

WILLA CATHER AND THE PAST

When death came to Willa Cather in 1947, she left behind her a production of twelve novels and many distinguished short stories, not to mention some slight verse and some significant criticism¹. In the decade since her death, her position as an American fiction writer has become steadily more secure. And it is safe to say that in the years to come she will be looked back upon with more and more appreciation, and will eventually take her proper place among such other genuine American novelists of the first rank as Cooper, Hawthorne, Twain, James, and Faulkner. To me one key to her greatness, as it is in differing ways to theirs, is her sense of the past.

It was impossible for Willa Cather to understand today without an awareness of yesterday; in fact, she once remarked that she could write only when she stopped trying to do so and began to remember², and her companion Edith Lewis once wrote of her that «She

¹ The novels are as follows: *Alexander's Bridge* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), *O Pioneers!* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), *The Song of the Lark* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915; rev. ed., 1937), *My Antonia* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), *One of Ours* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), *A Lost Lady* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), *The Professor's House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940). Three important books of short stories are *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), containing «Coming, Aphrodite!», «The Diamond Mine», «A Gold Slipper», «Scandal», «Paul's Case», «A Wagner Matinée», «The Sculptor's Funeral», and «A Death in the Desert», some of which had been published much earlier; *Obscure Destinies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), containing «Neighbour Rosicky», «Old Mrs. Harris», and «Two Friends»; and *The Old Beauty and Others* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), containing «The Old Beauty», «The Best Years», and «Before Breakfast». The verse is collected in *April Twilights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923). The criticism is most easily read in *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936) and *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

² STANLEY J. KUNTZ and HOWARD HAYCRAFT, eds., *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), p. 258.

never altogether lost the past in the present»³. Like many other writers, Willa Cather made a false start, with her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*; she began to find herself only when she turned back to her own past, discovering it to be a literary mine. Three excellent novels were the outcome—*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*—all based solidly upon her Nebraska years. The last word in *My Ántonia* is the word *past*, and it occurs in this fine closing sentence, which expresses the narrator Jim's joy in remembering the subject Ántonia Shimerda: «Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past»⁴. Then came World War I, which almost destroyed not merely half a continent but time itself for Willa Cather⁵. Her response took the form of a transitional novel, *One of Ours*, beginning bitterly in the Nebraska of the generation after the heroic pioneers and during the time of the materialists, those of shallow feelings. Its hero, Claude Wheeler, is lost until he can board a troopship with the classical name the *Anchises* and voyage in time as well as space back to the Old World, where he sinks roots quickly into the ageless soil of France, but where also he dies young, in combat. Willa Cather was nearly fifty years of age when *One of Ours* was published, in 1922, the year which she later said marked approximately the time when the world «broke in two»⁶. The title of her next novel, *A Lost Lady*, is almost descriptive of herself at this period of her life, for like its heroine Marian Forrester, Willa Cather was nearly moorless following the war⁷. Next came *The Professor's House*, the central character of which is a history professor, not an English or art teacher, as one knowing the novelist's background

³ EDITH LEWIS, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 57.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 372.

⁵ She said as much when, in *The Professor's House*, discussing the death of Tom Outland, she wrote of the war which caused it as «one great catastrophe [which] swept away all youth and all palms, and almost Time itself»; *op. cit.*, p. 260. Quoted in E. K. BROWN, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, completed by LEON EDL (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 239, where see also footnote.

⁶ WILLA CATHER, *Not Under Forty*, p. V.

⁷ «Her [Willa Cather's] new anxieties coincided with middle life, and the very title and the substance of *A Lost Lady* suggested Willa Cather's sense of being adrift in a world with which she no longer felt in harmony»; BROWN, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

might have predicted. As he ages, the historian, as learned as Willa Cather herself, has difficulty coming to terms with his past and toys with the idea of suicide; but he survives and faces the future stoically. The last word in this novel is the word *future*. At this point, Willa Cather's fiction moves forward in a slightly different direction, as—after the unrepresentative short novel *My Mortal Enemy*—she turns to the past and explores in succession the American Southwest of 1850 to 1890 in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, late seventeenth-century Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock*; and—after a wistful glance back again to Nebraska in *Lucy Gayheart*—finally pre-Civil War Virginia, where she was born, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. It is interesting to append here the fact that in the seven years before her death, Willa Cather thought much though evidently she wrote rather little—and that little she ordered destroyed—of a short novel to be cast in fourteenth-century Avignon at the time of Pope Benedict XII⁸.

All of Willa Cather's fiction may be more profitably and more pleurably read, I think, if one of their keys—the past—is kept in mind. Over and over Willa Cather shows that life is impoverished when one is cut from his past and enriched when he finds and treasures it. Examples abound. Mr. Shimerda, father of *Antonia*, is too old to survive being transplanted from Czechoslovakia, with its nourishing talk of religion, nature, and music; so he kills himself on his miserable farm at Black Hawk, Nebraska. In *O Pioneers!* Carl Linstrum leaves the overpowering farm in his youth for life in the city, only to return home in his later years to Alexandra Bergson, the heroine, and be whole again. Thea Kronberg, whose struggle to become a brilliant operatic singer is told in *The Song of Lark*, receives necessary spiritual stimulus to continue her studies when, at one point in the novel, she is able to live briefly among the austere remains of the cliff-dwellers of the American Southwest. Claude Wheeler, the doomed American soldier in *One of Ours*,

⁸ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 190, 195-196; GEORGE N. KATES, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story", pp. 175-214, in WILLA CATHER, *Five Stories with an Article by George N. Kates on Miss Cather's Last, Unfinished, and Unpublished Avignon Story* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

faces east to France, and when he gets there he thinks about staying as a farmer after the War; his conclusion is summarized thus:

Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together⁹.

But the best example of one coming to an understanding with a far-reaching past is Father Jean Marie Latour, who in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* leaves his native, beloved France—which he never forgets—to sink roots in New Mexico and become part of an ageless tradition absorbing Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, and Americans.

In Willa Cather's short stories too the same point is made repeatedly. Thus, to take the first of three examples, in «A Wagner Matinée» the narrator witnesses nothing less than a resurrection when he takes his aunt, returned from a quarter-century on a frontier farm, to a musical program in Boston: the poor woman, once a competent musician herself, is so entranced that she wants never to leave the concert hall. And Harvey Merrick, the now-dead artist in «The Sculptor's Funeral,» has achieved victory because he ignored the crassness of his birthplace and escaped to link himself with his cultural heritage. Finally, «neighbour Rosicky,» hero of a story with that title and a man patterned closely after Willa Cather's father, survives migration to the New World not so much by adapting himself to a new way of life—though he does that well, once he begins farming—as by contentedly living over his past with anyone who will listen, and understand.

In a sense, the fiction of Willa Cather is a living over of her past. In her life there were four momentous emotional experiences, all of which she transmuted into art: (1) when she was about ten, she migrated from Virginia with her beloved parents to Red Cloud, Nebraska; (2) in early adulthood she followed a knowledge of literature with a university-town introduction to the world of opera and drama; (3) in 1902 she made the first of several trips to Europe,

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 406.

where she found France of an especial appeal¹⁰; and (4) in 1912 she discovered America's great Southwest. All of these stirring revelations made Willa Cather in subtle ways discontent with the mere present and anxious to explore the past. The form her exploration took was fiction, which we shall now consider under these headings: immigrants, art, Europe, and the Southwest.

Immigrants are important characters in the Nebraska novels and in several of the short stories. Having been uprooted herself at a tender age and thrust into an alien soil, Willa Cather was unusually sympathetic toward the problems of Czechs, Swedes, Russians, Germans, and other immigrants whom she portrays in her fiction. For example, in *My Ántonia* the narrator like Willa Cather leaves Virginia to move first to a farm and then to a town in Nebraska, where he observes tradition-rich European immigrants doing valiant battle to tame the raw land. The names alone of some of the characters in the novel suggest the diversity of their origins: Otto Fuchs, Ambrosch Shimerda, «Russian Peter,» Lena Lingard, Cuzak. As their stories unfold, often in elaborate flashbacks, the conclusion is clear that no one's past is escapable and further that no good person wants it to be. For instance, the narrator sees in his grandfather's hired hand Otto a man on whom a full past is broadly written, indeed, almost carved: his cheek is scarred, the top of one ear is gone, he can talk of Austria, of mining and cowpunching in the Far West, of carpentry and farming everywhere. For another instance, «Russian Peter» and his friend Pavel could talk, if they wished, of once feeding piecemeal to the pursuing wolves a wedding party off careening sleds in frozen Russia; this story from the past emerges only after Pavel has strained himself lifting timbers and lies dying in delirium. But a better section of *My Ántonia* is entitled «The Hired Girls,» so named because the foreign families were often obliged to send their older daughters from the farms to work as domestics for the more elegant, longer-established «American» townspeople. Willa Cather effectively praises the foreigners as follows:

¹⁰ See *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey: With an Introduction and Incidental Notes by George N. Kates* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our country were the first to become prosperous. After the fathers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbours — usually of like nationality — and the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve ¹¹.

A somewhat similar contrast is expressed in *One of Ours*, a novel also concerned in part with immigrant families, but here with the materialism of their descendents, of whom at a crucial point the hero Claude is described as thinking thus:

The people... had changed. He could remember when all the farmers in this community were friendly toward each other; now they were continually having lawsuits. Their sons were either stingy and grasping, or extravagant and lazy, and they were always stirring up trouble ¹².

Fortunately this gloomy note, struck by Willa Cather in her melancholy year of 1922,¹³ was not the last concerning her beloved Middlewest: it is refreshing to learn that in her final short story, entitled « The Best Years, » she pictured again what she called « the beautiful Nebraska land which lies between the Platte River and the Kansas line » ¹⁴; here it is the area in which is enacted the tragic but rewarding life of Lesley Fergusson, evidently of second- or third-generation Scandanavian extraction. The girl is a sixteen-year-old school teacher whose devotion binds together an assortment of children sent by farmers to a country school at Wild Rose. The whole story is a pastoral evocation of the author's never-forgotten childhood in Nebraska amid others also born elsewhere and migrant.

Her parents transported her through space to Nebraska, but Willa Cather by reading books and attending the theater moved herself through time back to previous epochs—to ante-bellum Vir-

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 200.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹³ And struck again a year later, when in *A Lost Lady* she pictures the gallant Captain Forrester and his kind yielding to the unscrupulous, pushing Ivy Peters and all that he symbolizes in the younger generation.

¹⁴ In *The Old Beauty and Others*, p. 75.

ginia, to Quebec during the reign of Louis XIV, to the time of the Spaniards in New Mexico, to medieval France, to Virgilian Italy. It is fashionable, I suppose, to regard the Nebraska of seventy years ago as backward, which it was in some ways but not intellectually: Willa Cather read English classics, repeatedly including Shakespeare and Bunyan, with both her grandmothers; she learned to read Latin at home, and she read it and Greek—Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Anacreon, etc.—with a friendly old dreamer in Red Cloud;¹⁵ and when she went on to the University at Lincoln, the theater there was the scene of superb performances by stars of stock companies—which performances, by the way, Willa Cather not only saw but also described maturely in her column for the *State Journal*.¹⁶ So it should not be surprising that even Willa Cather's earliest novels, those of the frontier, contain many references to the classics and to the theater. For example, *My Ántonia* has for its inscription the Virgilian pronouncement *Optima dies... prima fugit*, which indeed is one moral of the book. Jim, the narrator, goes to Lincoln to study under a brilliant young Latin scholar, who talks to him of Pompeii, of Virgil at Brindisi, of Dante's adoration of that «sweet teacher.» It is not by chance nor is it extravagant that a recent critic should call Willa Cather's Alexandra Bergson, heroine of *O Pioneers!*, «a kind of Earth Mother or Corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over the fruitful land,» and should also label as «a rustic goddess... Proserpine» her Lesley Fergusson of «The Best Years,» itself a story said to have «a fine pastoral freshness» and to be a «pastoral elegy.»¹⁷ Willa Cather read Virgil and other classical writers long and passionately, and their view of things was often hers.

And the fact that she attended the opera as devotedly as she read is proved by her splendid novel *The Song of the Lark*, in which Thea Kronberg, daughter of a Swedish minister in Colorado, rises above the restrictions of her home-town to become an opera singer as great as Willa Cather's obvious model, the American soprano

¹⁵ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 21-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷ DAVID DAICHES, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1951), pp. 28, 170, 171.

Olive Fremstad. Miss Lewis tells the curious story of Willa Cather's first meeting with Mme. Fremstad in 1913, during an abortive interview one afternoon in connection with a magazine article on opera which the novelist was preparing.¹⁸ The singer had returned late from a drive and was cold and too tired to talk above a whisper, and so the interview was postponed. That same night at the opera—*The Tales of Hoffmann* was being offered—while Willa Cather was telling her companion of Mme. Fremstad's condition, an announcement was made from the stage that the regular soprano had become sick and that Olive Fremstad would substitute; and she did, surprisingly and gloriously.¹⁹ Of this real-life incident Willa Cather made one of the most effective episodes in *The Song of the Lark*, in which Thea rushes to substitute as Sieglinde in Wagner's *Die Walküre*.

Among numerous short stories dealing with art folk, «The Diamond Mine» is one of the best. In it the much-married heroine, bearing the hoary name of Cressida but unlike Troilus's friend in most ways, is a veritable «diamond mine» to many people simply because «she appealed to the acquisitive instinct in men.»²⁰ Her warmly human life in America and Europe as an opera singer and a wife is superbly told in a series of flashbacks—flashbacks which are, as we shall see in a moment, proof in the realm of technique of the importance of the past in Willa Cather's thinking.

Europe had been near Willa Cather from her earliest consciousness, through family talk of Welsh and English ancestors, through her countless friendships in the Middlewest with immigrants of many racial strains, and through her reading in literature and history; therefore she was abundantly prepared for her first excited contact with the Old World, which came in 1902.

Characteristically, impressions gathered during this tour through England and down to France, together with memories of other vacations following it, were left to mellow in her richly stored un-

¹⁸ Willa Cather never wrote fiction based on her experiences as a writer of newspaper and magazine articles or as an editor—proof enough that she did not regard that work as part of her usable past.

¹⁹ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-92.

²⁰ In *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, p. 81.

conscious while she turned back to her childhood and youth in Nebraska to write her first novels. Not until *One of Ours* in 1922 did she take a fictional character back along her path to Europe. Soon, however, others followed army lieutenant Claude Wheeler. The history teacher Godfrey St. Peter, of *The Professor's House*, is given student days in France and Spain to live over in retrospect; Bishop Latour and his aide Father Joseph Vaillant of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are provided French backgrounds and several trips home and to Rome from their missionary area in the American Southwest; *Shadows on the Rock* is almost as much a study of people in late seventeenth-century France as it is of Frenchmen in Canada; and the titular heroine of *Lucy Gayheart* follows if only in imagination her lover Clement Sebastian's wider experience, which ends with his death by drowning in Lake Como.

To pursue her characters, Willa Cather went often to Europe herself, at least once mainly to revivify her impressions of Count Frontenac's quarter of Paris.²¹ This imaginative feat of walking into the past she was skilled in; as her biographer E. K. Brown writes, «Willa Cather had an extraordinary power of obliterating from a historic scene its modern encrustations. She had done so at Avignon, and at Paris, more recently at Santa Fe; she did so again at Quebec.»²² It should be obvious that she preferred the past to the encrusted present; in fact, one of her last short stories, suggestively entitled «The Old Beauty,» makes the point that before the First World War all things were better than they have been since. With Willa Cather, this was an old truism. Her essays, collected in 1936 under the provocative title *Not Under Forty*—meaning that readers under forty years of age would not understand them—touch in various ways upon it, perhaps most effectively in the essay «A Chance Meeting,» which describes Willa Cather's wonderful encounter with a precious relic from the past, Madame Franklin Grout, the *Caro* of Gustave Flaubert's *Lettres à sa Nièce*, and model of Gabrielle Lady Longstreet, heroine of «The Old Beauty.»

²¹ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 270.

But the most inspiring travel Willa Cather ever did was not to Europe at all but to the American Southwest, seeing which in 1912 for the first of many visits was in Brown's words « the principal emotional experience of... [her] mature life. »²³ She went out to Arizona to spend some time with Douglas Cather, one of her brothers, and with him she began to find the country. In Miss Lewis's words,

... a whole new landscape — not only a physical landscape, but a landscape of the mind, peopled with wonderful imaginings, opened out before her. They made one journey to Walnut Canyon, where there were some cliff-dwelling ruins. She had never seen any cliff-dwellings before; but she and her brothers had thought and speculated about them since they were children²⁴.

She had even written about the cliff-dwellings before seeing them; an early tale, « The Enchanted Bluff, » published in 1909 in *Harper's Magazine*, pictures a group of boys about a camp-fire vowing to seek out a huge, smooth-sided rock called the Enchanted Bluff and said to contain an abandoned Indian village, « away up there in the air. »²⁵ The boys never go; but Willa Cather did, and a major element in her fiction was the result. Thea Kronberg, heroine of *The Song of the Lark*, hears of the region from railroaders like—indeed, patterned after—Douglass Cather and his friends; later, in early maturity, when offered a chance Thea goes down to Panther Canyon in northern Arizona, to find herself—in time. Scene of only a fraction of *The Song of the Lark*, the Southwest is the locale of the solid middle third of *The Professor's House*. Just before the second book, called « Tom Outland's Story, » the bemused, past-ridden history professor, author himself of *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, is pictured as turning to the manuscript diary of his finest student, the now-dead Tom Outland. What follows is Outland's account of his discovery of a cliff-dweller establishment at the Blue Mesa. Thus Tom is seen as having lived the kind of adventure which for the most part the professor has only written about. It is of interest to note here that the fantastic discovery of the cliff-city by Outland

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

²⁵ In *Five Stories*, p. 10.

was based firmly upon historical fact: Willa Cather herself wrote a friend that

...the Blue Mesa (the Mesa Verde) actually was discovered by a young cowpuncher in just this way. The great explorer Nordenskjöld wrote a scientific book about this discovery, and I myself had the good fortune to hear the story of it from a very old man, brother of Dick Wetherell. Dick Wetherell as a young boy forded Mancos Rivier and rode into the Mesa after lost cattle. I followed the real story very closely in Tom Outland's narrative²⁶.

The Southwest is but one of several locales for Thea's story. And it accounts for but one-third of *The Professor's House*. But with *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, it is the whole novel; its past is made to come alive again there in a series of magnificent episodes and flashbacks. To realize the grip on Willa Cather of the past still living in that region, one has only to name over the subjects of certain key chapters in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: a Spanish bell cast in 1356, the vision of Guadalupe, Kit Carson, an immemorial wooden parrot, the legend of Fray Baltazar, the Fort Bent massacre, the discovery of gold under Pike's Peak, and throughout the narrative the missionary careers of Father Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant, fictional counterparts of real-life Bishops Jean Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf.

It is of course obvious that all writers use experiences from their past, but it is, I think, now clearer that Willa Cather was more than ordinarily conscious of the past when she wrote; and her usable past, as I have tried to show, included a youth spent in observing immigrants in the Middlewest to which she herself was a migrant, further a youth and indeed a long lifetime devoted to art as it came down in many forms from the past to her, repeated visits to old Europe for rest and stimulation and even sustenance, and finally nothing less than adoration of America's past as reflected in her Southwest.

Before I finish, let me now make two germane points concerning Willa Cather's technique in writing: one, as I have insufficiently suggested, she used real-life persons, known to her through observation or reading, as models for her created figures; and two, she

²⁶ *Willa Cather on Writing*, p. 32.

indirectly shows the operation of the past in the present by use of flashbacks.

We know through Miss Lewis and others familiar with Willa Cather's method that the novelist habitually placed relatives, friends, celebrities, and historical personages in her fiction. This is not to imply that she was deficient in inventive powers but only that she was — in words applied elsewhere by Henry James — one on whom nothing was lost. Let us begin with her immediate family for a few examples. Her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, became Rachel Blake in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, cast in Virginia, where the author had spent her early childhood²⁷. Her father provided a few of Mr. Templeton's traits in « Old Mrs. Harris », while Rosicky's fatal heart ailment in « Neighbour Rosicky » is identical to that of the novelist's father; further, the father-daughter relationships so moving in *Shadows on the Rock* and *Lucy Gayheart*, among other works, are partly autobiographical²⁸. The original of Mahailey, the queer old servant of the Wheelers in *One of Ours*, was Margie Anderson, who worked for the Cathers in Virginia, went with them to Nebraska, and stayed on until she died²⁹. Almost the entire Cather family is re-created in « The Best Years »³⁰. As for friends — the real Antonia Shimerda was Annie Sadilek, a Red Cloud hired girl; Thea Kronberg's friend Dr. Archie was drawn with a Nebraska physician named McKeeby occasionally in mind; Louie Marcellus, the somewhat unctuous but not really repellent son-in-law of Professor St. Peter, was modeled on Jan Hambourg, violinist husband of Willa Cather's intimate friend Isabelle McClung³¹. Eusabio, the Navajo Indian in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, who has « a face like a Roman general's of Republican times »³²,

²⁷ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, p. 4. « She had often been urged to write a Virginia novel; but for a long time some sort of inhibition — a reluctance, perhaps, to break through to those old memories that seemed to belong to another life — had deterred her; though she sometimes spoke of incidents, stories of the Virginia years, which she might write about some day »; LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.

²⁸ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6; BROWN, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-276, 297.

²⁹ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196; GEORGE N. KATES, ed., *Willa Cather in Europe*, p. 142.

³¹ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 25, 27; BROWN, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

is thought to have been patterned in large measure after Tony, the Indian husband of another friend, Mabel Luhan, who had a hacienda at Taos³³. Nor did public figures past and present escape Willa Cather's alchemy. The state and the background are altered, but it is apparent that the original of *A Lost Lady* was Nebraska Governor Silas Garber's wife³⁴; Olive Fremstad, the opera singer, I have already mentioned. Drawn with Willa Cather's father partly in mind, Cécile's father Euclide Auclair, of *Shadows on the Rock*, is also given many of the professional characteristics of Michael Sarrazin, an early Canadian naturalist³⁵. In the same novel, Count Louis de Buade de Frontenac is a real-life personage deriving largely from Francis Parkman's history of the British and French in North America; Bishop Laval derives not from the unsympathetic treatment of him by Parkman but from the friendlier researches of Abbé Henri Arthur Scott, whose writing and conversation on the subject Willa Cather knew intimately³⁶. One has only to repeat the names of Bishops Lamy and Machebeuf, prototypes of Bishops Latour and Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* — as I have said — to make complete enough a list of real models for Willa Cather's fictional creations, a list which could be extended almost indefinitely.

Likewise, a listing of flashbacks in the fiction could be prolonged until half the major episodes were identified, so popular a technical device did the flashback become in the hands of Willa Cather. Often the flashback is short and simple, as when for example Lucy Gayheart later remembers — and we learn for the first time — how she left Chicago as soon as possible after hearing the news of Sebastian's death by drowning; or when the whole story of the dying slave woman Jezebel is finally told in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a novel by the way containing almost a dozen such episodes from earlier times. Occasionally the pattern of a narrative is a combination of a loose forward motion in time with seemingly artless digressions into previous decades, and centuries. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

³³ LEWIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

³⁵ BROWN, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-274.

is so constructed — recall Fray Baltazar and Father Junipero, for two instances — and so is *Shadows on the Rock*, with the stories so given of such lowly or great persons as Count Frontenac's drummer boy Giorgio, Blinker a former torturer for the king, the religious recluse Jeanne Le Ber, and the young Bishop Jean Baptiste de la Croix de Chevières de Saint-Vallier. By the time of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Willa Cather's last novel, the flashback technique has become so skillfully managed that to me the digressions are more interesting than the main action, which might almost be said to exist only to support them.

The controlled release of information through flashbacks during an entire novel is exciting when employed by an expert. For two examples, let me mention *A Lost Lady* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* a final time. Through all of the former novel we wonder how Captain Forrester met Marian, his wife and the lady of the title; only in the last significant flashback do we learn. And early in the latter novel it is hinted that once long ago Latour inestimably aided Vaillant during a spiritual crisis; not until the last book are we sufficiently prepared, Willa Cather seems to say, to understand the implications of that crisis, and so not until then — fifteen pages before the end of the entire novel — does she open that window on the past.

I must not leave anyone with the mistaken impression that Willa Cather foolishly turned her back on the present and dreamily lived in the never-neverland of the past. She was alive to her age, witnessed courage in it, and met the illustrious of it. But when she saw idealism and initiative weakening as the generations advanced, she concluded ever more strongly that the past — perhaps without ever really containing « the good old days » so celebrated in anecdote — was best, best because the epic pioneers of the Middlewest were better than their sons and grandsons, best because no one age can produce more than one or two supremely fine artists and the past is full of ages, and best because then — whether in Europe or in the American Southwest — roots were deeper in time.

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