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Review Essay

The Iconic Willa Cather

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***Willa Cather and Others.* Jonathan Goldberg. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. Pp. xviii + 228. \$54.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).**

***Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship.* Deborah Lindsay Williams. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Pp. xi + 224. \$40.00.**

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Contemplating the iconic moves inquiry in two directions simultaneously. To the past it asks, what were the conditions? How did this icon come about? Who was this Author, Person, Woman, larger than us, sustaining us, accusing us? At the same time the inquiry looks to the future and asks, what will be the effect? Whose way can now be paid, who may be inspired by this Author, Person, Woman, larger than us, sustaining us, accusing us? Willa Cather's iconic status means that now we have to know everything, we need to incorporate her passions, her physical being, her spirit, her off-hand remarks, and her profound comments into a theory of the Catheresque. Iconic status opens inquiries into all of Cather. The future, not *démeublé* but filled with Cather furniture. The migratory author. The prairie girl. The big city editor. The woman who preferred the company of women, or, perhaps, given the two main sexes, could tolerate only one domestically. What is the Catheresque?

The Cather icon is not a simple one. As Cather moves into the canon of American literature, she brings a set of seemingly unresolvable mysteries with her. Complicating the problem are contingents of Catherians who will deny the existence of anything problematic about her life story. Her biography appears, for example, in a series designed for young adult readers called "Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians," as if her sexuality were not the subject of ongoing debate.¹ Early biographical "evidence" of her homosexuality—cropped hair as a teenager, cross-dressing, assuming male personae—have been systematically contextualized as circumstantial; arguably, these moves were signs of "rebellion against the ideal of 'femininity' that threatened to engulf her



328 as an adolescent” and thus threatened to silence her creative energies.² Cather seems to have rebelled against heterosexual norms in order to survive professionally. Complicating the problem further is the fact that she based her aesthetic on a principle of immanent mystery. She is famous for her statement that it was “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” that transformed narrative into art.³ “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created” (*ibid.*). Some critics have spent countless pages naming the unnamed thing, seemingly oblivious to the logic that would disqualify any nameable thing as being the *unnamed*. Icons may envelope mystery, but they cannot forestall the proffering of human incarnations.

If readers compelled to sort out religious beliefs want to prove that Cather was Catholic, they will encounter the public fact that she joined the Episcopal Church in 1922 and remained a parishioner until her death. Such evidence does not confirm the strength of her devotion but it is unmistakable proof of a public association. Her writing about the Catholic Church, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), will continue to suggest to new and uninformed readers that she was Catholic, but there are facts to contend with. Furthermore, there is nothing illogical, perverse, or dishonest about an “Episcopal woman” holding deep respect for the Catholic Church, strong affinities for its traditions, and great appreciation for its hold over believers, without actually being a Catholic herself, and without ever explaining why she was an Episcopalian. She can get away with such mysteriousness because in the world of contemporary U.S. literary criticism religious beliefs are rarely afforded much attention. Given a list of authors, it is doubtful that most critics could succeed in matching them to their religious affiliations.

While there are few, if any, critical debates on Cather’s religious affiliations, her sexuality is considered to be of tremendous import. The mystery of one’s religious beliefs has been solved on the American continent by a kind of indifference. Muslim fundamentalism may rekindle religious intolerance, but at present the hold of indifference remains strong. Except in reactionary enclaves, in most of the United States one’s career, social standing, and range of movement are not curtailed by a declaration of one religious belief over another. This is particularly true in places where critics live, in institutions of higher learning. But such tolerance does not extend unequivocally to questions of race or sexuality. Identification of one’s sexual activities or of one’s race can ruin, forestall, or redirect a career, social standing, or range of movement in far too many places to claim the achievement of tolerance. This makes the sexuality of emerging iconic figures, like Cather, of great urgency. If tolerance is to expand in the United States, and the idea of a spectrum of sexuality is to be introduced into those regions where it does not yet exist, much of the work toward such inclusiveness will be done by humanist scholars, including literary critics. The reigning assumption, therefore, is that Cather was closeted in order to protect her public image and to provide her a level of autonomy that she would lose by association with an out-group. “The public image that Cather created was marketable and powerful—and *safe*. To become more publicly queer,” according to Deborah Lindsay Williams, “would be to risk not only open expressions of homophobia but also to be affiliated, for good or ill, with a specific group and set definitions” (109).

One is thus greatly moved by the personal impetus confessed in the preface to Jonathan Goldberg’s book, where he describes his own initial response to reading Willa Cather in high school: “I knew somehow that my own incipient, incoherent sexuality was being addressed, but couldn’t tell how the novels I was reading spoke so uncannily, couldn’t see what was in the novels that made the connection” (ix). Goldberg’s working assumption is that Cather was a lesbian; he then proceeds to marshal not evidence so much as textual and biographical manifestations of homosexuality. Readers are being trained to interpret queerly. All that is enigmatic and mysterious, as a result, turns to queerness: “At the level of representation, the secret radiates, so that lesbian desire masquerades as heterosexuality, heterosexuality as homosexuality, and, even more to the point, heterosexuality as social convention necessarily fails to satisfy the deepest nature of the self” (13). All roads lead back to Cather’s lesbianism, in a kind of insistence. The icon would not tell (or, it never occurred to her to tell), and so the critic explicates an identity based on textual evidence. Even female cruelty is masked desire. “Sapphira’s plan to have Nancy

raped [in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*] reveals her sexual desire for Nancy”; this is one of numerous examples of “the linked displacements that structure the novel” (36, 40).

In the discipline of literary criticism since deconstruction, no amount of textual evidence will necessarily overcome a reader’s cleverness. Goldberg is clever. For example, one fact we have, from letters and published accounts, is that no one but Cather and her partner, Edith Lewis, ever referred to Richard Wetherill, their Mesa Verde guide, as “Dick.” Goldberg pounces. He refers to “the movement of identification and distance, of displacement and overlapping. ‘Dick,’” Goldberg claims, “is one of the sites where Cather and Lewis meet, the shared misnaming that makes Cather’s Dick also Edith Lewis’s, or perhaps the other way around. ‘Dick’ is also a (mis)naming of their relationship” (127). In order to accept such an argument, one must be a believer. But if one is a believer, one does not need the argument. There is a similar air of insistence in much of Goldberg’s writing that is not so much a weakness as a symptom. The excesses of queer studies may one day be chalked up to the inevitable overstatement of progressive discourse. However, if literature is primarily confessional (in a discussion of *The Professor’s House* [1925], Goldberg writes that “The professor’s female-identified movements, or his bonding with Augusta, arguably hint at a potential movement across gender and sexuality, and in the direction of Cather and Edith Lewis”), then literary critics ought to abdicate to psychoanalysts, who are better equipped for the job (147).

At the same time, Goldberg’s chapter on the connection between Cather and the inspiration for *The Song of the Lark* (1915), diva Olive Fremstad, is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the novel and to this rather bizarre infatuation. Goldberg refers to “the tense dynamic” of their relationship, a series of rebuffs and displays of friendship “which included protracted attention to *The Song of the Lark*,” including its original writing, its 1932 preface, and its 1937 final revisions. Noting that “Cather worked on *The Song of the Lark* from the beginning to almost the end of her career,” Goldberg presents evidence that Fremstad held “a long-lasting antipathy to Cather’s novel” (59, 49). The story he tells humanizes Cather, softens and introduces pathos into the profile of the iconic figure.

Equally illuminating is the attention he gives to Laura Gilpin, the photographer of the Southwest who wanted to do a photographic edition of *The Professor’s House*. Gilpin’s aim was to counter Tom Outland’s “small kodak” images of Mesa Verde with her own. It is not known whether Cather ever knew of the project. The connection that drives Goldberg is his contention that Gilpin had a “homeroetic” relationship to the American Southwest, and he explores what it might mean to call Gilpin’s work “a lesbian project” and by implication, what it might mean to label Cather’s similarly (162). He argues that the lack of discussion of Gilpin’s lesbianism resembles “the way Cather’s relationship with Edith Lewis . . . is made not to matter so much in writing about Cather” (164). Equally plausible, however, is that previous critical paradigms, lacking his creativity, did not make much of the Cather-Lewis relationship because little short of conjecture can be said responsibly. Nonetheless, to a substantial portion of humanity seeking to convince others, Cather’s potential status as lesbian icon demands this kind of close and creative scrutiny. Her aesthetics, including the pervasive subtlety of the thing not named, is well suited to conjecture. “It is because of such understatement,” Goldberg admits, “that so little can mean so much in Cather” (177).

Cather seldom does engage social and political issues directly. Nonetheless, as Goldberg states, the

disinclination to write socially engaged, activist texts does not mean that the politics of her representations can be dismissed as retrograde in every respect. The “secret” energies of her writing, the complex routes from male-male to female-female sexual relations are not necessarily politically progressive, but they do not follow in any simple way from Cather’s “politics.” [154]

In *Not in Sisterhood* Williams argues that it was just such disinclination that led to Cather’s (and Edith Wharton’s) canonization, while writers who did engage in the social and political issues of the day, such as Zona Gale, have been passed over by critics and institutional forces empowered

330 to create literary icons. If we apply Williams's logic to Goldberg (which, I should make clear, Williams does not do), we would conclude that had Cather been openly (that is to say, politically) lesbian or had she championed women's causes in her lifetime, she would be of little interest to us today. Her secrecy and her avoidance of social issues is, in part, responsible for her iconic status. The argument is not that her aloofness provided her the time she needed to perfect her craft, or that her artistry left her unconcerned with or unwilling to engage in social issues. Instead it is that *because* of her seemingly apolitical temperament, critics find her art appealing.

Williams analyzes Cather's and Wharton's "deliberate strategy" and "professional decision" to remain aloof and unassociated with political issues—especially women's issues—as premeditated plans to achieve literary canonization. The decision, according to Williams, "had profound implications for both writers' careers and for their status in literary history" (1). By comparison, Gale's "feminism, and her strong sense of female community" resulted in a very different strategy (*ibid.*). Gale did achieve popular and critical success in her lifetime; however, "her feminist fictions have not preserved a place for her in literary history" (2). Williams concludes that "Wharton's and Cather's rejection of public literary sisterhood was instrumental in their achieving canonical status, while Gale, who celebrated community, collaboration, and sisterhood, has been forgotten" (4). Feminist critics, seeking female icons in the 1970s, were drawn to Cather and Wharton as safe choices; the aesthetic quality of their texts as measured by dominant male standards was easily established, and, biographically, they fit the male model of genius. The politically active Zona Gale presented an alternative, actively feminist model, and was therefore overlooked. "Thus feminist critics have, perhaps subconsciously, replicated Wharton's and Cather's belief that literary authority is at odds with literary sisterhood" (5).

Williams's analysis of the correspondence between Gale and Wharton, and between Gale and Cather, is most intriguing. She argues that both sets of letters

reveal that Wharton's and Cather's disdain for literary female companionship had more to do with their public postures than with their private desires. In their private letters to Gale, both Wharton and Cather claim her as a literary sister who shares what Wharton calls the "community of spirit," which can be inhabited only by women of letters. [5]

Gale's very public literary sisterhood, in other words, was something quite consciously rejected by both women. Williams characterizes their refusal as "a plan of survival and success in the literary world" (6). Her argument is that Cather and Wharton each desired and privately expressed a belief in public sisterhood, but consciously suppressed such desires because they were constructing public personae more suited to established models of (male) literary genius. To march in the street, attend rallies, or otherwise participate in networks of literary sisterhood would have been to accept an inferior (female) model. Even worse, Williams argues, this behavior was rewarded by the feminist literary establishment, which overlooked activists like Gale in favor of women who abjured female traditions.

Williams's assumption, like Goldberg's, is that secrecy or reticence is not evidence of the need for privacy but is a mask for suppressed desire. The notion is useful to the extent that it may be employed to broaden the iconic relevance of the author. Like Wharton, Cather secretly believed in and thus, according to Williams, longed for public sisterhood:

Their letters reveal a desire for sisterhood that is not ever expressed publicly; sisterhood, for Wharton and Cather, exists as a private bond, not as public affiliation. In the world of the letter there is a private community within which the two correspondents exist, but in public both Wharton and Cather are silent about Gale, their friend and peer. [12]

Such secrecy is not the end of the matter, but the beginning. Secrets, in both books, are closeted desires—there is no such thing as legitimate reticence. "Wharton's and Cather's public silences about their female peers," Williams writes, "negate their privately expressed desire for sister-

hood" (12). She quotes and applies Helena Michie's notion of "sororophobia," which includes "both the desire for and recoil from identification with other women" (ibid.). In men, we might recognize it as the familiar drive of genius, the independent aloofness considered necessary to creation—but this is the masculine paradigm inside of which Cather and Wharton pursued their projects.

What evidence do the letters reveal? Wharton and Gale corresponded for over a decade, and never met. Gale visited Cather once, at her Bank Street apartment in 1929, and invited Cather to her parents' empty house (Cather declined). One reason may be that Cather dismissed nearly all female models as literary influences in order to create "her own myth of artistic origins" (38). Thus she "establishes similarities between herself and Gale but then immediately creates boundaries between them" (41). According to Cather, "getting too close . . . is the 'meanest thing' that one writer can do to another" (ibid.). Williams claims that both "Cather and Wharton are drawn to Gale, but they are afraid of being utterly pulled in; the threat of correspondence is too strong. The community of spirit, the correspondence they share, is written but not enacted" (ibid.). Here the iconic phenomenon returns. In a letter to Gale, Cather "sums up her ambivalence" when she argues that "one cannot live in a test tube, but that most contact is pernicious" (44). According to Williams, this expresses "the dilemma with which both Cather and Wharton wrestled throughout their careers: a tug-of-war between their need for recognition as individual artists . . . [and] their need for social contact, for community" (ibid.).

Questions arise. Is it not possible to prefer that some associations remain epistolary? Certainly, before e-mail and airplanes, human beings kept lifelong hardcopy correspondences with people whom they would scarcely recognize on the street, or whose physical company they may have shared only once or twice in a lifetime. Furthermore, when is it a "dilemma" to be divided in one's desire for individuality and community? Such ambivalence is as old as literary expression, no doubt as old as thought itself. These questions are not answerable by the evidence alone, but in conclusions which precede evidence. The "model" of solitary genius Williams refers to is the one assumed to originate in gendered experience, not the experience of genius alone, say, or the experience of solitary composition. The ideal is sisterhood, and for it to be an ideal, it must be something longed for by tragic figures, like Cather and Wharton, who could see no access to it that would sustain their art. "[A]lthough both could believe in a community of *spirit* with another woman writer," Williams argues, "neither could allow herself to become publicly a member of such a group. The private desire articulated in these letters gives voice to the public silence that Wharton and Cather used to maintain their artistic, authorial identities" (47).

As a result, Cather and Wharton see sisterhood as something more properly closeted, and in their fiction they "create hidden communities of spirit that flourish because of their secrecy" (91). All of the strong and unconventional women are textually marginal in *My Ántonia* (1918), for example. To bring such characters as Tony Soderball and Lena Lingard to the center would risk creating topical novels doomed to the dustbin of social-issue aesthetics. Cather knew that novels with "New Woman" themes were less successful critically, often labeled polemical, and usually forgotten as their specific arguments faded or their agendas were achieved. According to Williams, Cather and Wharton developed "obliqueness [as] . . . the best approach" and "*because* they were so successful, their strategy of indirectness has become part of feminist literary history" (123). The possibility that subtle or indirect methods may raise topical issues to the level of cultural phenomena is not the point.

The victims here are women who inherit a literary legacy. Williams's ultimate claim is that Cather's story "illustrates the consequences of choosing sisterhood as a model for literary authority" (163). This story is reminiscent of Richard Wright's flight from the Communist Party in the 1930s because the "brotherhood" (as Ralph Ellison would later characterize it) wanted to control his creativity. Williams has a similar quarrel with radical individuality, the kind which seems unheeding of sisterhood or brotherhood, much as it may long for what it rejects. R. W. B. Lewis's Adamic figure is invoked as the paradigm into which Cather and Wharton inserted themselves hyperconsciously: "*Because* their public authorial personae meshed so easily with the ideas about 'the artist' that Lewis and others helped to institutionalize," they have become iconic figures, while "Gale's popularity and social conscience work against her" (169–70). From this perspective, feminist critics work like dupes within models established by male critics.

332 Williams's conclusion is that "the writers who get singled out for particular attention are those who come the closest to the romantic ideal of the solitary genius," the implication being that "literary authority cannot be found in literary sisterhood" (175). Gale is excluded because "she does not fit into any of the critical paradigms that have been used in the last sixty-odd years to discuss U.S. literature and authorship for women and men. She is not the Adamic artist" (176).

Williams's scholarship is meticulous and her argument, while certainly debatable, is far from unfounded or insignificant. On the contrary, her thesis is one with which many feminist scholars and those interested in the processes of canonization must reckon. The present era is obsessed with personality, especially aspects of personality revealed through scrutiny, surveillance, and investigation. If Cather and Wharton surveyed the literary landscape and concluded that sisterhood—bonds of sympathy with other living women—was detrimental to their literary prospects, this would be sad but far from tragic. However, the implication of Williams's argument is that alienation is an enforced quality, and women are compelled into it if they wish to have their work taken seriously.

What this misses is anything resembling aesthetic valuation. Williams's criteria for becoming a great woman writer do not include linguistic beauty—no argument is *ever* marshaled to suggest that Gale's writing possesses aesthetic value equal to that of Cather's or Wharton's. Only her content makes Gale's writing inaccessible. Williams suggests, for example, that "Gale's political feminism has become a goddess-centered mysticism that most of society cannot or will not experience" (83). Nonetheless, Williams's insistence "that [Gale] is indeed 'good enough' for critical discussion," bears the weakness of all insistence; the statement remains unproven and lacks demonstration by textual evidence (*ibid.*). Instead, we are told that Gale's "disappearance points to the unfortunate fact that literary history does not yet know how to account for a career like hers" (177). It is the career, not the use of language, that is unaccountably lost to literary history; "one of the lessons learned from Gale's vanishing is that literary authority is still at odds with literary sisterhood" (*ibid.*). The issue of quality is begged and is, in the end, beside the point.

Beside the point of Williams's argument, perhaps; but the issue of quality cannot be irrelevant to literary study, else we, in the profession, become attenuated historians and social scientists. For Williams, literary sisterhood is the mark of literary achievement and (from the perspective of sexual justice) is what, in another era and for another cause, was termed "the good fight." Literature inevitably plays to social agendas. In the 1930s, Williams's voice might have been that of Granville Hicks, another critic who disparaged Cather for her seeming obliviousness to social causes. Marxist criticism in the 1930s pressed its litmus test of allegiance to economic justice as hard as Williams presses hers for sorority. The issue runs directly to a vein in literary study that Williams has, in her argument about the loss of Gale to literary history, examined closely. She is not the first to suggest that critical valuation is preternaturally opposed to socially committed writing. The conclusion remains unlikely. If so, it would not be easy to account for the succession of critical methodologies exploring the depths of William Faulkner's penetration into the psyche of American racism, or Cather's probing of gendered experiences. Critical valuation abhors transparency; it dismisses most writing deemed advocacy on the grounds that where solutions are proffered too readily, the human predicament that is represented probably does not merit aesthetic consideration. On this score, literary valuation assumes a conservative hue because it is drawn not so much to representations of ephemeral (but often pressing) manifestations of social struggle, but to the more abstract, and hence less engaged, structures of human existence. Writing that does not capture the way we live now but pushes our thinking toward greater refinement of both understanding and purpose is valued above all others.

The political content of aesthetic valuation, on the other hand, is a question raised by Williams's argument but not addressed systematically. Injustice never seems to pass from human experience, though its manifestations are indeed temporal. Gale may have been a good literary sister in her own lifetime, but Cather and Wharton are progenitrix; their language, not their politics, draws critical, imitative, and devotional attention from later generations. Literary history, on the other hand, is littered with writers whose politics outdistanced their aesthetics and whose voices, if not lost, are simply not very interesting to us now. This is not to say that Gale may not again become heard; literary criticism is also an arena of recovery, and Williams is engaged in a project

that does, at the very least, make us curious about Gale. Nonetheless, it will be on the strength of Gale's aesthetic appeal and not her devotion that she will, or will not, reach a level of iconic status and become, to borrow Cather's phrasing, a great fact of literary history.

Williams is more convincing in her suggestion that as a writer like Cather comes to possess iconic status, the meanings invested in the icon are more than incidental to the author's reputation. If she is a lesbian—not by rumor, gossip, or innuendo but as evidenced by her aesthetic choices, by the very form and structure of her novels—then we have in this iconic figure, one of the two or three greatest writers of the twentieth century, a lesbian who may now proceed through exegesis to normalize the image of the homosexual. To domesticate it, as it were, for cultural consumption. As Cather becomes an institution in schools and colleges a lesbian aesthetic moves from the margins to become a centralizing aesthetic, a voice that speaks not only for marginalized experience but for the American century itself. According to Goldberg, “the aim of [his] book” is to imagine “*the alterity that coexists with ordinary relationships*. And thus to imagine and to realize in and through others an alterity otherwise unimaginable” (179). The “alterity” experienced and projected by Cather, a product and manifestation of her lesbianism, is now recognizable as a universal condition. This is a little different from Williams's argument, where alienation is the product of the processes of canonization. For Williams, the icon's experience is presented as a cautionary tale, and an admonition to feminist critics: create aesthetic scales suitable to measure greatness in artists who model their lives on sisterhood, not isolation.

Both writers utilize normative models toward which progressive critical forces are marshaled. Similarly, for over thirty years, Faulkner's critique of race relations has buttressed his iconic status by providing progressive critics with materials through which to advance the cause of racial justice. Faulkner's critique, likewise, of abuses of sexual power supplied evidence to critics in the cause of sexual equality. The beauty and challenge of his prose, moreover, placed the cultural content of his writing in the context of rigorous literary exercises in exegesis. Cather's status today in the movement for justice for homosexuals and in women's studies parallels these examples. Some of Goldberg's readers will most certainly find his arguments excessive on occasion, and readers of Williams may speculate, as I have done here, on vital issues of formal quality. Those who have read Gale may simply disagree that she is as good as other women who have entered the canon. But for many these critiques will miss the point. As Cather's iconicity becomes more inescapable, questions about normative homosexuality will achieve greater currency, as will questions about Cather's status as a “woman” writer.

Maintaining these versions of the Cather icon is fraught with difficulties. She is the lesbian whose sexual practices cannot be established for certain, the woman writer who abjured feminist politics, or at best seemed uninterested in women's causes. Adjectives such as lesbian or feminist, when placed before the word “writer,” seem to slip off Cather when scrutinized. It may be that we can label her lesbian no more certainly than we can label her heterosexual, no more call her a feminist than we would accuse her of misogyny or misanthropy. Perhaps the Cather icon will come to stand as an admonition against our proclivity to assign character traits, political views, or sensibilities based on the end game of sexual pleasure or preferences for company. If sexuality is a continuum, with identification as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual mere transparencies, then perhaps the Cather icon is far from achieving its full articulation. Her sense of immanent mystery continues to inform our contemplation of human experience regardless of how it is gendered or politicized. Whatever the case, given the personal commitment displayed in the works under review, Cather's relevance to the efforts we make to determine where it is we are going is very clear.

Notes

1. Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather* (New York: Chelsea House, 1994).
2. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Dressing for the Part: [What's] The Matter with Clothes,” in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. Ann Romines (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 218.
3. Willa Cather, “The Novel *Démoublé*,” in *Not Under Forty* (1922; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 50.