, the *Willa Cather Archive*, edited by Andrew Jewell, has made more accessible many of Cather's known, but relatively inaccessible, critical essays published before 1923.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered a previously unrecorded Cather critical essay published in *Vanity Fair* in 1920. The 1927 publication of a photographic portrait of Cather by Edward Steichen in *Vanity Fair* has received scholarly attention,¹ and, indeed, my attempt to find correspondence about the production of this image led to my discovery of the critical essay. The Condé Nast corporate archivist informed me that there were no editorial files for *Vanity Fair* in the 1920s because editors simply took their files with them when they left. As a sort of consolation prize for this absence she sent me an image of a "manuscript card" documenting that on April 20, 1920, *Vanity Fair* paid Willa Cather of 5 Bank Street in New York City \$80 for an item with the title "Nexoe."² Although designated space on the card for the issue in which the item ran was left blank, I quickly located her brief (less than 1500 words) essay on *Pelle the Conqueror* (*Pelle Erobreren*) by Danish novelist Martin Andersen Nexø (alternately spelled Nexö or Nexoe) in the July 1920 issue of *Vanity Fair*, which is reprinted below for the first time. I further preface this reprinting with some remarks introducing Nexø and his four-volume social realist novel, which has largely disappeared from the consciousness of English-language readers, and place Cather's response to it in relation to her own novels and to *Vanity Fair* as a venue. As will become apparent, Cather's response to *Pelle* provides a fresh perspective on Cather's place in literary culture at a moment of friction between the established realist tradition and the then-emerging modernism.



Willa Cather published her essay on Martin Andersen Nexø in 1920, but 1913 is a crucial year in the story of Cather's reading of his work. Considering the length of the novel, which Cather accurately analogizes to that of *War and Peace*, and her account of its appearance over time, it seems reasonable to assume that she read it that way rather than being commissioned to read all four volumes for the purpose of writing about it—indeed, having recently read the novel myself in order to write this introduction, I doubt that Cather would have found

\$80 adequate compensation for such a time-consuming feat. In June 1913 Houghton Mifflin published Cather's first novel set in the American West and featuring Scandinavian immigrant characters, *O Pioneers!*,³ and in September of the same year *Vanity Fair* first took notice of Willa Cather, publishing a brief review of the novel. The magazine had just been acquired by Condé Nast and christened *Dress and Vanity Fair*, with September being its first issue—the transformation to *Vanity Fair* under Frank Crowninshield began in 1914.⁴ *Dress and Vanity Fair* called Cather “neither a skilled storyteller nor the least bit of an artist.” Despite this faint praise, the reviewer ultimately conceded the power of the novel's realism: “one feels that one has really lived in this simple community with the heroine, Alexandra, and shared her griefs, struggles, and satisfactions, which finally attain a dramatic interest.”⁵

Later in 1913 the first volume of Nexø's four-volume *Pelle the Conqueror*, subtitled *Boyhood* in its English translation, appeared in the U.S. (in Danish the four volumes had originally appeared from 1906 through 1910).⁶ This first volume begins in May 1877, with the title character and his father, Lasse, arriving on a ferry from their native Sweden looking for employment on the Danish island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea.⁷ As publication chronology makes clear, *Boyhood* could not have influenced *O Pioneers!*, the heroine of which, Alexandra Bergson, is a Swedish immigrant farmer in Nebraska. Nevertheless, in light of Cather's work on *O Pioneers!* and her turn by late summer 1913 to work on a second novel featuring a Swedish-American heroine, *The Song of the Lark* (1915),⁸ the review of *Boyhood* in the *New York Times* certainly would have caught her interest. The reviewer describes it as “read[ing], not like fiction, but an exceptionally vivid record of actual events” and praises Pelle as “a real boy.” Officially, feudalism had been abolished in Denmark before the late nineteenth century, but Pelle and Lasse labor under semi-feudal conditions tending the cattle of the proprietor of Stone Farm⁹—the kind of success Alexandra Bergson achieves as an agricultural proprietor in Nebraska is thus inaccessible to them. Because Nexø, with a few brief exceptions, confines focalization in *Boyhood* to the child Pelle, the farm which Pelle wanders herding cattle, is, for much of the volume, Pelle's and thus the novel's entire world. It is very much a boy's world, in which he and his friend Rud sometimes beat each other for entertainment or torment the cattle. “We leave the book anxious to know what sort of a man this boy will make,” the *Times* review concludes, “and certain

that he will become one worth hearing about. Martin Andersen Nexø is not destined long to remain, so far as the American reading public is concerned, an unknown author.”¹⁰

As *O Pioneers!* demonstrates, in the late-nineteenth century many Swedes and Danes were immigrating to the U.S. and taking up farms in places like Nebraska, but there is no mention of America until the second volume of *Pelle*, which appeared in the U.S. in 1914 with the subtitle *Apprenticeship*. By the end of *Boyhood*, Pelle has finished his schooling, has been confirmed in the church, and has decided to leave the farm to seek employment. At the opening of *Apprenticeship* Pelle is thus walking to the provincial town where he and his father arrived on the ferry years earlier and encounters “a great deal of traffic on the high-road,” including many people he knows. “There were people who were going to the town—his town,” he reflects, “and some were going farther, far over the sea, to America.”¹¹ Pelle encounters one particular person bound for America, “the old man from Neuen-dorf,” “got up quite like an American,” who explains that he “was going out to his betrothed” in America because she had been there for three years already and “will not wait for [him] any longer.” Pelle tells the old man he will “willingly take over the ticket [to America] and the bride,”¹² but after this joking moment America recedes from Pelle’s consciousness. Instead, he becomes a shoemaker’s apprentice in the provincial town and eventually sets his sights on the capital city of Copenhagen, where volumes three and four take place. As reviewer L. M. Field wrote in the *New York Times*, *Apprenticeship* is “a perfect presentation of one phase of the revolution wrought by the machine” as Pelle acquires a handicraft skill that is being superseded. “The little community at Stone Farm was very real to the reader,” Field explains, “and the small town is portrayed as vividly.”¹³ Pelle’s widowed father, in the meantime, remarries and acquires a farm on credit, although the work of clearing the land of boulders breaks both him and his second wife, who dies, and he loses the farm.

Willa Cather evidently kept reading *Pelle*, although as she wrote in *Vanity Fair*, it was *Boyhood*, featuring Pelle’s agricultural childhood, that most interested her. And although *Pelle* is most often classified as a social realist novel or, based on the later volumes, a proletarian novel, later critics have also commented on Andersen’s use of mythic and folkloric motifs, particularly in *Boyhood*, and the affinity of the early volumes with the Danish tradition of provincial literature

(*hjemstavns litteratur*).¹⁴ Certainly, these aspects of the early volumes of *Pelle* would have resonated for Cather in the wake of *O Pioneers!*, arguably a novel in the U.S. regionalist tradition in which the heroine is both realistic and mythic.

It is the isolated small-town childhood of future Swedish-American opera singer Thea Kronborg that occupies a disproportionate amount of space in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, which appeared in October 1915, around the same time that volume three of *Pelle*, subtitled *The Great Struggle*, issued in the U.S.¹⁵ As the review in the *New York Times* noted, although the great labor strike that is the culminating event of the volume "is very real," "a strike in Copenhagen resembles very closely a strike in London or New York," while the "quaintness" of "manners and customs" on Stone Farm were more "novel" to American readers.¹⁶ *Dawn*, the final volume, begins with Pelle emerging from prison, where he has served time on trumped up charges, and ends with his working to establish a new workers' cooperative community outside of Copenhagen—this volume appeared in the U.S. in late 1916. "Pelle is not only the leading character of the remarkable epitome of the labor movement given in these four notable volumes," the *New York Times* reviewer wrote, "he is also a type and a symbol," and the final volume ends on "a strong clear note of hope."¹⁷

Meanwhile, Cather wrote yet another novel of the American West featuring immigrant characters, *My Ántonia*, which Houghton Mifflin published in September 1918.¹⁸ Rather than the third person omniscient narrators of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, Cather used Jim Burden, an "American" immigrant to Nebraska, as the first person narrator, and her central European immigrant character is Czech, not Scandinavian. Nevertheless, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians feature throughout the novel's agricultural and small town scenes, most notably Lena Lingard, who, like Pelle, herds cattle. Lena's Norwegian immigrant family owns its Nebraska farm, but it is a very poor one, and Lena is dressed in rags and chased around the prairies by "Crazy Mary," jealous wife of Ole Benson, who likes to talk to Lena as she tends her cattle. Lena escapes the prairie to become a successful dressmaker, but Lena's dark prairie years on a poor farm resonate with the first volume of *Pelle*.

Cather's increasing critical reputation in the wake of *My Ántonia* brings us back to her presence in the pages of *Vanity Fair*. Under Frank Crowninshield as editor in chief, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and

Robert Sherwood were contributing editors of *Vanity Fair* in 1919. In January 1920, Crowninshield told Parker that she could no longer write theater reviews because Florenz Ziegfeld had complained about her cutting review of his wife, actress Billie Burke. Parker resigned in protest, and Benchley and Sherwood followed her, leaving Edmund Wilson, a recently-hired young Princeton graduate, in charge as managing editor. After Parker, Benchley, and Sherwood departed, Wilson hired his Princeton friend John Peale Bishop as his assistant.¹⁹

Because there is neither an editorial office archive nor any mention of her essay on Nexø in Cather's extant letters, it is difficult to know for sure who commissioned the essay and under what circumstances, but Wilson seems the likely candidate. Notably he was living in Greenwich Village, more-or-less around the corner from the 5 Bank Street apartment Cather shared with Edith Lewis, and he may have found his way to one of their Friday teas.²⁰ Cather was also at a turning point in her career in the spring of 1920. Dissatisfied with the advertising and promotion of her first four novels by Houghton Mifflin Co. of Boston, she was considering changing to Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., of New York City. Even though a substantial archive of Cather's correspondence with Alfred Knopf has recently become available, there are still notable gaps, including in 1920, the year that Knopf published *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, a volume of short stories about art and artists.²¹ We do know, however, that Cather signed the contract for *Youth and the Bright Medusa* on February 1, 1920.²² This chronology suggests that Cather's essay on Nexø, in which she takes on the cultural authority to choose which works are worthy of entering the canon of "world literature," was part of a campaign to promote Cather herself as a distinguished artist. Furthermore, by writing the essay she earned some fast cash just as she was about to leave for an expensive trip to France to research the World War I scenes of her novel-in-progress, *One of Ours* (1922). Timing also suggests that the essay was designed to serve the interests of Nexø and his American publishers. In the wake of the success of *Pelle* with American readers and critics, in 1920 Henry Holt & Co. was poised to issue his next novel, *Ditte, Girl Alive!*, nearly simultaneously with its publication in Copenhagen in the original Danish.²³ Indeed, the caption under the photograph of Nexø that appears with Cather's essay is essentially an advertisement for this forthcoming publication:

Denmark, which has already to her credit one modern literary figure of European importance, the great critic George Brandes, seems now to have produced another in Martin Nexö, the author of "Pelle the Conqueror." This biographical novel belongs to the same epic school as Romain Rolland's "Jean-Christophe," J. D. Beresford's "Jacob Stahl" and Theodore Dreiser's Titan-Financier trilogy. A new novel by Nexö called "Ditte: Girl Alive" has been announced for early publication by Henry Holt & Co.

The brevity of Cather's essay on *Pelle* puts it in the *Vanity Fair* league,²⁴ but in other ways she and the essay initially seem out of key with the venue. The magazine has become a key site in scholarly analyses of the transition from realism to modernism because of its focus on the new, the modern, and the avant-garde.²⁵ The July 1920 issue in which her essay appeared reflects this emphasis on the new and modern, although perhaps less so the modernist and avant-garde. Of the thirty-four pages of advertisements in the front of the magazine preceding the table of contents, nearly a third are for automobiles or automobile-related products, and there are yet more car ads in the back of the magazine. Many of the photo spreads and pages featuring single photographs focus on what is new and current in New York theater across the cultural range, from actresses in musical comedies to avant-garde ballet dancers. Despite her Greenwich Village residence, Cather was not one of the young Bohemians of the Village that the magazine obsessively anatomized for readers. The page after Cather's essay, for example, features a group of satirical black-and-white drawings by George Luks with accompanying text titled "Bohemians, and the Quest Eternal: Greenwich Villagers may not Know What They Are Striving for—but, My! How They Strive!" Nor was Cather a modern quipping female satirist in the fashion of the recently-departed Dorothy Parker or poet Edna St. Vincent Millay writing as Nancy Boyd, who are the subject of Catherine Keyser's *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture* (2010). As it happens men wrote all of the satirical essays in the July 1920 issue, but satire is nevertheless the predominant mode, from "Coke, Coal, and Other Bituminous Metals: A New Civic Masque, for Community Production in July" by American dramatist Percyvere (Percy) Mackaye to "The New Girl: A Type of Modern Woman Which is Likely to Bring the New Utopia to Ground" by Irish dramatist St. John Ervine.

Despite the foregrounding of the word “New” in the title of Cather’s essay (a title which likely was not her own), in it she earnestly promotes Nexø and his novel as a development in the long tradition of the realist novel rather than celebrating his modern-ness. Nevertheless, Cather’s essay makes sense in the context of what Daniel Tracy has identified as the middlebrow “pedagogical” function of critical writing in *Vanity Fair* and the “professional authority [that] accrues to expert classification and performances of reasonable compromise.”²⁶ In her concluding remarks on Nexø, Cather performs just such a reasonable compromise by both critiquing Nexø’s merging of social reform advocacy with fiction and judging the novel a success as a work of art despite this flaw. She also notably does not connect Nexø’s work to her own *oeuvre*, as I have above—she does not write about Nexø as an influence on her own creative work but instead claims the cultural authority to judge the quality of another artist’s work. In so doing, she elevates both Nexø’s and, implicitly, her own novels featuring Scandinavian characters on farms and in rural small towns to the category of “world literature.”

A theme of Cather’s mature criticism also emerges in the final paragraphs of her essay on Nexø: the need to separate the realm of art from social concerns. She would soon take up this theme again in “The Art of Fiction,” which appeared later in the year in *The Borzoi 1920: Being a sort of record of five years’ publishing*, a promotional volume Alfred Knopf created to celebrate his own achievements as a publisher.²⁷ “Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap and breakfast foods,” she writes, “or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values.”²⁸ In “The Novel Dêmeublé,” first published in the *New Republic* in 1922, she would further distinguish “the novel as a form of amusement” from the novel “as a form of art” and the novel as “a form of imaginative art” from the novel as “a vivid and brilliant form of journalism.”²⁹

Earlier in her *Vanity Fair* essay, Cather takes up another theme that would soon appear in these two notable essays on aesthetics. Writing of Nexø’s life experiences before he began to write, she opines, “There he seems to have got that long perspective on his material which clarifies the writer’s vision and simplifies his feeling.” She attributes this

quality to the fact that Nexø had no early phase as a writer of fiction that he had to get past: “he seems to have forgotten how to ‘write’ before he ever began.”³⁰ In “The Novel Dèmeublé,” she would soon write, “The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it.” Writing of *Pelle*’s power to absorb readers and make them forget that they are reading a novel rather than experiencing the events depicted, Cather analogizes Nexø’s characters to characters in an Ibsen play, and describes how, “From the moment the curtain rises, they are there, and the author exists no longer.” At the end of “The Novel Dèmeublé” she would use a similar theatrical metaphor: she imagines all of the “furniture” of the novel thrown “out of the window” leaving the room “bare as the stage of a Greek theater ... bare for the play of emotions, great and little.”³¹

Reviewers most insistently analogized *Pelle* to Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe*, another early-twentieth century multi-volume novel centering on the development of its eponymous male protagonist. Cather takes up a different analogy to a novel referenced explicitly in Nexø’s novel, Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862). Hugo’s novel about the sufferings of the poor in early-nineteenth-century France is a favorite of *Pelle*’s friend Morten, who has a similar background to *Pelle*’s but becomes an author writing on proletarian themes rather than a labor leader. Morten is also transparently a surrogate for Nexø himself—the first two volumes of *Pelle* are based on Nexø’s own experiences, but he was not a labor leader, like *Pelle*. Near the end of the final volume of *Pelle*, when Morten is packing for a trip he insists on cramming into his suitcase the large *Les Misérables*, which the narrator identifies as “Morten’s Bible.”³² In her essay on Nexø Cather takes this episode as a “clear state[ment]” by him that his theme is “identical with that” of Hugo’s novel, “but instead of a great mass of rhetoric about the poor ... we have *les misérables* themselves.”



Edmund Wilson became an important voice on the side of modernism as against realism, but he left *Vanity Fair* in February 1921 to become managing editor of the *New Republic*.³³ Throughout 1921 *Vanity Fair* promoted Cather as a cultural celebrity and distinguished artist by including her in its popular themed photo features.³⁴ In January,

she was featured in a photospread of “American Novelists Who Have Set Art Above Popularity: A Group of Authors Who Have Consistently Stood Out Against Philistia” in the company of Sherwood Anderson, Joseph Hergesheimer, Edith Wharton, James Branch Cabell, and Theodore Dreiser.³⁵ In February, she appeared in “The Apotheosis of Greenwich Village: Muses of New York’s So-Called Quartier Latin, who have Achieved the Highest Distinction in the Arts.” Despite the invocation of muse discourse, the women featured all created rather than merely inspiring others to create; Cather appeared in the company of Edna St. Vincent Millay, actress Helen Westley, “fashion artist” Helen Dryden, “black and white illustrator and humorist” for *Vanity Fair* Ethel Plummer, playwright Susan Glaspell, “satirist in black and white” and painter Clara Tice, stage and costume designer Ilona Karasz, and pianist Ethel Leginska.³⁶ Finally, in October 1921, Cather appeared in the regular photo feature “We Nominate for the Hall of Fame” in the heterogeneous and international company of Russian dancer and choreographer Wladyslaw Nijinski, French dress designer Paul Poiret, and British painter Augustus John.³⁷

Having been effectively retired as the subject of photo features by inclusion in the Hall of Fame, Cather nevertheless reappeared in *Vanity Fair* in 1922 as an object of critique. Edmund Wilson returned to *Vanity Fair* from the *New Republic* in July 1922, and he both served as managing editor and contributed by-lined reviews and cultural commentary, including his “Books of the Month” column. When the magazine identified Cather as having “set art above popularity” in January 1921, it cited H. L. Mencken’s judgment that *My Ántonia* was “the best novel every written by an American woman.” In his October 1922 column, Wilson admits that he hasn’t read *My Ántonia* but still wonders, “Can Mr. Mencken have been mistaken when he decided that Miss Willa Cather was a great novelist?” He flatly decrees that his occasion for writing about Cather in 1922, her then-new novel *One of Ours*, is a “flat failure” on an interesting theme in which she “has certainly never succeeded in making her hero a reality.” Having decreed Cather a failure as a realist in both *One of Ours* and her *Youth and the Bright Medusa* stories, he credits her with a devotion to artistry and concedes that her attempt to make her characters come alive was sincere. However, he also points to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a counter example of what she might have achieved: “If her novel only had more vitality it might put the fear of God into all our hearts—as *Ulysses* has done to

those who have read it. It might bring the salutary blush of shame to many a complacent cheek. But as it is, ‘younger novelists’ can evade the moral of Miss Cather’s example by protesting that she is dull.”³⁸

Vanity Fair had cited the judgment of British novelist and critic Hugh Walpole in placing Cather in “The Apotheosis of Greenwich Village” (“ranked by Hugh Walpole and by other competent critics as, next to Edith Wharton, the ablest woman novelist now writing in America”) and “The Hall of Fame” (“according to Hugh Walpole, Mrs. Wharton is her only rival among American women novelists”). In a March 1923 *Vanity Fair* essay “Realism and the New English Novel: A Practitioner of the Established School Discusses the Messiahs of the New Faith,” Walpole came to the defense of realism, the novelistic tradition, and Willa Cather. He concedes the “genius of Mr. James Joyce and his *Ulysses*,” but he also defends “what is known as the novel” against charges that *Ulysses* had undone the genre’s realist tradition.³⁹ Walpole describes *Ulysses* as purely subjective and autobiographical, while he argues that novelists in the tradition established in the nineteenth century created characters who were unlike themselves. He closes his essay with a catalog British and American novelists keeping this tradition “alive and even kicking” and “modern enough to hold our attention”: in England Frank Swinnerton, Kaye Smith and Francis Brette-Young, and in America Edith Wharton, Joseph Hergesheimer, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher.⁴⁰

Wilson’s attack on Cather has assumed an outsized place in literary history, appearing prominently in the introduction to Michael North’s *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (1999). Wilson left *Vanity Fair* again in 1923, and references to Cather disappeared from *Vanity Fair* until the iconic Steichen portrait of her appeared in 1927. *Vanity Fair* itself did not survive the Great Depression. Cather predicted that *Pelle the Conqueror* would “inevitably take its place as one of the great imaginative works which belong to the human race and for as long as books shall last,” and for a time in the twentieth century, this prediction was accurate, with *Pelle* appearing on lists of the world’s ten best novels.⁴¹ Nexø’s epic novel made him a hero of Social Democrats in Denmark, but soon after the last volume of *Pelle* appeared in English translation, he lost faith in socialism and embraced revolutionary communism, a choice that forced him into exile.⁴² Ultimately, outside of Denmark and communist countries, *Pelle* largely sank into oblivion.⁴³ The 1987 film *Pelle the Conqueror*, which starred

Max von Sydow and won the *Palme d'or* at the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film, might seem to contradict this claim; however, the film dramatizes only the first volume of Nexø's epic and did not result in the novel being brought back into print in English.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile recovering Cather's engagement with Nexø at a crucial turning point in her career as a novelist, when she was also reemerging as a critic and emerging as a theorist of the art and craft of fiction. It is also worth pondering how Cather's essay on Nexø was missed by several rounds of scholars seeking to recover all of Cather's publications. Notably the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, the warhorse of pre-digital research, did not index *Vanity Fair*. And as Associate Editor of the Complete Letters of Willa Cather, a digital edition in progress, I can testify to that fact that Cather makes no mention of her *Vanity Fair* essay in any letter yet located. However, one letter to a correspondent only identified as "Mr. Miller" does take up *Pelle the Conqueror*. Miller apparently wrote Cather castigating her for the use of a male first-person narrator in *My Ántonia* and suggesting that she should have adopted the style of narration of *Pelle the Conqueror* and Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*. "I wholly disagree with you regarding Jean Christophe and Pelle the Conqueror," Cather wrote Miller in October 1924. Although in *Vanity Fair* she opined that for readers *Pelle* "lives as if it had made itself," to Miller she wrote, "Do either of these books tell themselves? Not for a minute!"⁴⁴ Even if *Pelle* is now obscure, as late as 1924 and perhaps beyond, Nexø's novel engaged Cather's creative imagination and critical acumen.



A New World Novelist in Europe⁴⁵

*The Rapidly Widening Fame of Martin Nexö
in Modern Literature*

By WILLA SIBERT CATHER

MARTIN ANDERSEN NEXO'S great novel, *Pelle the Conqueror*, though written in Danish, is not a Danish novel or a Scandinavian novel, but a world-novel. The

world is just beginning to read this veritable masterpiece, but I doubt whether anything published within the last twenty years will so inevitably take its place as one of the great imaginative works which belong to the human race and for as long as books shall last.

Good novels are rare enough, but a great novel can only be born out of some kind of greatness. While nobody can say just what greatness is, we all know that it is something quite apart from the fine qualities of even the most accomplished artist.

Nexö's novel was born, not made, and it was a long while in being born. The actual writing of the volumes took him only a few years, but it took him nearly forty years to live them,—and in this book, particularly, the significant work was all done long before there was any question of writing. The quality of a novel depends so much upon what else the author is, or has been, besides a novelist. At the age when Henry James was at school in Switzerland, and Anatole France was already a brilliant young journalist in Paris, Martin Nexö was a shoemaker's apprentice, working fourteen hours a day,—and that for four years. Before he was apprenticed he had been a farm hand, and his early childhood was spent in the poorest quarter of Copenhagen, where his mother went about with a push-cart, peddling fish and vegetables. He worked at shoe-making for six years in all, and then, because his health broke from long indoor confinement, became a hod-carrier.

Nexö's Early Life

AFTER all this, Nexö began to go to the High School at Askov, where he was taken into the household of the widow of the poet Molbach. This woman believed in his talent, became his benefactress. Indeed, it was she who made it possible for him to write at all. After an attack of pneumonia had all but put an end to the young man, she nursed him until he was strong enough to leave his own country for a milder climate, then sent him south

for two years in Spain and Italy. There he seems to have got that long perspective on his material which clarifies the writer's vision and simplifies his feeling. We probably owe the actual existence of *Pelle* to Fru Molbach, for without her assistance the book would almost certainly have gone into the ground with Nexö.

One does not mean to imply, of course, that shoe-making and hod-carrying made Nexö a writer; he was born one. But poverty held him back from his work so long that he could not well produce anything trivial, and his struggle taught him those deeper values which cannot be learned by observation. After his return from Southern Europe in 1896, still in feeble health, he taught school for several years, writing his first book of travel sketches at night. Under this double strain he again broke down, and in 1901 gave up his instructorship. Nothing more was heard of him until he emerged with a masterpiece almost as long as *War and Peace* and almost as great. There was no period of promise. He has no "early manner." He is an obscure school teacher and an invalid until he comes forth with a great imaginative work before whose richness and humanity even the most shallow and conceited of his craft must bow. He has left no experimental works in his trail, no books written for writing's sake; in that sense he seems to have forgotten how to "write" before he ever began.

"Pelle" and Les Misérables

THE older one grows and the more one has read, the harder it is to recapture that pleasure of losing one's self in a long novel, as one did in childhood. We read with recognition, appreciation, but no longer with that self-surrender which makes the winter and summer on the page more real than any physical atmosphere that envelops [sic] us. In Nexö's long story, the most critical reader may embark once more upon that rare experience. He will hardly think of this as a book, but as a kind of society into which he has suddenly been plunged. The

stream of life flows over him so fast and strong that he will scarcely regard it as writing at all, will for the time forget that to create this stream is the ultimate test of a writer's power. For six years, as the book came out volume after volume in English, this has been happening to people here and there, and now one hears on every side that *Pelle* is a great novel. But nobody ever remarks that Nexö is a great writer. So completely is he above any sort of virtuosity that he has made his book a fact, simply; he and all his gifts are forgotten in the overpowering reality of his work. It lives, as if it had made itself. This is a long way from the ideals of Gustave Flaubert, certainly.

The theme of this work, as the author clearly states in the last volume, is identical with that of *Les Misérables*; but instead of a great mass of rhetoric about the poor, a passionate and fervid oration on poverty, we have here *les misérables* themselves. They come and go, and tell their story by their own behaviour, like the people in a play by Ibsen. From the moment the curtain rises, they are there, and the author exists no longer.

The Reformer as Novelist

THIS is the only novel I know which is able to carry a reformatory intent without losing every quality that makes a work of art. When a novel becomes a sociological study, it belongs on the lower shelf, along with tracts and reports and statistics; the noblest motives, the greatest sincerity cannot save it. Even Tolstoi, when he wrote to instruct, achieved only a heavy mediocrity. A fine imaginative work can be written only for itself and for the writer's joy in it. It is by this time a platitude that where the reformer begins, the artist dies. Yet Nexö almost succeeds in doing what has never been done before,—almost, but not quite.

His novel is best in the first volume, which is purely lyrical; it is still magnificent in the middle volumes, which deal with Pelle's young manhood and his struggle

to help in the founding of Trades' Unions in Denmark. But toward the end, when the element of conflict dies and the hero successfully works out his plans for the betterment of factory workers, the story grows pale and thin, and one must pronounce the last volume, judged by the high standard of the others, a failure. If this novel cannot carry a constructive philanthropy upon its giant shoulders, one is almost forced to conclude that no novel by a human hand could do it, and that the artist can benefit suffering humanity only indirectly; by firing the imaginations and waking the feelings of men, not by reasoning with them.

An Unobjectionable Happy Ending

THE fact that *Pelle the Conqueror* ends uninterestingly—the “happy ending” that editors are always pleading for!—detracts very little from its greatness as a novel, and will not prevent it from being read and lived and loved all over the world for many years to come. For one reason or another, nearly all the great single novels whose names are greater than their authors' in the world at large, have great blemishes. You have only to think of some of them: *Anna Karenina*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Les Misérables*, all the greater novels of Balzac. A novel does not live by the absence of faults, but by presence of compelling merits. It is the most modern form of art and one of the most human,—too human to admit of cameo-like perfection. The great novels tower above mediocrity much as great men tower,—not by the rules they have not broken, but by the life-giving vitality in which all their imperfections are lost and forgotten.



Notes

1. See especially Michael Schueth, "A Portrait of an Artist as a Cultural Icon: Edward Steichen, *Vanity Fair*, and Willa Cather," *Cather Studies*, 7 (2007), 46–67. Thanks to Maureen Honey and an anonymous reader for this journal for feedback on this essay.
2. Marianne Brown, email to the author, 21 November 2016. In my own prose, I spell the author's surname Nexø, but in quoting other sources, I follow their spelling.
3. On the publication date, see *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather, ed. Susan J. Rosowski et al. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 357.
4. George H. Douglas, *The Smart Magazines* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 95–96.
5. "Views & Reviews," *Vanity Fair*, 1 (September 1913), 57. This review is not reprinted or noted in *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).
6. The *New York Times* review of *Pelle* establishes its U.S. publication date. "Autobiography," *New York Times Book Review*, 7 December 1913, p. 720. As *Pelle Erobreren*, the first volume, subtitled *Barndom*, had first appeared in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1906. Volume 2 (*Læreaar*) similarly appeared in Denmark in 1907, volume 3 (*Den Store Kamp*) in 1909, and the final volume (*Gryet*) in 1910. See the bibliography in *Omkring Pelle Erobreren*, ed. Børge Houmann (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1975), p. 397. I read enough Norwegian to have deciphered some information about publishing history accessible through this bibliography. Although the apparatus is in Danish, the volume collects responses to *Pelle* in multiple languages, including English, and forms the basis of my broader claims about reception. Jessie Muir's translation of the first volume, subtitled *Boyhood*, appeared first in London under Sidgwick & Jackson's imprint. New York publisher Henry Holt & Co. used the British sheets, as evidenced by the legend "Printed in England" on the copyright page of the U.S. edition, making it technically an issue of Sidgwick & Jackson's London edition. Each subsequent volume also appeared in the U.S. after London publication using British sheets (and British English idioms appear throughout the volumes). Bernard Miall replaced Muir as translator of volume 2, but Muir returned as translator volumes 3 and 4.
7. Martin Andersen Nexø, *Pelle the Conqueror: Boyhood* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1913), p. 1.
8. On composition chronology, see *The Song of the Lark* by Willa Cather, ed. Ann Moseley and Kari A. Ronning (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012), p. 580.
9. Faith Ingwersen and Niels Ingwersen, *Quests for a Promised Land: The Works of Martin Andersen Nexø* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984), p. 3.
10. "Autobiography," p. 720.
11. Nexø, *Pelle the Conqueror: Apprenticeship* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1914), p. 2.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

13. L. M. Field, "Latest Fiction," *New York Times Book Review*, 6 December 1914, p. 556.
14. Ingwersen and Ingwersen, p. ix. K. A. Koefed, "Martin Andersen Nexø—Some Viewpoints," *Scandinavica: An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 4 (1965), 29–32.
15. Cather, *Song of the Lark*, 587. I have located no late 1915 advertisements for *The Great Struggle*, but the very early January review in the *New York Times* suggests late 1915 publication.
16. "Danish Hero's Fascinating Career," *New York Times Book Review*, 9 January 1916, p. 13.
17. "Story of a Peasant and Labor Leader," *New York Times Book Review*, 7 January 1917, p. 3.
18. *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather, ed. Charles Mignon et al. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 494.
19. Douglas, pp. 109–11. Precise chronology is elusive, but most sources documenting Wilson rather than the magazine place him in the position of managing editor starting in January 1920. See "Chronology" in Edmund Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912–1972*, ed. Elena Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. [51].
20. Wilson shared an apartment at 114 West 12th Street with several Yale graduates he had met in army training in the summer of 1916 (Jeffrey Meyers, *Edmund Wilson: A Biography* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995], p. 43).
21. *Youth and the Bright Medusa* encompassed some stories from *The Troll Garden* (1905), her first book of fiction, supplemented by stories written in the teens on the same subject. For recent treatments of Cather's relationships with Houghton Mifflin and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., see Robert Thacker, "'As the Result of Many Solicitations': Ferris Greenslet, Houghton Mifflin, and Cather's Career," *Studies in the Novel*, 45 (2013), 369–86; and Richard Harris, "'Dear Alfred'/'Dear Miss Cather': Willa Cather and Alfred Knopf, 1920–1947," *Studies in the Novel*, 45 (2013), 387–407. Harris draws on the correspondence only recently available to researchers. On the gaps and omissions, see Melissa J. Homestead, "Yet More Cather-Knopf Correspondence," *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 60, ii (2017), forthcoming.
22. Knopf, "Miss Cather," in *The Art of Willa Cather*, ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 206.
23. After Henry Holt issued the four volumes over time using sheets from the British publisher, the firm permanently acquired American rights to the novel in 1917 (see the note in Houmann's bibliography in *Omkring Pelle Erørbreren*, p. 405) and reissued all four volumes in two. I suspect that Cather had some contact with Nexø's American publisher because of the biographical details she provides in her essay. In London and the U.S., the translation of the first volume of *Pelle* appeared with a "note" by Otto Jespersen, Professor of English at the University of Copenhagen, which explained that the novel was, in many respects, autobiographical, but Jespersen also explained that "very little is known about the writer" ("Note" in *Boyhood*, [v]). Following the lead of this note, reviewers,

including in the *New York Times*, characterized the novel as autobiographical. However, Cather provides far more biographical detail (and accurately) than Jespersen's note provides—details I have not found in any American periodical source Cather may have read (and she did not read any Scandinavian language). Henry Holt circulated a fuller biographical sketch of Nexø in its edition of *Ditte* from which Cather might have derived her information, but only if she had access to it in advance of *Ditte's* September publication (*Ditte* was listed in "Latest Books" in the *New York Times Book Review*, 5 September 1920, p. 16).

24. *Vanity Fair* published non-fiction essays of 2000 words or less in length and did not publish original short stories. On these parameters, see Edmund Wilson to Stanley Dell, 19 February 1921, in *Letters on Literature and Politics*, p. 55.
25. See, e.g., Michael Murphy, "'One Hundred Per Cent Bohemia': Pop Decadence and the Aestheticization of Commodity Culture in the Rise of the Slicks," in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watts (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 61–89; Martha Banta, *Words at Work in Vanity Fair: Language Shifts in Crucial Times, 1914–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and other scholarship cited in this essay. It is beyond the scope of this essay to answer the vexing question whether Cather was a modernist. However, Cather's appearance in *Vanity Fair* supports Janis Stout's approach to the question, which entails placing Cather in the same socio-cultural circles as important modernist artists and thinkers. See "Modernist by Association: Willa Cather's New York/New Mexico Circle," *American Literary Realism*, 47 (Winter 2015), 117–35.
26. Daniel Tracy, "Investing in 'Modernism': Smart Magazines, Parody, and Middlebrow Professional Judgment," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 1, i (2010), 43. Tracy primarily analyzes the satire published in *Vanity Fair*, but he embeds his argument in a broader discussion of the magazine and features like Cather's earnest essay.
27. Amy Root Clements, *The Art of Prestige: The Formative Years at Knopf, 1916–1929* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2014), pp. 122–24.
28. Cather, "The Art of Fiction," *The Borzoi 1920* (New York: Knopf, 1920), p. 8. The essay was collected in *Willa Cather on Writing*.
29. Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," *New Republic*, 12 April 1922, pp. 5, 6. The essay was collected in *Not Under Forty*.
30. This is an exaggeration. Cather mentions the travel sketches he produced when his patron sent him to Spain and Italy but not the fairly considerable body of short stories he produced before *Pelle*, which were not available to her in English. See Ingwersen and Ingwersen, pp. 34–54.
31. Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," p. 6.
32. Nexø, *Pelle the Conqueror: Daybreak* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1916), p. 192. On Morten as a surrogate for Nexø, see Ingwersen and Ingwersen, p. 12; Naomi Lebowitz, "Magic Socialism and the Ghost of *Pelle Erobreren*," *Scandinavian Studies*, 76 (Fall 2004), 354; and Nexø to Waldo R. Browne, 27 July 1918, in Houmann, *Omkring Pelle Erobreren*, pp. 377–78.
33. Wilson, "Chronology," p. 5.

34. On the logic of celebrity photos in *Vanity Fair*, including in “The Hall of Fame,” see Faye Hammill, “In Good Company: Modernism, Celebrity, and Sophistication in *Vanity Fair*,” in *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, ed. Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 123–35.
35. “American Novelists Who Have Set Art Above Popularity,” *Vanity Fair*, 15 (January 1921), 55. Schueth also considers Cather’s appearance in this photo feature but mistakenly places it in 1922 and misses the appearance of Cather in the other photo features in 1921. “A Portrait of an Artist,” p. 56.
36. “The Apotheosis of Greenwich Village,” *Vanity Fair*, 15 (February 1921), 37.
37. “We Nominate for the Hall of Fame,” *Vanity Fair*, 16 (October 1921), 62.
38. Wilson, “Books of the Month: Mr. Bell, Miss Cather and Others,” *Vanity Fair*, 19 (October 1922), 26–27.
39. Walpole, “Realism and the New English Novel,” *Vanity Fair*, 20 (March 1923), 34.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
41. Lebowitz, p. 341.
42. Ingwersen and Ingwersen, pp. 11–12. Cather and other American readers did not learn of this aspect of his life history in the biographical sketch published with *Ditte, Girl Alive!*
43. See especially Lebowitz.
44. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout (New York: Vintage, 2013), p. 362.
45. Cather, “A New World Novelist in Europe,” *Vanity Fair*, 14 (July 1920), 41.