

## Impact of Different Novelists in Willa Cather's Writing

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Willa Cather seems to have admired almost all the French writers of the nineteenth century, from the romantics Hugo and Dumas to Zola, the father of literary naturalism. But only a small group can be said to have influenced her technically. The author whose theory and practice are held up as exemplary in 'The Novel Demeuble' is Prosper Merimee (1803-70). To provide a fundamental critical principle she quotes Merimee's statement from his essay on Gogol that the art of choosing from all the details that life affords is much more difficult than careful observation and faithful reportage. And when she gives an example of a perfectly wrought piece of fiction from which not a word could be cut, it is Merimee's *Carmen*. E. K. Brown tells us that Cather became acquainted with Merimee's work while 'she was still at the university and that she felt a close affinity to his mind'.<sup>1</sup> It was an abiding sympathy, for in a letter as late as November 1929 she singles out Merimee as the author she most admires.<sup>2</sup> Reading through his fiction and critical writings one feels that here indeed was a writer whose work would have had a powerful and lasting influence on Willa Cather. It's aesthetic ideals of organic unity, restraint, and apparent simplicity are those which inform Cather's writing at its best.

Apparent simplicity and inevitability were artistic goals Cather shared with Merimee, and both achieved those goals through restraint. References to Merimee in Cather's essay on the unfurnished novel are; very much to the point. Few writers have exercised such economy in storytelling as Merimee, whose novellas are as brief and austere as Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*. Both writers were:

by disposition romantics attracted to material with strong emotional content, and they both achieved their special effects by using classical forms and a reserved, often laconic style.<sup>3</sup>

Cather's effects are more muted but technically similar. As a frame around *My Antonia*, the author has a lawyer friend bringing her a memoir he has written about his childhood in Nebraska. This creates a distance between the author and her nostalgic narrative, the content of which is largely autobiographical. In a letter Cather refers to her 'introduction' as a device employed by French authors when they wanted their narrative to be colored by a certain mood throughout. Like most of Merimee's works, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* are carefully researched books in which the persona and emotional contents are muted by historical transposition and potentially melodramatic scenes undercut by the long summary view of history. For example, after telling in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* the lurid story of the degenerate murderer Buck Scales and his captive wife Magdalena, Cather concludes the chapter with a brief, documentary account of their fates-Scales after a short trial is hung and his wife becomes a housekeeper for a group of nuns.

Merimee thought of the writer as a dissembler, similar to a woman doing her makeup or an actor preparing his costume, but warned that the ideals of simplicity and inevitability were spoiled if the reader be-came aware of the artifice and calculation involved. He felt that the writer in every respect must remain behind the scenes. Like Cather, Merimee took every precaution to keep the prying gaze of the public away from his emotions and private life. Consequently Willa Cather's last fictions occupy that paradoxical, but not uncommon, position of work of art pointing to their own devaluation.

Critical Response to the works of Willa Cather has often focused on Cather's biography, aesthetics and canonical continuity rather than on the wider currents of literary and cultural history in which her works participated. The main avenues of approach to the Cather canon have long been defined by the personal and nostalgic tone of much of her

work, by her deep-seated aversion to the political and the public, and—particularly with regard to her late work—by her increasing despair over the course of current events. In their criticisms of Cather's final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, biographical critics (Robinson, Rosowski, O'Brien, Lee, Woodress) have tended to trace the book's origins to Cather's nostalgia for her Virginia girlhood and to her personal, emotional and aesthetic retreat from a contemporary world she felt to be disintegrating all around her. James Woodress, writing in 1970, notes that a "novel laid in the South five years before the Civil War cannot help dealing with the issue of slavery." But he immediately downplays this fact: "Willa Cather, however, keeps polemics out of her fiction by design and is primarily interested in creating a picture of western Virginia as it must have been in 1856" (263). Most of Cather's critics and biographers have followed Woodress's lead, minimizing the novel's participation in the heated social debates that shaped its world, whether in its nineteenth-century or its contemporary context.

Some recent critics of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* have begun to redress the relative "isolationism" of the Cather critical canon by reading the novel in terms of its embeddedness in literary-historical networks of meaning. Merrill Skaggs, for example, reads *Sapphira* in the context of contemporary southern fiction and finds that Cather's purpose is "to assault standard literary assumptions about antebellum Southern life" (3). Minrose C. Gwin focuses on the novel's use of antebellum materials, using its complex relationship with "black and white female autobiographical writings of the nineteenth-century South" (14) to account for Cather's divided attitudes towards *Sapphira*. New directions like these represent a welcome movement toward understanding Cather's novels in terms of the larger literary and cultural networks in which they participate, but one vital context for understanding Cather's goals in her final novel has thus far gone unremarked.

Begun in 1937, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was written during the Great Depression and against a background of intense critical warfare over the proper social role of the artist. With the economic and social turmoil of the 1930s came the rise of the Left Criticism: a loosely confederated range of

Marxist and left-leaning critics who insisted on artists' engagement with social issues, contemporary and historical. Cather deplored the aesthetics of the Left Critics, as much as she hated the politics of Roosevelt's New Dealers. But what has usually been seen as her apolitical isolation in the "kingdom of art" would more accurately be described as active resistance to the Left's aesthetic of naturalism, sociology and protest; Cather's rejection of the assumptions of the Left Critics cannot remove her work from its literary-historical context. In fact, Cather wrote *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* while reconsolidating her artistic principles against attacks from the Left, and the novel is her assertion of a counter-aesthetic to the Left Criticism's dictums on literary representation of social and historical realities.

The label attached to any literary critical movement creates an illusion of solidarity and stability which belies the more tenuous connections among the critics begging to it. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the Left Critics, who spent as much time arguing with each other as they did attacking their more traditionalist contemporaries. Nevertheless, the critics associated with radical and/or left-leaning periodicals like *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, *New Republic* and *the Nation* (listed from far-left to center-left) did hold in common basic assumptions about the social and political work that literature should perform, and the aesthetic modes best suited to that work. Left Critics shared a core of beliefs that included the failure of capitalism, the efficacy of social realism and the duty of artists and critics alike to do their part to uproot old social evils and participate in the creation of a new society.

To the Left Critics Cather was a prime example of a literary vision and practice radically out of step with its time. As a representative of an older, "genteel" literary tradition whose characteristic ways of seeing arose from a pre-war and pre-Depression America, Willa Cather was fair game for the contemporary issues-oriented left. Viewed from the left, Cather and "New Humanist" cronies like Thornton Wilder reprinted all that was wrong with contemporary American literature. Such writers, as Jaci Salzman explains, "were essentially conservative, religious, and erudite; they were also

antidemocratic and antiscientific. As such, Humanism, as Malcolm Cowley declared, had no validity" (231) for a majority of the citizens of modern American industrial society "For many of the writers who were moving toward the left, the coming of a new society demanded the creation of a new art" (231) based on principles of science, sociology, radical economics and comprehensive social change; to the Left Critics, Cather's art hearkened back to values appropriate only to an irrevocative Lost, preindustrial society.

Two of Cather's final three novels (*Sapphire* and *Shadows on the Rock*) are works of historical fiction, and thus provided Left Critics the perfect opportunity to reevaluate the Cather canon according to their own aesthetic. Writing in the *New Republic*, New-tom Arvin took the occasion of the 1931 publication of *Shadows on the Rock* to make Cather the exemplar of the literary sins of an entire generation. Willa Cather, he wrote

is a writer who apparently has never come to grips with the real life of her time, whose triumphs have been too often the triumphs of what seems like judicious evasion, who at all events writes as if mass production and technological unemployment and cyclical depressions and the struggle between the classes did not exist.(345)

In her best work, according to Arvin, Cather's depiction of the pioneer individualist "had its roots deep in a social earth" (345), symbolized the collective reality of pioneer experience, and contained an implicit critique of middle-class society, but ultimately her conservative individualism prevents her from fully engaging historical relatives.

Cather's putative evasion of history and contemporary socioeconomic reality rapidly became the dominant theme in the Left Critics' ongoing denunciations of her work. Horace Gregory's review of *Shadows* framed Cather's work as "an example of reaction against the tendency of the American novel to gain sociological importance" (552), and denounced Cather herself as an author whose "interests have always been controlled by a traditional America, rather than the actual and contemporary scheme of existence" (553-54).

Following suit, Clifton Fadiman (hardly a radical but no less surely influenced by left critical dictums) regretfully announced in the *Nation* in 1932 that either "has no report to make to us on the America of her time" (563): Despite her literary craftsmanship, Fadiman continued, an outmoded worldview results in "a simple inability to see her own time realistically" (563). Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling (in 1933 and 1937 respectively) turned in the most damning left indictments of Cather's work. "Miss Cather has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is," wrote Hicks; "she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least in her idealization of it, had" (144). Like other writers of her generation, Hicks asserted, Cather can neither "accept the cruelty and rapacity" of industrial civilization nor commit herself to "the movement to destroy and rebuild it. Flight is the only alternative" (147). Trilling likewise took Cather to task for her works' progressive evasion of social facts. Her "turn to the ideals of a vanished time is the weary response to weariness" (154), her historical fictions, failing to transform history into "relevant criticism of the present" (154), smack of escapism and her domestic fictions are a lonely retreat into a "mystical concern with pots and pans" (155).

Cather herself, though increasingly reluctant in later years to expose her views publicly through any channels outside her art, was by no means insulated from the controversies generated by the use of the Left Criticism, nor had she lost her interest in questions of aesthetics. In fact, the 1930s found Cather engaged in several projects entailing comprehensive reassessment of her career and the aesthetic which had guided it. As she began work on *Sapphira* in 1937, Cather was preparing a collected edition of her works, to be published in twelve volumes the following year; the year previous, Cather had prepared for publication her first collection of critical essays, *Not Under Forty*. Roth projects entailed editorial decision-making which immersed Cather in issues of aesthetics and the role of art in modern industrial society.

The title, *Not Under Forty*, indicates the age of its intended audience, immediately throwing down the gauntlet to the predominantly younger set of Left Critics and setting the tone for the book's uniform rejection of contemporary literary currents. The

collection contains no new writing apart from a single-paragraph "Prefatory Note," which includes the author's revealing avowal that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (v). The book's steadfast adherence to aesthetic principles formed much earlier in Cather's career indicates that the author saw little of worth in the Left's literary innovations. The centerpiece of the book is "The Novel Demeuble" (1922), Cather's rejection of a "literalness" of representation of material objects and physical sensation that she finds antithetical to the evocative purposes of true art. "If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism. Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art" (48). The novelist, Cather asserts, must strive to strip her work of its "furnishings" of physical reality to create space for the play of tone and feeling. It is "the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or , the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel" (50).

Cather wrote her essay primarily in reaction to the perceived literary barbarities of popular fiction and, especially, the muckraking and naturalist writing with which she had had firsthand experience during her years on the editorial staff of *McClure's Magazine*. The social and political interests of early twentieth-century practitioners of the literary/journalistic exposé were contiguous with the new, more radical social-advocacy aesthetics of the Left Critics, and thus "The Novel Demeuble" demanded attention from Left Critics like Trilling. The high value Cather places on spiritual and emotional intangibles, and her concomitant devaluation of the material facts of existence, were calculated to challenge the Left's sense of literature's proper engagement with historical realities.

Cather further offended against left critical orthodoxy in many of the other essays in *Not Under Forty*. She praises Katherine Mansfield for her love of language, which - 'contrasts markedly with most contemporary writers, who do not "care much about their medium except as a means for expressing ideas" (134). She values Thomas Mann for his inquiry into human consciousness as spirit rather than "the nature of man as the Behaviourists or the biologists see it" (96). In praising Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather segregates the reporter, who "can write equally well

about everything that is presented to his view" (81), from the "creative writer," whose success depends on sympathetic communion with the human materials unique to art. In an essay recounting her relationship with Annie Fields (widow of the Boston publisher James T. Fields and intimate friend of Cather's mentor, Jewett), Cattier reveals the extent to which the characteristic topics, tones, and strategies of writers championed by the Left were alien to her sensibility. She associates Mrs. Fields's decidedly nineteenth-century home with a cultural past secure from "the ugliness of the world, all possibility of wrenches and jars and wounding contacts"; it is a place "where the tawdry and cheap have been eliminated and the enduring things have taken their proper, happy places" (63). Pronouncements like these were of course unlikely to meet with sympathy among the Left Critics and, in fact, the timing of *Not Under Forty's* publication, as well as the belligerent tone of its preface, indicate that the collection was a calculated act of defiance.

The same year that *Not Under Forty* was published, Cather wrote a lengthy letter to the editor of *Commonweal* explicitly rejecting the literary assumptions of the Left. Cattier asserts a strict division between the concerns of life and those of art, and maintains that the true artist is by definition unconcerned with ephemeral issues of economic, social, and political events:

You were asking me what I thought about a new term in criticism: the Art of "Escape." Isn't the phrase tautological? What has art ever been but escape? To be sure, this definition is for the moment used in a derogatory sense, implying an evasion of duty, something like the behaviour of a poltroon. When the world is in a bad way, we are told, it is the business of the composer and the poet to devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation. But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape. ("Escape" 18-19)

Literary radicals, she continues, demand artistic fidelity to the Cause: "Face the stern realities, you skulking Escapist!" the Radical editor cries. Yes, but usually the poor Escapist has so little cleverness when he struggles with stern realities" (20). The proper function of artists is not to further the ends of

any particular revolutionary ideology, but to "refresh and recharge the spirit of those who can read their language" (20). Such a role depends on artists' being left out of the social and industrial routine which goes on every day all over the world. Industrial life has to work out its own problems" (21). Artists who have been involved with the social movements of their times have succeeded as writers precisely because they were able in their work to devote themselves exclusively to the proper ends of art: exploration of the personal, spiritual dramas of the individual. Art arises from an "unaccountable predilection" of the individual toward creation of the beautiful and the permanent, independent of the shifting demands of physical existence. In this respect, "Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin. Economics and art are strangers" (27). The literary radicals" (27) who call for a new literature of protest against social injustice mistake the ephemera of politics for the eternally valid truths of art.

To sum up, both Cather's fictions and her critical statements placed her head-to-head with the Left Critics, but she was neither swayed nor particularly disturbed by their attacks on her aesthetic principles. Her response was simply to consolidate and rearticulate the aesthetic which had guided her work from early in her career. At first glance, therefore, it seems surprising to find Cather at work, just one year after her letter to the radical editors, on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a project which necessitated her dealing with issues of race. Closer examination, however, reveals that Cather's reasons for embarking upon *Sapphira* were very much in accord with her anti-left aesthetic, despite the apparent contradiction. The novel arises from the author's early childhood memories of western Virginia, and Cather's priority throughout is to evoke by careful selection of detail the tone and mood of her subject. The nuances of antebellum life in the Shenandoah Valley are recounted through a carefully controlled double filter of artistic memory: the adult narrator's reconstruction of the past embellishes the childhood memories of the little girl in the novel's epilogue, whose only firsthand contact with the story's figures occurs twenty-five years after the novel's main events.' Despite the oblique focus,

however, the novel's setting and characters make confrontation of racial issues practically inevitable.

Faced with precisely the kind of subject matter that the Left Critics found most amenable to their ideological agenda, Cather staunchly refuses to move her fictional treatment of a social issue outside her customary aesthetic sphere. In dealing with a topic obviously susceptible to a polemical treatment, Cather sets out to demonstrate how "high art" ought to deal with social issues. Against the Left's national international political emphasis, Cather asserts a regional outlook. In place of a monolithically defined ideological division between North and South, Cather depicts local culture. In her creation of characters, the novelist replaces simple, dualistic political positions with intricate patterns of interwoven political commitments and moral quandaries. For absolute capital-versus-labor conflict, she substitutes a complex web of overlapping social niches. Cather refuses an abstract economic systemization of the antebellum South, and instead explores a lively and complicated multicultural in which individuals and communities define themselves according to a plethora of interpenetrating and variable criteria, including skin color, region, life-style, religion, gender, ethnicity, occupation and education. Despite Cather's refusal to bend to the dictums of the Left Criticism, *Sapphira* and the Slave Girl constitutes an oblique response to their criticisms of her work, in which she treats the Left's topical "property" according to her own firmly anti-left aesthetic principles.

The first words of the novel are a brief heading: "The Breakfast Table, 1856," a phrase that points simultaneously in two different conceptual directions and flags Cather's intended approach to her subject. On the one hand, the book's time frame suggests the rapidly escalating political tensions which affected all regions of the antebellum United States. The year 1856 saw the beginning of black slavery-related violence in Kansas; it was the year of John Brown's Pottawatomie massacre and of physical violence on the floor of the United States Senate, as Massachusetts abolitionist Charles Sumner was assaulted by a proslavery colleague. The word "1856" invites polemic; the "breakfast table" declines the invitation. The intimate, household setting indicated on *Sapphira's* first page signals the novel's

consistently small-scale, domestic and local mode of exploration. Despite the fact that the novel focuses on slaves and slaveowners, and climaxes in Nancy Till's northward escape via the Under-ground Railroad, the story is presented in terms of complex interpersonal relationships rather than easily labeled ideological positions. Nancy's flight is not the result of any yearning for an abstraction called freedom, but of the highly individualized dilemma created by the confluence of her slave status, Henry Colbert's attraction, Sapphira's jealousy and Martin Colbert's lust. The entire drama 'occurs within the domestic sphere.

Regionally, the setting of the novel resists the Left's tendency to see in terms of dualistic geopolitical divisions. Back Creek, Virginia-west of Winchester in the hills which rise from the Shenandoah Valley-is less than five miles by road from what would become with the outbreak of the Civil War the Unionist state of West Virginia. It is, moreover, a mere thirty air miles from the free state of Pennsylvania. Historically, western Virginia was a 'part of the South which was itself peculiar in relation to the South's 'peculiar institution'" (Lee 358). Populated largely by small farmers rather than the cash-crop plantation owners who dominated the state's Tidewater district, the area traced its lines of descent to Pennsylvania and Europe rather than to the South. Slavery was legally sanctioned, but the actual number of slaves in the west was minuscule compared to the masses in eastern Virginia. Among the inhabitants a broad range of opinion on the slavery issue was tolerated, but it tended toward disapproval As Henry Colbert reminds his wife, This isn't a slave-owning neighborhood. if you sold a good gill like Nancy off to Winchester, people hereabouts would hold it against you" (8). Clearly Cather's construction of the book's regional and historical setting is calculated to discourage unproblematically delineated ideological conflicts of the kind the Left Critics advocated.

The varied origins and allegiances of the Colberts' neighbors further complicate the picture, making simple correlations of regional with ideological loyalties virtually impossible. The abolitionist postmistress, Mrs. Bywaters, secretly subscribes to the New York *Tribune*, David Fairhead, the schoolmaster, is a transplanted Pennsylvanian and

does double duty as a Baptist preacher; Andy Shand is a Scottish emigre who hates the Colberts and their slaves for the utterly apolitical reason that Lizzie, the black cook, sings hymns in church too fast for his taste. At the outer fringes of the community are a number of impoverished white hill farmers whose cherished superiority to blacks is, in the words of David Fairhead, "the one thing they've got to feel important about" (81), as well as a "wise old Quaker" of Henry Colbert's acquaintance, who encourages the mill-ownet's moral qualms concerning the holding of slaves.

Awareness of ethnicity pervades *Sapphira*, but no one in the novel is definable solely by reference to race or racial issues. Individuals are located along so many different axes of identity— racial, regional, religious, economic—that any placement of characters into rigidly distinct social categories is as obfuscating as it is revealing. Till, for instance, the black slave woman who serves Sapphira through a lifetime, discloses her multiplex sense of her own identity in a passage which also captures the diverse mixture of local identities in the Valley. As she mentally traverses the geographical distance between Back Creek and Winchester, her birthplace and the region's only town of any significant size, Till's mind covers a diverse social geography as well. The social spectrum runs a full range from the "poor white trash" of the roadless North Mountain, who lived mostly on the squirrels they shot, and the pig or two they fed on acorns" (73), to "the quality" of Winchester, where "the houses had porticos with tall columns, and were set in lawns shaded by flowering trees" (74). Between these extremes, Till's mind passes in succession over a variety of intermediate niches, in-cluding Capon Springs, where people of means went "to take the baths"; Romney, "where people of some account lived, she had heard"; the more remote slopes of the Shenandoah Valley, where "there were some slightly farmhouses, certainly, where well-to-do families lived"; and lastly, the longer-settled country closer to Winchester, where the woods began to open up, and the country looked more human" (73-74). Till's journey. into memory reveals her decided sympathies for the culture of town and affluence, and in so doing it reveals also an identity defined more by personal' history, social class and regional allegiance than by race. None of

these factors, of course, are ultimately divisible from one another, but Cather's treatment of her slave character's psyche refuses to reduce Till to a racial "counter" in an ideological game. Till dislikes her banishment to the backwater of Back Creek despite, not because of, her devotion to Sapphira, and her feelings are prompted by considerations which have little to do with race. "She liked, as she said to herself, to live among 'folks,' not among poor farmers and backwoods people. The finer accomplishments she had learned from (a townswoman), those of which she was most proud, had little chance here" (69).

The white characters in the novel participate in a similarly complicated system of social distinctions informed by differing belief structures, religions, regional origins and economic statuses. "Loudoun County people," Cather explains, "were thought to be a little jealous of the older and richer families in Tidewater Virginia" (161), and Sapphira upholds the assertion when she comments: "Those folks from the Tidewater do hold their heads high, though I've never seen just why they feel called upon" (162). Likewise, Back Creek natives view Henry Colbert askance because of his Loudoun County origins, his Flemish ancestry, his Lutheranism and his lack of a southern accent. Despite their personal sympathies for the good miller, the locals "never forgot that he was not one of themselves" (5). Similarly, Sapphira's relations with the Yankee David Fairhead are markedly uncomfortable on both sides—a situation that Henry Colbert attributes to his wife's uneasiness about being placed on a social par with someone "'Northern' at heart" (81); Sapphira, Cather notes, "did not really regard him as an inferior, but as an equal—of the wrong kind" (81). In all these cases, individuals understand themselves and measure others according to complex webs of standards which defy simple social schematization.

Insofar as *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is a book about slavery, it is so by way of a slave culture's myriad modes of shaping individuals and their interrelationships. The novel, as one critic notes, is "an intimate study of the peculiar institution" (Auchincloss 120) rather than a polemic; Cather is interested not simply in exposing the horrors of a socioeconomic system but in recreating a sense of

individual and community life as lived within that system. The relationships between owners and owned are always presented in terms which subordinate the ideological to the inter-personal.

Sapphira's relationship to her slaves contains a mixture of sympathetic feeling and contemptuous disregard which makes a modern reader—and Sapphira's daughter—extremely uncomfortable. Her regard for the older slave members of the household is genuine, as is her concern for the well-being of all her slaves, notwithstanding her often tyrannous and sometimes (as in the case of Nancy Till) cruel treatment of them. Even the abolitionist-sympathizer Rachel Blake, who is the primary instrument of Nancy Till's escape to the North, is forced to admit that her mother, despite her long-standing habits of speaking to her "property" in tones either of "sarcastic reprimand" or "contemptuous indulgence" (137), manifests a personal investment in their happiness:

Yet one must admit inconsistencies. There was her singular indulgence with Tansy Dave [who was permitted to leave the farm to follow his lover], her real affection for Till and old Jezebel, her patience with Sampson's lazy wife.

Even now, from her chair, she took some part in all the celebrations that darkies love. She liked to see them happy....

When the darkies were sick, she doctored them, sent linen for the new babies and had them brought for her to see as soon as the mother was up and about. Recalling these things and trying to be fair to her mother, Mrs. Blake suddenly rose from her chair and said aloud.

There can be no doubt that Sapphira is a racist who denies her slaves' full humanity. But it is no less true that the despotic slaveowner and her slaves are involved in a relationship that is much more than an economic arrangement. Their bonds of household history and personal loyalty tie them to each other far more securely than the legal sanctions of the slavery system ever could.

Sapphira's relationship to Nancy Till reveals the worst aspects both of this particular slave-owner's personality and of the slavery system as a whole, but again Cather approaches the Issue" of slavery from a resolutely interpersonal angle. The institution of slavery grants Sapphira the power to act upon her

most ignoble feelings toward Nancy. But the conflict itself is generated by interpersonal emotions that are not limited to master-slave relationships: the wheelchair-bound invalid Sapphira is jealous of the close relationship between her young house servant and Henry Colbert. The slavery system magnifies the essentially interpersonal evil of Sapphira's persecution of Nancy (via the Colberts' lecherous nephew, Martin) by sanctioning Sapphira's enormous latitude of power. But the system itself is powerless either to harm or to help without the human will and passions which fuel it. For Cather, the real horror of slavery resides in the distortions it effects in the hearts and minds of its participants, who include both owners and owned. In *Sapphira* we witness the insidious workings of what Gather elsewhere names "the Terrible," an elusive and deeply domesticated form of evil which pervades the "local" ground of everyday life. Slavery is a social evil with demonstrable negative consequences in the lives of individuals and families. But slavery is not Evil itself; it is both a partial cause and a means for the embodiment of "the Terrible" in the lives of ordinary people.'

The nearest approach to an explicitly ideological treatment of a topical concern in *Sapphira* is Rachel Blake's conversion to a mild brand of abolitionism, and here, again Cather shows how completely the political is shot through with the interpersonal. As a young girl, Rachel overhears a conversation between Mrs. Bywaters and her father in which the young woman decides that slaveowning is incompatible with her own peace of mind and moral convictions. As she considers what she has just heard, Rachel comes to her own, similar conclusion:

A feeling long smothered had blazed up in her—had become a conviction. She had never heard the thing said before, never put into worth. It was the owning that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant. (137)

Rachel expresses her new belief as an abstract principle: that human ownership of other human beings is, ipso facto, morally wrong. But her process of reasoning is any-thing but abstract; her experience of this new truth is more like the experience of a prophet than that of a philosopher. It

arises in her as a conviction, as an amalgam of thought, belief and emotion rather than a carefully considered ideological dictum. As she continues her ruminations, the personal and relational nature of her antislavery conviction becomes clear. She discovers that

[s] he had always known, it was wrong. It was the thing that made her unhappy at home; and came between her and her mother. How she hated her mother's voice in sarcastic reprimand to the servants! And she hated it in contemptuous indulgence. Till and Aunt Jezebel were the only blacks to whom her mother never spoke with that scornful: leniency. (137)

Rachel Blake finds within herself, by the agency of Mrs. Bywaters, a moral bedrock that runs deeper than ephemeral political events or ideological creeds. She works out the implications of the truth she has discovered in terms of the interpersonal relationships of her own household and her own experience in Back Creek, far from the centers of abolitionist and proslavery ferment in Boston, New York and Washing-ton.

None of Cather's characters-not even those with the most strongly held beliefs about slavery-is mounted by a simple dogmatic position. Sapphira Colbert holds slaves as the result of accidents of birth, upbringing and inheritance, unbolstered by an independently reasoned social creed. Henry Colbert, who is tortured by his inability to construct a biblically-sanctioned case either for or against slavery, functions by turns as an apologist for slaveholding and an accomplice in abolitionism. Good-hearted and sympathetic as he may be, he is damned by the lights of left ideology. Even Rachel Blake, whose forceful and principled objections to slavery are stronger than those of any other major character in the novel, suffers periodic doubts about the consequences of her conviction. Having broken the law, risked her own safety and sacrificed her relationship to her mother for the sake of delivering Nancy Till from almost certain rape, she wonders nevertheless whether her actions have been wholly just to all involved:

Mrs. Blake knew how her mother hated to be overreached or outwitted, and she



was sorry to have brought another humiliation to one who had already lost so much: her activity on horse and foot, her fine figure and rosy complexion....

"It's hard for a body to know what to do sometimes," she murmured to herself. .

. "Maybe I ought to have thought and waited." (246, 247)

Few of us would have any difficulty in justifying Rachel Blake's actions, but Cather consistently complicates her characters' moral certitudes about slavery by raising questions about other, perhaps equally valid, moral obligations. In no case does Gather permit a character to rest secure in a reified moral/ideological station.

Even such a profoundly ideological event as the Civil War passes over Back Creek and its inhabitants with scarcely any effect on local reality, on individuals in their social relationships. The temporal distance between book 8 and the epilogue, twenty-five years later, is measured not by the war that stands squarely in the interim but by the even flow of years between Nancy's departure for the North and her re-turn to Virginia. in all that time," the narrator tells us, "the country between Romney and Winchester had changed very little. The same families were living on their old places," "the wooden foot-bridge over Back Creek hung just as it did in the Colberts' time," and "Mrs. Bywaters, though now an old woman, was still the postmistress" (273-74). "The war," she continues, "made few enmities in the country neighbourhoods" (274), despite the fact that the area's inhabitants fought for both Union and Confederacy. Without dismissing the importance of the Civil War on the lives of her characters, Cather shows us that the war and the "peculiar institution" it abolished had been only one part of these people's reality. The daily life of village, farm, family and individual continues despite the violent (and temporary) resolution of the era's single greatest political question.

Human life, Cather tells us in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is essentially local, inter-personal, emotional. Theories of sociology, economics and politics of the kind promulgated by the Left Critics can only misrepresent life as it is lived by the mass of humanity. Any attempt to understand the world in terms of ideological generalizations is bound to fail,

because abstraction is alien to life as lived, and thus is alien to the art which tries to capture the essence of that life. Cather does not deny that economic and political actualities profoundly impact the lives of individuals and communities. But those actualities exist for her only in terms of their manifestations in the daily lives of individuals, singly and in association. If art is to penetrate the crust of surface realities to evoke the spiritual eternalities which lie below, it must approach the Radical Editor's issues obliquely, seeing them for what they are: the incidentals from which people build their real lives. Anything less is mere reportage.

### Reference

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