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Introduction

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"LIFE BEGAN FOR ME," Willa Cather once said, "when I ceased to admire and began to remember."[1] Her artistic power was also born when she moved from admiration to memory. But this was a long process. Cather began writing fiction as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska in the early 1890s; in her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), she was still writing as an admirer of the great writers who preceded her. Honoring in particular the fiction of Henry James, whom she once referred to as the "mighty master of language," Cather set her novel in the Jamesian drawing rooms of London and Boston.[2]

In *O Pioneers!*, published a year later in 1913, Cather began her literary breakthrough, returning to the Nebraska cornfields and inventing a character new to American fiction – a strong, creative woman who (unlike the heroines of Henry James) is not rebuked for her independant-mindedness. Cather continued to take what she called "the road home" in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), her novel of a woman artist's emergence from a Western background much like her own.[3]

It was in *My Ántonia* (1918), however, that Cather most fully transformed memory into art. She dedicated the novel to two friends of childhood, Carrie and Irene Miner, "in memory of affections old and true." Many friends from her Red Cloud childhood inspired characters in her novel – most notably the Bohemian "hired girl," Annie Pavelka, who was the source for Ántonia Shimerda.[4] The story of narrator Jim Burden's childhood uprooting from Virginia and transplanting to Nebraska was also Cather's own. Of course the novel is fiction, drawing on life but

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transforming it into art. Yet in *My Ántonia* Cather not only drew more deeply on her Nebraska past than she ever would again; she also made the role of memory in shaping the past central to the novel's design – memory infiltrated by the transformative energies of imagination and desire.

Cather spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Red Cloud, a small Nebraska prairie town, and graduated from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1895. She then moved east, working as a journalist and a teacher in Pittsburgh and moving to New York City in 1906 to take up a staff position at *McClure's Magazine*. Eventually Cather became managing editor, before plunging full time into writing in 1912. Investing herself in a literary and professional world dominated by East Coast values, Cather at first saw no way to link her regional past with her hopes for an artistic future. During the early 1900s, she said later, Nebraska was considered "declassé" as a literary background by snobbish Eastern critics; no one who was anyone "cared a damn" about Nebraska, no matter who wrote about it.[5]

Willa Cather was shaped by nineteenth-century assumptions about gender as well as region. Confronted by an ideology of femininity that associated womanhood with domesticity – not authorship – for many years Cather associated artistic greatness with masculinity. She did not have "much faith in women in literature," she claimed in 1895. "As a rule, if I see the announcement of a new book by a woman, I – well, I take one by a man instead. . . . I have noticed that the great masters of letters are men, and I prefer to take no chances when I read."[6] But as long as Cather did not have much faith in women writers, she could not have much faith in her own literary talent. Her acceptance of a patriarchal culture's disparagement of women writers inevitably delayed her own artistic emergence.

Central to Cather's evolution as woman and writer was the respected Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett, whom Cather met in 1908. Jewett was Cather's guide at the crucial transitional moment in her life, supporting her as she found both her voice as a writer and her literary road home to Nebraska. A woman and a gifted writer herself, Jewett helped Willa Cather to see that these identities could coexist in herself.

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Although Jewett – best known for *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) – outranked the younger writer in literary achievements, their brief friendship, which lasted until Jewett's death in 1909, was marked by mutuality. Jewett was mentor to Cather's emerging creativity; at the same time, Cather gave Jewett the chance to find a literary heir. "One of the few really helpful words I ever heard from an older writer," Cather said in 1922, "came from Jewett, who said, Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish."[7]

Cather dedicated *O Pioneers!* to Jewett, and she easily could have dedicated *My Ántonia* as well, for the novel reflects both Jewett's advice and her example. In *My Ántonia* Cather returns to her own country for inspiration, and there she, like Jewett, finds creative power in the folk art of storytelling, a creative inspiration that we can trace in Willa Cather's life back to her birthplace in Virginia.

* * * * *

Although we associate Willa Cather with the Nebraska landscape she evokes so powerfully in *My Ántonia*, she spent her childhood in the enclosed green world of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Born in the small farming community of Back Creek, Virginia, in 1873, the eldest of seven children of Charles and Virginia Cather, Willa Cather found her first introduction to narrative in the storytelling of local women who came to the Cather farmhouse, Willow Shade, to help with the canning, preserving, and quilting. Many of these stories Willa Cather "remembered all her life," her partner Edith Lewis recalls; they would finally shape the last book published in her lifetime, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), the novel in which she most fully returned to her Southern inheritance.[8]

In 1883 Charles Cather decided to join his father and brother, who were farming in Nebraska. So the young Willa was uprooted from the gentle, sheltering landscape she loved and "thrown out" into a country "as bare as a piece of sheet iron." She experienced an "erasure of personality" during her first

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months in Nebraska, almost dying, she later said, from homesickness.[9] In *My Ántonia* Cather gives this experience of uprooting and transplantation to Jim Burden, who shares her initial sense of Nebraska's bleak immensity:

> There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land. . . . (7)

Eventually Cather came to love her new home. The wide expanse of prairie gave her a sense of freedom rather than annihilation, and her exhilaration with the West's open spaces lasted a lifetime. "When I strike the great open plains, I'm home," she would say. "That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea – it's the grand passion of my life."[10]

Helping Cather to feel at home on the prairies were the immigrant farmers who had come to the Midwest to start over; like the young Cather, they were surviving the trauma of uprooting and resettlement. She was surrounded by a far more varied ethnic mix of people than she had experienced in the more homogenous culture of the Shenandoah Valley – Scandinavians, French, Russians, Germans, and Bohemians farmed alongside native-born Americans. Cather particularly loved to spend time with the immigrant pioneer women, who replaced the storytellers of Willow Shade, telling her stories about their European homelands, just as Ántonia tells Jim about Bohemia.

Even after the Cather family moved to the small prairie town of Red Cloud in 1884, Cather kept up these attachments. She also found herself drawn to the daughters of these immigrant women, the "hired girls" like Annie Sadilek, later Annie Pavelka. In Red Cloud Cather formed other new friendships with native-born Americans, in particular the daughters of the Miner family, Carrie and Irene. In *My Ántonia* Carrie is transformed into Frances Harling, and Mrs. Miner, for whom Annie Sadilek worked, becomes Mrs. Harling – the only exact fictional portrait Cather claimed to have drawn. Cather also drew on her grandparents William and Caroline Cather for the portrait of Jim Burden's grandparents; and an occasional visitor to Red Cloud, the

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black pianist Blind Boone, became the model for the novel's Blind d'Arnault.

Transforming her own experiences into Jim Burden's narrative, reworking Nebraska friends and acquaintances into the fictional weave, in this novel Cather drew most profoundly on her childhood memories – which may be the reason why, of all her fiction, *My Ántonia* was the novel about which she cared most deeply.

Yet *My Ántonia* is neither a childhood memoir nor a "young adult" book (despite its popularity on high school reading lists): it is a midlife novel about childhood. Like Jim Burden, Cather needed emotional, aesthetic, and chronological distance from her Nebraska past in order to write about it. Cather's creative process was based on loss. In order to write, she needed to feel the desire to possess and recreate what was missing or absent. So the creative process for her was joyous in that she could, in memory and imagination, bring to life what was gone; but it was also always and inevitably imbued with sadness. What is lost can be remembered and transformed into art, but it cannot ever be recaptured. We can see this doubleness in Jim's first-person narrative, which dramatizes Cather's own creative process. During the act of writing the past comes alive for him again: phrases like "I can see them now," or "they are with me still" recur throughout the novel. "They were so much alive in me," Jim says of the Black Hawk friends he brings with him in memory to Lincoln "that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how" (262). And yet there is a melancholy tone to *My Ántonia*, reflected in the epigraph from Virgil – "*optima dies prima fugit,*" the best days are the first to flee. Some losses are permanent; time, change and death must be accepted if we are also to accept life.

Willa Cather was well aware of the reality of loss during the writing of *My Ántonia*. In 1916 Isabelle McClung, her closest friend, creative companion, and romantic love of her life, announced that she was going to marry the violinist Jan Hambourg. This was a terrible blow to Cather. She had lived with Isabelle during her Pittburgh years, and after her move to New York had returned to Pittsburgh for long visits. Isabelle had

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known how to nurture her friend's creativity; Cather wrote most of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* in the sanctuary Isabelle lovingly created for her. In her art, Cather never wrote directly of the love between women – she was well aware of her culture's definition of lesbianism as "unnatural" – but in life her deepest emotional bonds would always be with women. Of these, her bond with Isabelle was the most significant. To lose Isabelle was like a divorce, or a death. When she spoke with her friend Elizabeth Sergeant about the marriage, her eyes were "vacant" and her face "bleak." "All her natural exuberance had drained away," Sergeant remembers.[11]

Throughout the spring of 1916 Cather remained grieving and depressed. She had an idea for a new novel (which would later become *My Ántonia*) but no interest or energy: her creativity was as dead as Nebraska's winter landscape seems to Jim Burden.

But Cather was resilient in both her life and her art. In the summer of 1916 she travelled west and spent several months in Red Cloud, renewing attachments with family and old friends, including Annie Pavelka – the inspiration for Ántonia and the spark for her next novel. Isabelle's marriage was a hard blow, and she would always feel the loss, but the rest of the world was still there, as was Cather's creative power.

When Cather returned to New York, *My Ántonia* was ready to emerge. She spent several months writing happily in the city before finding a new summer retreat to replace Pittsburgh – the Shattuck Inn in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. There she pitched a tent in a friend's meadow. This became the morning retreat where she wrote *My Ántonia* – "an ideal arrangment," recalls Edith Lewis:

> The tent was about half a mile from the Inn, by an unused wood road, and across a pasture or two. Willa Cather loved this solitary half-mile walk through the woods, and found it the best possible prelude to a morning of work. She wrote for two or three hours every day, surrounded by complete silence and peace.[12]

We can see Cather's recent as well as remote experiences of loss and change threading their way through *My Ántonia* – not just in Jim's yearning for a golden past and Ántonia's transfor-

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mation from a "lovely girl" into a "battered woman" (353), but also in violent and disturbing episodes that may reflect Cather's anger at loss: the suicide of Mr. Shimerda, Ántonia's seduction and betrayal, the brutal story of Pavel and Peter, the villainy of Wick Cutter.

But Cather's own renewal of creative energy is also evident in the novel it produced. In *My Ántonia* she affirms the power of people to weave the sadness of loss – of homelands, of loved friends and family, of childhood, of the past – into the web of ongoing life by telling stories. Foremost is Cather's own story, the novel we read; but there is also Jim's story, the manuscript we read after the Introduction; and within Jim's story are many other stories, like the Bohemian folk tales Ántonia tells, the story of Pavel and Peter (which she translates for him), the story of Wick Cutter's death (which her children tell to Jim), the story of Ántonia's seduction as told by the Widow Steavens, the stories Ántonia and her children tell while they look at old photographs, and the stories of Jim that Ántonia has been telling her children during his twenty-year absence.

Just as the novel demonstrates the connection between loss and creativity, so it shows us the link between the oral and the written, the folk narrative and the novel. In *My Ántonia* Cather honors the oral tradition of storytelling that nourished both the child and the writer. But oral narrative is more vulnerable to time and change than written narrative; after a while, stories may die out if there are no inheritors to keep telling them. And written narratives can also disappear if they do not find an audience through the act of publication.

Willa Cather was able successfully to transform the oral narrative into written form, thus giving one kind of permanence to the stories she heard, inherited, and created. By 1917, she was a well-known writer with literary power and authority. So she was also able to negotiate the transformation of her written manuscript into a published novel that embodied her own creative vision, guiding *My Ántonia* from the inner realm of the writer's desk into the outer world of contracts, book design, and advertising. The novel's publishing history is a fascinating one, and reveals how Cather struggled to unite the role of writer with that

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of author, and to integrate the private space of composition with the public space of commerce.

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Cather's first publisher was the Boston-based firm of Houghton Mifflin, inheritors of Ticknor and Fields, the nineteenth-century Boston publishers who brought Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Jewett, and Stowe to the American reading public. Houghton Mifflin thus was associated in Cather's mind both with her mentor Sarah Orne Jewett (and with Jewett's companion Annie Fields, widow of James Fields, partner in the original publishing company) and with the New England–dominated American literary canon. So in 1912, when Cather brought *Alexander's Bridge* to Houghton Mifflin, she was associating herself with publishers who were the inheritors and disseminators of American literary culture. In joining their literary family, Cather was becoming a descendant of Hawthorne and Emerson as well as of Jewett.

The publishing industry in the early twentieth century, like the author's relationship to editor and publisher, was a complex, contradictory enterprise, at once public and private, commercial and aesthetic. Houghton Mifflin, for example, viewed itself not as a corporation but as a cultural institution dedicated to furthering American letters, fostering authors, and bringing good books to the general reader. (Of course, it was not dedicated to these aims at the expense of profit.) Publishing companies like Houghton Mifflin liked to imagine themselves more as families than as corporate enterprises, seeking to honor noneconomic motives and relationships while at the same time managing healthy sales. The uneasy compromise such publishers envisioned between their commerical and familial motives is suggested by the very term they used to describe themselves: ''houses'' rather than ''companies'' (this older image is still anachronistially preserved in ''Random House'' and its family-dwelling logo). Publishing houses like Houghton Mifflin hoped for familial relationships between editors and authors, based on mutual respect for writing rather than the profit motive. Indeed, when Cather's editor Fer-

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ris Greenslet wrote her of his sadness at her decision to leave Houghton Mifflin for Knopf, he used the imagery of home and family: perhaps someday she would return, he hoped – the latch-string at Park Street would always be open, and she could come back any time she wished.[13]

During her Houghton Mifflin years Cather at first played the deferential role of the grateful daughter to Ferris Greenslet, welcoming his editorial suggestions and praising his advice. But as she began to accrue positive reviews for *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, she became more assertive and began to challenge the publisher's inadequacies. Cather shared Houghton Mifflin's sometimes contradictory definition of the meaning of the book. She wanted her books to sell, so that she could support herself as a full-time writer. Yet she did not want her books to be treated as interchangeable commodities, or to be grouped with popular writers who turned out one formulaic best seller after another. She wanted to be an individual artist, and for each of her novels to have its own unique vision; at the same time she wanted Houghton Mifflin to promote her work actively and to make her a writer honored by the press and supported by the public.

When she began writing *My Ántonia* in 1916, Cather was beginning to be unhappy with Houghton Mifflin, suspecting that her publisher was committed neither to the aesthetic quality nor to the commercial success of her books. Disturbed by what she considered Houghton Mifflin's careless attitude toward her books' appearance, she wanted to influence both design and production – cover, book jacket, typeface, paper, binding.

Cather's desire to determine the aesthetic shape of the book as a whole reached a height with *My Ántonia*. In addition to stating her preferences for the cover (darker blue than *The Song of the Lark*) and book jacket (bright yellow, with heavy black lettering), Cather commissioned a series of line drawings from the artist W. T. Benda to illustrate her manuscript. Born in Bohemia, Benda had spent a good deal of time in the American West, and Cather felt his imaginative vision was consonant with hers. When Houghton Mifflin balked at paying for Benda's drawings, Cather became increasingly frustrated at what she considered her publisher's stingy disregard for her aesthetic decisions. Cather

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had originally imagined twelve illustrations, but Houghton Mifflin agreed to such a small payment – $150 – that she could commission only eight.

Her correspondance with editor Ferris Greenslet and Houghton Mifflin's art department reveals how strongly Cather wanted to shape *My Ántonia* visually as well as verbally. Benda executed the sketches according to Cather's guidelines: she wanted simple pen-and-ink drawings that would resemble old woodcuts, because she knew the purity of her novel would be jarred by illustrations that seemed too flashy, slick, or sentimental. At first she thought she wanted "head and tail" pieces – illustrations inserted at the beginning or end of a chapter – but then decided that each illustration required a separate page, adding to the impression of woodcuts. The blank space was also part of the design, Cather decided; she told the art department to print the illustrations low on the page, so the reader could sense the presence of air and space overhead. She also wanted the drawings on right-hand pages, juxtaposed to the part of the text they illustrated, and printed in the same black ink.[14]

Even though Houghton Mifflin eventually followed her instructions, Cather felt her publisher never understood how aesthetically central the Benda illustrations were to her novel's design. After leaving Houghton Mifflin Cather had to fight to keep the Benda illustrations in later editions. The publisher dropped the illustrations in a cheap 1930 reprint, which Cather considered an unauthorized edition of *My Ántonia*. In 1937 Ferris Greenslet wanted to replace Benda's sketches with fancier color plates by Grant Wood, finally backing down after Cather objected strenuously.[15]

Her letters to Greenslet concerning *My Ántonia* are filled with complaints about advertising, reviewing, stocking, and promotion. You are more committed to the fiction of Clara Louise Burnham than to mine, she complained to Greenslet, referring to a best-selling novelist whose formulaic novels pleased the popular taste. Her assumption that Houghton Mifflin failed to recognize her literary stature was not dispelled when Greenslet told her that *My Ántonia* might have significant sales as a children's book.[16]

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