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PREVIEW

FINDING HER WAY:
WILLA CATHER'S POETICS OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

by

Steven B. Shively

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Susan J. Rosowski

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1997

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Finding Her Way: Willa Cather's Poetics of Religious Expression

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FINDING HER WAY:
WILLA CATHER'S POETICS OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

Steven B. Shively, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1997

Adviser: Susan J. Rosowski

Drawing on methodologies from cultural studies and New Historicism, along with theories of narrative, this dissertation explores the various uses Willa Cather made of religious forms of expression in her writing. A review of Cather's known religious associations and practices establishes the pivotal role religion played in forming her artistic principles. Her writing from the first half of her career--before "the world broke in two," in 1922 as she put it--reveals that she selected religious forms of discourse that would help communicate her ideas as they illustrated how to join art and religion.

Cather brought to her early journalistic commentaries on literature, art, music, and culture, a traditional religious heritage including familiarity with the Bible and other religious texts. In this writing she progressed from mimicking an inherited literary tradition to developing her own unique aesthetic credo anchored in the language of religion.

In her fiction, Cather uses religious expression to set her writing in a philosophical and aesthetic tradition. In O Pioneers! Cather writes out of the prophetic tradition,

particularly the biblical book of Isaiah, establishing Alexandra Bergson as a visionary who can lead the reconciliation necessary to reestablish hope after tragedy. In The Song of the Lark Cather uses eucharistic imagery and language to explain the power of her female artist; in particular, she reclaims from secular usage the religious meanings of passion and sacrifice. Cather draws on the form of the parable in My Antonia, thus blending the power of religion and story to create a model of community-building based on shared experience. In One of Ours Cather presents religion as a tool of war and Prohibition propagandists; she thus provides a critique of the use of religious discourse for non-artistic purposes.

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I also thank my parents, Bob and Nancy Shively, whose generosity and support have made my education possible.

Chapter three of this dissertation was published in slightly different form as "'A Full, Perfect, and Sufficient Sacrifice': Eucharistic Imagery in Cather's The Song of the Lark" in Literature and Belief 14 (1994): 73-86.

List of Abbreviations

- IP Willa Cather in Person
- KA The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896.
- MA My Antonia . 1926 edition.
- NUF Not Under Forty.
- OO One of Ours.
- OP O Pioneers!.
- OW Willa Cather on Writing.
- SOL Song of the Lark. 1915 edition.
- TG The Troll Garden.
- WCPM Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational
Foundation
- WP The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Review, 1893-1902.
- YM Youth and the Bright Medusa.

Introduction

Willa Cather had much to say about religion, and critics have had much to say about religion in her work. Those who admire Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock as great novels of Christian faith celebrate her as a religious writer who affirmed long-standing sacred values. Others find in her writing support for an opposite view: they are attuned to her characterization of religion as petty, hypocritical, and antagonistic to the purposes of art in works like the short story "Eric Hermannson's Soul" and the novels Song of the Lark and One of Ours.¹ The subject of religion is so pervasive, so varied, and so paramount in Cather's writing that there is little risk that labeling Willa Cather a religious writer will limit her reputation as labeling her a regional writer did earlier in the century.

Not unexpectedly, given the breadth and emotionalism of the topic, misunderstandings, contradictions, and errors abound, some dating to when Cather was alive: there have been claims that Cather was an atheist and that she was Roman Catholic, neither true; her confirmation in 1922 into the Episcopal Church has been improperly labeled a conversion; it has been argued that she did not discover a religion of belief until her old age; others argue that her

religious associations were based on an appreciation of history and aesthetics, and even family obligation, rather than on any fundamental system of belief.²

As yet there is no book-length study of Cather and religion, but the most comprehensive biographies--Willa Cather Living, by Edith Lewis; Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, by E.K. Brown and Leon Edel; The World of Willa Cather, by Mildred Bennett; and Willa Cather: A Literary Life, by James Woodress--provide important details relevant to Cather's religious background. Two dissertations provide comprehensive information about this aspect of Cather's art: "Biblical Allusions in the Fiction of Willa Cather," by Audrey M. Fetty in 1973, and "Seeking Is Finding: Willa Cather and Religion," by L. Brent Bohlke in 1982. Fetty's dissertation is valuable for confirming and cataloging the extent to which Cather drew on the Bible. Bohlke's dissertation (supplemented by several journal articles he authored) is sweeping as a biographical exploration of what he calls Cather's "pilgrimage" of religious life. Bernice Slote's commentary on Cather's early critical statements, "The Kingdom of Art," explores the philosophical traditions, including religion, that lie at the heart of Cather's artistry; Slote's collection of Cather's early writing, The Kingdom of Art, and William Curtin's two-volume collection of material from the same period, The World and the Parish, provide examples from Cather's own writing of how religion

resonates throughout her early work.

Religion is a particularly important touchstone in three early critical studies of Cather's work: The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value, by John H. Randall; Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, by Edward and Lillian Bloom; and Music in Willa Cather's Fiction, by Richard Giannone. More recently, books on Cather in which religion is a central issue include Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus, by Mary Ruth Ryder; Sacred Fire: Willa Cather's Novel Cycle, by Evelyn Helmick Hively; and Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire, by Guy Reynolds.

In 1988 John Murphy noted in his Foreword to a special issue of Literature and Belief devoted entirely to the subject of religion in Cather that "religion is one of Cather's flood subjects" (1). Murphy deserves special mention for keeping religion in the forefront of Cather studies, both as a writer of several articles and as editor of Critical Essays on Willa Cather, Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History, and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter. Murphy's use of "flood" is appropriate for Cather's writing about religion, but it also fits the subject of religion in the Cather critical canon. The rich body of scholarship considers an overwhelming range of topics from mythic spirituality to medieval ritual to the Trinity to miracles. Scholars wishing to explore how

various critics have dealt with the subject of religion in Cather's work would do well to begin with Marilyn Arnold's Willa Cather: A Reference Guide; this comprehensive work, which covers scholarship to 1984, includes in its index over fifty entries under the categories of "religion" and "faith." For books and articles published since 1984, Western American Literature provides an annual bibliography of studies in Western American Literature, which includes Cather. The wealth of critical material discussing Cather and religion shows no sign of abatement; in fact, the subject continues to promise new and illuminating insights.

The biographical details of Willa Cather's life indicate the broad and pervasive influence of religion. She was reared a Baptist; from various Presbyterian and Anglican backgrounds most of her ancestors had become Baptists before the Civil War. From earliest childhood, Cather's grandparents and parents read to her from the Bible and gave her instructions in the faith. The family attended Baptist services in Virginia and continued to do so after moving to Nebraska when Willa was nine years old. During 1983-84, her first year in Nebraska, Willa, with her parents and brothers, attended what was called the Lebanon Sabbath School, a group that met at the Catherton Schoolhouse and that had been organized in 1880 by Willa's aunt and uncle, who preceded her family to Nebraska. The record of the Lebanon Sabbath School reveals that various Cather

relatives, including Willa's grandparents, served as officers and teachers of the Sunday School as well as making up a significant portion of the attendees. This group was officially non-demoninational, but the officers ordered their teaching materials from the American Baptist Publication Society in Chicago. While there is no indication of a regular pastor or of any effort to build a church building, the Lebanon Sabbath School functioned like a small church--collections designated for mission work were taken, church periodicals were ordered and studied, and visiting preachers occasionally provided a sermon and fulfilled other religious functions. In addition, Cather family letters indicate that prayer meetings and revivals were held in the neighborhood from time to time. After Willa's family moved to Red Cloud and joined the small Baptist church there, local papers periodically took note of Miss Willie Cather's performances in Sunday School programs and church socials, celebrating her elocutionary prowess.³

Willa Cather remained at least nominally a Baptist during her years at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and during the early years of her journalism and teaching career in Pittsburgh (Bohlke 71). A college classmate who later became a Baptist minister noted in a letter to the editor in 1923 that Cather had been a regular attendant at Lincoln's First Baptist Church during her first year of college (Elmore). Prominently located near the state

capitol building, this church was a large, solid structure of red brick and stone with spires, an impressive steeple, gold leaf chandeliers, and stained glass windows of shepherds and angels.⁴

Despite their connections with the Baptist Church, the Cathers were ecumenical in their approach to religion. Letters between various family members--sometimes between people in Nebraska and people in Virginia, other times between people in different parts of Virginia--reveal an interest in the religious activities of various denominations.⁵ These letters indicate that Cather family members attended services or meetings associated with the Baptists, of course, but also with the United Brethren, the Quakers, the Presbyterians, and the Methodists. Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, died a devout Baptist after converting in the 1850s, but her Episcopal prayer book, donated to the WCPM by her great-granddaughter, reveals a lifetime of use (Bennett, "Cather and Religion" 12). Cather recalled the religious diversity of Nebraska in the 1880s, suggesting an appreciation for many forms of worship:

On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church. We could go to the French Catholic settlement in the next county and hear a sermon in French, or into the Bohemian

township and hear one in Czech, or we could go to church with the German Lutherans. There were, of course, American congregations also. ("Nebraska" 237)

In Red Cloud, Willa's mother occasionally hosted the women of the local Episcopal church in her home, a matter duly noted by the local newspaper in 1886 and 1889. On March 8, 1889, the Red Cloud Chief reported a benefit entertainment at the opera house for the Episcopal Church; among the performers were Mary Miner, a Catholic; Nellie Adlesheim, who was Jewish; and Willa Cather and her cousin Bess Seymour, both Baptists.

Shortly after moving to New York City in 1906, Cather began regularly attending services at the Church of the Ascension, a large Episcopal church in her Greenwich Village neighborhood (Lewis 151). She was not unfamiliar with Episcopalianism; during her college years in Lincoln she had attended church with her friends the Canfields and the Geres, both families being members of the denomination. She had attended Christ Church Episcopal in Beatrice when she visited her friend Katherine Weston, and in 1891, when Weston visited Red Cloud, they heard services conducted by the Reverend Myers at Grace Episcopal Church.⁶ At the Church of the Ascension, Cather enjoyed the music of organist Jessie Craig Adam and also had a personal friendship with the rector of the church, Percy Stickney

Grant (Lewis 152). She admired the John LaFarge mural of Christ's ascension and the bas-relief angels by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Perhaps because her secretary was available for work on Sunday mornings, Cather's attendance was usually at Sunday evening vesper services.⁷ While the Episcopal Church was notorious for attracting social-climbers more concerned with public image than religious devotion, there is no indication that such was the case with Cather. The Church of the Ascension, while aesthetically pleasing, was much less ostentatious than Grace Church, which was only three blocks from Ascension. The Rev. Grant had built a private stairway to his office so that prominent parishioners could have access to him without going through more public reception areas, a move that probably would have appealed to Cather.⁸ According to Dess Sherwood, a Red Cloud parishioner, Cather always arrived late to church so that she could avoid talking to anyone (Bennett, "Cather and Religion" 11).

Cather's association with the Episcopal Church paralleled that of the rest of her family. Back in Nebraska the Cathers had been migrating to the Episcopal Church themselves. Beginning with the 1906 confirmation of Willa's sister Elsie, all significant religious ceremonies of the Cathers--confirmations, marriages, burials--were Episcopalian (Bohlke 292-93). Willa Cather and her parents cultivated friendships with the Episcopal Bishop of Western

Nebraska, the Rt. Rev. George Beecher, and with the rector of Red Cloud's Grace Church, the Rev. John Mallory Bates, a man of distinguished achievement in botany as well as in the mission field of the church. When Willa and her parents made their association with the Episcopal Church official at a confirmation service in 1922, they had already been practicing members for many years. Willa Cather continued to maintain her membership in Grace Church in Red Cloud for the rest of her life, frequently sending contributions to the altar guild and the church and providing stained glass windows as memorials to her parents. After she moved to uptown Manhattan, Cather attended services at the small Church of the Holy Spirit in her neighborhood, a church that appealed to her both because of its Episcopalian affiliation and because of its heritage as a French-speaking congregation.⁹

Cather's religious practices and associations ensured that she had a solid grounding in knowledge of religious traditions, that she could draw from personal experience on a wealth of diverse religious situations, and that she continued to be stimulated by religious experience throughout her life. It is no surprise that religion is central to her art.

This dissertation builds on the work of many Cather scholars--especially the biographical work done by Bohlke, the work on religious allusions done by Fetty and Arnold,

and the work of exploring the philosophical underpinnings of Cather's religious aesthetic by Slote and Murphy--to examine how Cather used various forms of religious discourse. Cather's most celebrated statement of the link between religion and art came in her 1925 novel The Professor's House: "art and religion . . . are the same thing, in the end, of course" (69). This dissertation explores how Cather translated religion into her art, how she brought her religious sensibilities to issues of narration, style, and rhetoric. The discussion is limited, for the most part, to Cather's writing before 1922, partly because Cather herself set 1922 as a line of demarcation, noting that is when she believed "the world broke in two." More important, however, this discussion is limited to the time before 1922 because this period has generally been seen as a time when Cather was least involved in religion and was most antagonistic toward it. In fact, however, it was a time of much experimentation and growth in Cather's ability to blend religion and art. The first part of the title, "Finding Her Way," should not suggest that Cather was a lost soul or that she struggled unduly to find a niche for religion in her life; rather, it suggests that Cather continually engaged issues of religion, always seeking the most effective ways to communicate her aesthetic credo.

This dissertation reveals that Cather discovered she was the inheritor of a well-developed religious tradition

and that she found a remarkable number of different ways to claim that tradition and make it useful for her artistic purposes. In O Pioneers!, she wrote in the prophetic tradition, casting Alexandra Bergson as a model of the kind of visionary leader who can continually reestablish hope after tragedy. In The Song of the Lark, Cather used the language and imagery of the eucharistic sacrament to establish passion and sacrifice as keys to the power of female artistry. The rhetorical model of the parables of Christ informs My Ántonia, demonstrating the sacred power of storytelling to create meaningful human relationships. Early on, Cather learned that religion could also be used as a tool to support non-artistic purposes; in One of Ours, she examines how religion became a tool in the hands of propagandists promoting the causes of war and Prohibition. In all of these novels, and in the web of relationships between the novels and Cather's critical writing and short stories, Cather builds connections with her readers, showing that religion is one of the "deep-running currents" that Giles Gunn suggests artists can use to "conserve what has survived from the past and to release what may shape the present and the future" (4). Seen in this light, religion is not a part of art, but religion is art, and it anchors a sacred triangle of artist, heritage, and audience:

neither the specific work of literature nor the
total corpus of an individual writer can be

divorced from the actual culture from which it
springs or to which, in some complex sense, it is
addressed. (Gunn 3)

PREVIEW

Notes

¹Catherine McLay provides a discussion of positive and negative aspects of religion in Cather's fiction.

²James Shively includes comments by Cather's contemporaries at the University of Nebraska about her non-belief in God. Woodress (410-411) documents Cather's irritation with those who identified her as a Catholic. Bennett ("Cather and Religion") and Brown (xv, xvi, 227) speculate about her attraction to the Episcopal Church.

³See Bennett (World of Willa Cather) 170 for several excerpts from the local papers.

⁴Information about the First Baptist Church in Lincoln is available in two souvenir booklets in the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society: The First Baptist Church, Lincoln, Nebraska: Sixtieth Anniversary 1869-1929 and One Hundred Years of Service to God and Community: A Centennial History of the First Baptist Church of Lincoln, Nebraska. Marilyn Oestman provided me with additional information and an opportunity to look at archival photographs.

⁵The letters from Caroline Cather, Sidney Gore, Jennie Cather Ayre, and Frances Smith Cather are in the archives of the WCPM.

⁶Willa Cather, letters to Mariel Gere, 16 July 1891,

and 27 December 1895, WCPM archives.

⁷E.K. Brown Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University,
File 1.

⁸Goodness, Donald, Personal interview, 22 July 1995.

⁹Bohlke provides a detailed discussion of Cather's
religious practices.

PREVIEW