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Willa Cather in New Mexico: A Review Essay

ROBERT F. GISH

In *A Certain Climate*, Paul Horgan's recent volume of essays, one of which is devoted to "Willa Cather's Incalculable Distance," Horgan observes that, "In her felicity of word and vision, [Cather] is a great artist of *place*."¹ Horgan, of course, writes as a kindred spirit, another great artist of *place*, and especially of the "spirit of place," the "place-ness," which has long been so enchanting to artists and writers—New Mexico.

Most would contend that Cather's artistry of place is all the greater because it is not limited to New Mexico, any more than is Horgan's. "Regionalism" or localism for the likes of Cather and Horgan is useful, ultimately, only as it inspires and leads to the universal concerns of humanity. As with any consideration of place or setting or locale or "nature" in literature, however, issues in Cather's writing center on the degrees to which human character determines place or is determined by it—that is, seeks to control it or becomes a part of it. The

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1. Paul Horgan, *A Certain Climate: Essays in History, Arts, and Letters* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 80.

"land" in and around Red Cloud, Nebraska, was a tremendous influence on Cather in her early years. The Southwest, as place, worked its ways into her later sensibilities and, along with other mysterious factors that shape the creative imagination, *caused* the creation of some of her best fictions.

Cather as a novelist of place, of lives and landscapes, and of lives *in* landscapes, has continued to gain critical attention and esteem since her death in 1947. Since 1973, the centenary of her birth, Cather scholarship (critical studies and biographies most notably) has helped assure her a spot not just in the literary history of the American Middle West and Southwest, but a *place* as a major writer in the larger "tradition" of American literature. Whether her final legacy will be as a writer, a woman writer, or a "regionalist" is problematic.

Part of Cather's fascination is her multitudinousness, the way her works lend themselves to differing assumptions and approaches. The appearance last year of The Library of America's edition of Cather's *Early Novels and Stories* served as one kind of symbolic recognition of her status as a major American writer and her inauguration into the national "canon," as the current critical buzz word has it.²

Moreover, James Woodress's long-awaited "definitive" biography *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (all 583 pages of it), attempts to balance some allegedly extreme, "mistaken," or simply incomplete notions and arguments and, in the process, tries to refocus through comprehensive scholarship recent, more popularized versions of Cather's life such as Phyllis C. Robinson's *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather*.³

Woodress sees Cather as much an artist of places—Virginia, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, Canada, France—as a writer of the American Middle West or Southwest, insofar as it was the interaction and tensions between the places where she lived, or visited, or wrote about, which helped shape and define her life and her art. Certainly, the tensions of geography were not the only forces at work in making Cather the person and the artist she was—or that recent biographers "think" determined her.

Thus, Woodress gives his biography of Cather a more or less conventional structure, the usual fare of traditional literary biography: birth to death; where Cather lived at various phases in her life; how

2. Willa Cather, *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories*, ed. by Sharon O'Brien (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1987).

3. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Phyllis C. Robinson, *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1983).

moves inaugurated those phases; where she travelled; and what she lived for as an artist. Above all, as Woodress attempts to dramatize, she sought to live a life and search out the place(s) that would, indeed, allow her to write—not an altogether simple task, as the story/history of Cather's complex life proved.

Cather, especially in her later years in which she was at times depressed and outright grumpy, saw little need for actual or planned biographies of herself and did her best to ensure that her life-companion, literary executor, and dear friend, Edith Lewis, destroyed letters and other conspiring materials that would aid a biographer, whether objective or with a hypothesis to test and a thesis to argue. (Lewis's *Willa Cather Living* [1953] provides as significant a source for Woodress as for all Cather biographers who are removed from primary autobiographical sources.) This, in addition to denying film rights to her novels (after what she considered the disastrous adaptations of *A Lost Lady* in 1925 and again in 1934), assured that biographers would be driven back into Cather's novels and short stories where she wrote what amounted to her own imagined and remembered versions of herself. These works represent multiple autobiographies of the author cast as biographies of her characters, narrators, and miscellaneous fictive counterparts. In them, history became story.

In its way, literary biography, regardless of how conscientious or well-intended the biographer is in an allegiance to "facts," inevitably has elements of fiction about it—or "faction," as the New Journalists would have it. Moreover, some individuals would argue that novelists make the best biographers, in ways not unlike those either enlightened or misguided souls (so the controversy runs) who believe that the best historians are narrative historians, more artists than social scientists. Master biographers like Leon Edel wage convincing arguments that the best biographies discover the Jamesian "figure in the carpet," the pattern of the weave seen from underside as well as topside.

All of which reminds us that ever since modern biography began to take shape in the writings of Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and other questioning, iconoclastic Edwardian types, heroes and heroines—not to mention saints—are hard to come by. One after another contemporary literary biographers asks that the "real" Cather stand, step forward, and be introduced.

No hagiographer, Woodress's account of Cather strives for proportion, tries not to worship her or whitewash her eccentricities, especially her penchant when a child and an adolescent for the name "William," and male clothing. All the while Woodress gives Cather the

respect due an exceptional artist. Woodress seeks to present an objective, factual history of Cather's life and art. (Somewhat innocently, if not obliviously, he assumes that facts do not change in relation to their interpreters and in their arrangement and emphasis—even if the plan is intended as balanced.) He avoids prolonged argumentation about Cather's lesbianism, conjectured by some and confirmed by others. He backs away from psychological or, to be sure, psychoanalytical speculations about Cather's private and personal sexuality, saying simply, reductively, that she preferred the companionship of women but was more asexual than androgynous or lesbian. He acknowledges the Cather profiled by "feminist" critics (of many sub-types to be sure). Most notable for Woodress is Susan J. Rosowski, who approaches Cather not so much from main-line feminist attitudes and assumptions as by arguing for Cather's place in romantic tradition, even seeing her (not disparagingly) as a Gothic writer, a kind of female Bram Stoker, in some later novels such as *Lucy Gayheart*.⁴

Had Susan O'Brien's provocative feminist "partial" biography, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, devoted to Cather's early years and writings, been totally available to Woodress, he might, in all likelihood, have moved it backstage or muted it.⁵ O'Brien sees Cather as a lesbian and as a woman who was also a writer. Thus, O'Brien seeks to answer such questions as how Cather shaped a female self and voice not predetermined by Victorian, masculine assumptions of the artist's identity; and why by the time of her first visit to the Southwest in 1912 she found *O Pioneers!* virtually writing itself. Woodress, for example, dismisses Cather's "love" for Louise Pound, whom she met in college at Lincoln, as much a freshman's "crush" for a senior as a serious affair. And to call it lesbianism, for Woodress, "is to give it undue importance." O'Brien, on the other hand, is convinced by the Cather-Pound love letters "that *lesbian* did in fact capture Cather's self-definition."

Woodress wrote the biography he believed needed writing. Invidious comparisons with the enthusiasm, "cause," and conviction of O'Brien aside, Woodress is generally reliable and comforting in his massing of detail. But he is also monotonous and at times outright boring. He could have said more about relationships of gender and creativity—as did O'Brien. He could have said more about Cather and the West, as John J. Murphy did in his compact but fascinating chapter on Cather

4. Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

5. Susan O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

and the Midwest in *A Literary History of the West*.⁶ But Woodress works on a larger scale, not involved so much with the gender of the weaver or the figure in the carpet as with the space it covers.

Woodress offers big themes, especially his tracing of Cather's relationships to place, her geographical journeys from Nebraska and beyond, and her professional moves while building a career first as a journalist and drama critic, then as a teacher and magazine editor, and finally as a free-lance novelist. Regrettably, however, such themes are often buried in such standard, plodding biographical fare (and formula) as plot summary, survey of scholarly critical analyses, and cataloging of the reactions of Cather's contemporary reviewers. Woodress follows this structure repeatedly for every text considered.

Notwithstanding his tendency to take the middle of the road on many issues and his proclivity to follow what Reed Whittemore recently referred to as the plague of current biography's "obligation to include," Woodress is thorough in his handling of numerous themes, including: Cather's ties to Nebraska; her years at the University of Nebraska; her move to Pittsburgh and public high school teaching; her mentorship under S. S. McClure at *McClure's Magazine*; her developing friendships of varying degrees of intensity at various times with Louise Pound, Isabelle McClung, Annie Fields, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edith Lewis, Elizabeth Sergeant, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Zoë Akins, Alfred and Blanch Knopf, and Yehudi Menuhin and his family.⁷ Woodress's retelling of how, much later in Cather's life, she took Truman Capote to tea is one of many such enjoyable anecdotes of friendship.

The influence of McClure and Knopf, Woodress makes clear, changed Cather's entire destiny as a writer. McClure's grooming of Cather to take over as managing editor of his magazine allowed her an entrance into the writing world that otherwise would have remained closed, or at least much delayed. Knopf in particular, as a replacement publisher for Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin, provided the means, with his high regard for Cather's talents and his quality Borzoi editions and generous contracts, to turn Cather into a rich and famous personage in her own lifetime.

Woodress is adequate, too, in his attempts to explain how Cather's discovery of her Nebraska heritage as a subject for her writing brought

6. John J. Murphy, "Willa Cather," in J. Golden Taylor and Thomas J. Lyon, eds., *A Literary History of the American West* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), 686-715.

7. Reed Whittemore, *Pure Lives: The Early Biographers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

her a new voice and vision at just the right time in her career, first with *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), then *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and culminating with *My Antonia* (1918).

Woodress also is good in weaving through the twenty-three chapters of his book (through the years of Cather's developing career and her developing relationships with friends, employers, and publishers), her discovery of the West—Wyoming, California, Colorado, but especially New Mexico. He would be somewhat more authoritative by not referring to such influences as Charles F. Lummis on Cather's New Mexico masterwork, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), as "Charles Loomis" [sic]. But Woodress reports accurately, albeit too tentatively, that New Mexico had a large effect on Cather's art, as it has on so many writers and painters.

In his chapter on *Archbishop*, however, Woodress gives too little attention to Cather's Francophilic and decidedly ethnocentric championing of Jean Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf over the native clergy. Woodress seems to side ultimately with Cather, who loved passionately and blindly everything French, and gives little space or sympathy to Mary Austin's cranky but justified insistence on complaining to Cather that Lamy's building of St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe, in Romanesque imitation, was a calamity for the local culture. Woodress does the biographer's fundamental duty to report such a flap, but he goes no further in explaining the depths of the continuing antipathy to Lamy in his battles with Padre Martinez.

Questions of whether Cather could have been fairer to both Hispanics and Native Americans in her portrayals go without comment from Woodress. How any discussion of either *Death Comes for the Archbishop* or Lamy and Machebeuf could neglect mention of Fray Angelico Chavez's *But Time and Chance: The Story of Padre Martinez of Taos* (1981), John De Aragon's *Padre Martinez and Bishop Lamy* (1978), or Horgan's prize-winning biography, *Lamy of Santa Fe* (1975), as Woodress does, undermines full claim to truly comprehensive scholarship.

Cather wrote about the Southwest even before she went there first in the spring of 1912. Her story, "The Enchanted Bluff" (1908), set the tone for the expansiveness of spirit, which the "incalculable distances" of her imagination and the Southwest opened for her. Cather's brother lived for a time in Arizona. Visits took her there and to New Mexico and Colorado in 1914 and 1915 (her influential Mesa Verde visit), and in 1916 (she liked the Columbian Hotel at Taos, and daily horseback rides). She returned to New Mexico in the mid-1920s while she was working on *Archbishop*, with the gracious assistance and hospitality of Mary Austin and Mabel Dodge Luhan, among others.

On Cather's last trip to California in 1941 she saw New Mexico for the final time through tears of nostalgia for what *Archbishop* had meant to her as an experience and for the sheer beauty and majesty of the land. New Mexico as place and idea were still much in her, just as she had been in it over the years.

When Cather first found herself in New Mexico it was not because she intended to write about the place. As is so characteristic of New Mexico literary history in the 1920s, D. H. Lawrence was involved. On the referral of a painter friend of Cather's, world-roamer Lawrence stopped off to meet Cather in New York in 1923 when he and Frieda were on their way to Taos to answer Mabel Dodge Luhan's mystical mission to get someone, in this instance Lawrence, to tell the "real" story of New Mexico and its native peoples.

Woodress is uncertain whether Cather had already met Mabel Dodge in New York at one of her entertainments, before her move to Taos in 1916, but traces their friendship to New Mexico. Woodress reports that Cather liked Mabel and Tony Luhan immensely but, he surmises as biographer, that Cather remained innocent of Tony's "carnal nature" and that he gave Mabel syphilis. For whatever reason, Cather did not join the bandwagon of political action then popular with non-Indian artists on behalf of native Americans. Luhan, it should be mentioned, left little record of her impressions of Cather. Those interested in New Mexico literary history will find that Woodress' tracing of the Willa Cather/Mabel Dodge Luhan connection raises more questions than it answers.

In any event, sixteen months after Lawrence's stop-off in New York, Cather took Lawrence up on his invitation to visit him and Frieda in New Mexico. Coincidentally, Cather was reading proofs of *The Professor's House*, with its great interpolated story of the discovery of Mesa Verde, while she visited the Lawrences and Mabel and Tony Luhan. After these visits, and some time spent in Española, Cather and Lewis set up headquarters at the La Fonda in Santa Fe. She was greeted by enthusiastic responses to the Mesa Verde chapter, just published in *Collier's* under its title, "Tom Outland's Story."

The idea to write expressly about New Mexico purportedly came to Cather one day east of Santa Fe as she looked out at the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and realized full force that the great story of the Southwest—greater than a cowboy's coming upon Mesa Verde's ruins in the snow—was the story of the missionaries. This is not to say, one assumes, that she did not comprehend there were countless other New Mexico stories, stories from the reverse angle not of the missionaries but of their would-be converts; all the many stories which New Mexico,

in history and imagination, has meant. She read some of Lummis' works (though Woodress is not specific beyond *A New Mexico David*); and she possibly read Bancroft's *History of New Mexico and Arizona*, among other histories.

Cather focused on Lamy, his history, his biography, after one of her visits—like so many luminaries of the day—to Mabel and Tony Luhan. The bronze statue of Lamy in front of St. Francis Cathedral, plus William Howlett's *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf*, snapped things into place. By the next morning, reputedly, she had the design of *Archbishop* clearly in mind. (When a young man, and much before writing about Lamy, Horgan, ironically or fortuitously as the case may be, accidentally intruded on Cather and her companion Edith Lewis one day in 1926 on the porch of the La Fonda hotel, and he, too, would be compelled by Santa Fe and his own religious/aesthetic impulses to write about the same subject Cather probably was contemplating the day of their chance meeting.)

Woodress sees *Archbishop* as perhaps a more experimental book than it really is, judging that its allusiveness and "technical virtuosity" clearly invites comparison with other "modernist" works. He suggests that it is a better historical novel than it really is, at least as it is read against the "minority" sensibilities of the 1980s, even if her right to poetic license is excused. Certainly Cather's New Mexico novel is a grand evocation of character and place, and a masterpiece of simplicity and symbol.

It can be argued that Cather's impressions of New Mexico, beautiful and deep and sincere as they were, needed more duration, more seasoning. Like Lamy and her fictionalized version, Latour, Cather remained something of a tourist, a visitor. Her idealized portrait of Kit Carson is a case in point.

It is folly to speculate what kind of books would have resulted had Cather moved to New Mexico—lived there, or been born there and felt about it, in her heart, what she felt about Nebraska. Did the Southwest replace Nebraska in Cather's attitudes toward *place*? Was it an extension of that first fondness for lives in landscapes? Or was it something entirely different?

Perhaps, had she decided not just to visit but truly remain *in* New Mexico, she would have found simultaneously more peace and greater spirit to continue writing than she found in her eastern searches for a home (her depressing New York apartment on Park Avenue, of all places, and her cottages in New Hampshire and on Grand Manan Island in New Brunswick). New Mexico, Los Alamos, Trinity Site, and development of the atomic bomb would not have closed out the war

that weighed so heavily on Cather's spirit in her later years. But the ancient Indian cultures and the Hispanic heritage might have buoyed her. Local history in combination with world history might have given her other "real" stories of New Mexico to write about—beyond that of the missionaries.

Going home to live again in Red Cloud, Nebraska, was never a real consideration for her, nor back to Pittsburgh. Woodress certainly never even hints that Cather's sadness in later years was anything less than malaise because of world wars and the deaths of friends and relatives dear to her. For those who know the lure of New Mexico it is not too farfetched to believe that Cather was perhaps more devoted to that special place and homesick for it than even she really knew or realized.

Horgan sees Cather's life as one destined to probe the incalculable distances of artistic aspiration. In Woodress' *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* one sees just how far and persistently Cather traveled as a result of that aspiration. Her life, like all lives, was a journey from birth to death with determining and shaping stops along the way: Nebraska; Pittsburgh; New Mexico; New York; and all the other places she knew. Although his broad scope does not allow Woodress to dwell on Cather's time in New Mexico or draw truly profound conclusions from his analysis of it, he does present New Mexico as significant in Cather's life.

Whoever Willa Cather was or aspired to be—woman who wrote, writer who happened to be female, romantic, regionalist—her time spent in New Mexico and with its history was part of her biography. New Mexico was also part of her personal history and, through her, became a significant part of the literary history of the nation.⁸

8. For additional consideration and reconciliation of Cather's regionalism with issues of gender, and of the American land as the center of women's power in Cather's writings, see Cecelia Tichi, "Women Writers and the New Woman," in Emory Elliot, ed., *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 589–606.

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