

“Dock Burs in Yo’ Pants”

Reading Cather through *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

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“You ain’t got no call to be comf’able, you settin’ down de minute a body’s back’s turned. I wisht I could put dock burs in yo’ pants!”
— Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

Reading Willa Cather

Cultural critics are sometimes accused of ignoring the aesthetic qualities of a text, or at best of giving these qualities too little attention. Still, cultural criticism has arisen in part because formalism, from New Criticism through deconstruction, seems too little concerned with how the text functions in social and political discourse. It’s an old argument, really. Even back in 1937 social critics would say Willa Cather was politically irrelevant—wasn’t she the one who wrote about seventeenth-century Quebec in the midst of the Great Depression?—and New Critics would say she was pleasant but rather simple, lacking the dense passages worth explicating. By her own testimony Cather sought to leave the most vital elements of her fiction—the very thing she was writing about—off the page.

It is futile, and potentially destructive to literary study, to attempt to separate formalist and cultural concerns, and debates on the issue are more often questions of emphasis, not exclusion. Literary artists of the breadth and range of Willa Cather often instruct readers in how to see cultural concerns within new forms, and thus may redefine the terms and limitations of what it is possible to know, through their writing. Let’s take another southern example. William Faulkner entered the canon on the strength of his aesthetics; when critics first wrote about Faulkner, they employed phrases like “frozen moment” and “reader participation” to indicate that the *experience of reading* Faulkner was the primary thing to be valued in Faulkner’s work. That was the thing that catapulted Faulkner into the canon despite charges that his writing contained misogynist and racist content and that he participated in what was called “the cult of cruelty.” More recent criticism has challenged these indictments by claiming that Faulkner’s work explores racism and misogyny in heretofore unprecedented ways. Hence, we can say that Faulkner has instructed us to see racism, for example, as a matter of social and linguistic construction (as he does in

Light in August), and to see misogyny as a manifestation of male hysteria (as he does in *Sanctuary*). The point to remember in this process of canonization, however, is not that critics can explain away anything—although of course they can. Rather, we should recognize the way in which meaning follows form, and literary ethics emerge from formal textual engagement. Engagement, in turn, can begin only *after* a reader is captivated by a text’s literary quality. First comes Benjamin Compson, in other words, full of sound and fury, and then comes puzzled attention, the suspicion of the significance, making a pattern out of obscurity.

But where is Cather’s Benjy section? Where are those dense passages wherein we create our own euphoria by acts of heroic exegesis? It was not until the 1970s that Cather began to be read as more than a sweet old lady, that old-fashioned, Victorian “Miss Cather” we have all heard about. Fifty years after her death, we continue working to align form and content in Cather. However, Cather instructs her readers as definitively as Faulkner, and it is within the texts themselves that we find their cohesive logic. For Cather’s Benjy section, I nominate *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather’s most challenging narrative, and one that most clearly encapsulates those narrative strategies identified as Catherian.

The act of reading *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* must not be decoyed by the seemingly transparent prose, or daunted by the need to make its politics comfortable in the present era. We do not wish to emulate Henry Colbert, reading and rereading the same book but still failing to perceive its challenge to do difficult thinking. Colbert was unable to find “a clear condemnation of slavery” (110) in his biblical text, despite the anachronistic status of the institution in 1856 Virginia. Colbert, to his credit, suspects, “Perhaps our bewilderment came from a fault in our perceptions” (111). Our perceptions are precisely what Cather is concerned with in all of her works, including this novel. If we read Cather’s whole career through the lens provided by *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, our perceptions of that career alter considerably. Critics have tended to read *Sapphira* as a minor work because, frankly, in some aspects it doesn’t sit too well with us. Cather readers are far more likely to place *My Antonia* at the center of the oeuvre, leaving *Sapphira* on the margins. However, contemporary valuations of multiplicity suggest infinite potential centers, successively revealing enriched understandings. Cather was a Virginian, and *Sapphira* claims its right to the center by virtue of its Virginia setting and by the signature Cather placed upon it herself, on its final page.

Old Jezebel would mete out justice through her sewing; to lazy boys she would provide a rough trouser seat, and to hard workers she would stitch a smooth one. Cather is easy to read; even a lazy boy can do it. But on all readers she stitches an occasional rough seat, such as when she refers to Nancy’s “dreamy, nigger side” (178) or describes Sampson’s head as “full

behind the ears, shaped more like a melon lying down than a peanut standing on end" (109). We all know what it's like to come across one of those Cather passages and think, "She oughtn't-a done that." Remember what old Jezebel said to one boy who complained about his rough-seated pants: "You ain't got no call to be comf'able, you settin' down de minute a body's back's turned. I wisht I could put dock burs in yo' pants!" (97). Throughout Cather's fiction there are "dock burs" that stick when you start to relax, prickly things that cannot be accommodated easily or explained smoothly, things that don't sit right. Not all of these are embarrassing moments. Equally important are eruptions of the inexplicable, such as the fact that Krajiak's ax fits so perfectly into the gash on Mr. Shimerda's head; or when the soon-to-be-fired accompanist Mockford turns up after four months on Sebastien's Italian vacation, in *Lucy Gayheart*, to accompany him on the capsizing and the drowning. These are things to remember, incidents when secret fears or suspicions are revealed, when what someone really thinks or what the hidden truth is slips out, spilling revelation across polite veneers of custom.

As Carl says in *O Pioneers!*, "It's queer what things one remembers and what things one forgets" (160). Sometimes it's queer what Cather considers an appropriate detail, like the appearance of the malevolent sniper in *One of Ours* who "kept his nails so pink and smooth," the better not to snag on the "gorgeous silk dressing gown" (348) he wore when he was not shooting American soldiers out his window. These are moments that can be elided quickly in Cather, unless one wishes to think about them, in which case they stick. But I suspect that these dock burs are very important, and must be recognized and incorporated into the way we know Cather. It's queer what Willa Cather remembered when she let herself remember Virginia, to write her "southern novel" of reminiscence and recognition. Alexandra explains this process of recognition to Carl: "It's by understanding me, and the boys, and mother, that you've helped me. I expect that is the only way one person ever really can help another" (35). Each of Cather's novels, as with each novel written by any author who possesses a substantial body of work, provides a way of seeing the career as a whole. To view Cather through *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is to look through the dock bur—but let's not pursue that image any further. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that inside a bur is another thing entirely, a seed that grows into something else. Readers of Cather are accustomed to dramatic shifts in conceptual levels, moving into "Tom Outland's Story" in *The Professor's House* or into narratives of the miraculous in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. These little disturbances of the text operate like dock burs, making the reader aware of physicality—the physical act of reading—but also pushing the reader into alternate casts of mind, to levels of comprehension only accessible through literary modes of thought.

Very often in Cather an everyday occurrence is raised out of its literal significance to achieve a kind of transcendent timelessness; to enter the world of art, yes, but also to command a different level of perception. Because so much of Cather's writing is rooted in memory and autobiography, we can be assured that Cather depended upon such moments for aesthetic inspiration. We might think of these as points of verticality, where the historical, material world intersects with the aesthetic or spiritual world of art, escape, and inspiration.¹ In Emersonian terms, it is the intersection of materialism and idealism, a crossing between the world that contains consciousness and the world produced by consciousness. In his essay "The Transcendentalist," Emerson says, "It is the quality of the moment, not the number of days, of events, or of actors, that imports" (104). Cather, I suggest, fits Emerson's definition of the transcendentalist, as one "who looks at [her] life from these moments of illumination." As such, "Much of our reading, much of our labor, seems mere waiting," waiting for the illumination, the moment of passage (106). When Nancy returns, after young Willa Cather's long wait, and has her reunion with Till, the scene is indeed described in the language of transcendence: "There was something Scriptural in that meeting, like the pictures in our old Bible" (283). I would stress the possessive pronoun "our" because it is crucial to see how Cather grounds the cosmic, scriptural moment in local, private memories. Her claim is not access to some secret truth, some Gnostic revelation or esoteric insight; rather the claim is to a practiced, accessible way of seeing the world around us. Such moments—picture making, cliff dwelling, eagle flying—mark Catherian connections to a dimension of existence that is mysterious, otherworldly; but it is equally within the grasp both of those who work the plot of world empires and those who work, modestly, at what Ann Romines calls the home plot. Cather's novels are replete with these moments. Sometimes they appear through a window (as to Professor St. Peter) or in a specific place (as Latour's cruciform tree) or, romantically, in a remembered moment or gesture that fills the present with inspiration or longing. Nancy's return is the genesis both of the novel and—if we take Willa Cather at her word—of the author herself, of what might be described as the "named and name-collecting adult writer" in this novel (Swift 24). Motion is central to this transcendence, but Nancy's mobility in space is nothing compared to the spiritual journey she has made, signaled by her dress, her speech, and her demeanor.

Of all writers of this century, Cather demonstrates the profit to be gained by moving outside of what we today would call our "comfort zone." The dock bur is as well a signal of constant attentiveness, especially to those phenomena that are troublesome, foreign, or other. The idea of engagement, of sustained and varied interest, the ability to be, like Thea Kronborg, "a soul obsessed by what it did not know" (*The Song of the Lark* 174),

is central to everything Cather wrote, and indispensable to reading her books. Again I take my model from *Sapphira*, where Mandy Ringer is described as one who lives engaged with her world: "Mrs. Ringer was born interested. She got a great deal of entertainment out of the weather and the behavior of the moon. Any chance bit of gossip that came her way was a godsend. The rare sight of a strange face was a treat. . . . Mrs. Ringer couldn't read or write . . . but the truth was she could read everything most important: the signs of the seasons, the meaning of the way the wood creatures behaved, and human faces" (119). Mrs. Ringer, though illiterate, is what country folk call a "reader." She models the kind of discernment Cather demands. According to Mildred Bennett, Mrs. Ringer might also provide a model for the kind of narrator Cather once wished to become. Bennett says that "Miss Cather told [Bread Loaf] students that her first teacher in narrative was an old mountain woman in the hills of Virginia . . . [,] a woman who could neither read nor write, but who knew the life of the mountain, the folk phrases which no one had written or could write, but which are the product of years and generations" (208-9).

Cather's mentor in narrative method was someone with wide interests who read not for simple validation but who saw the other, as we say today, as a treat, something to look forward to and to enjoy, a godsend. A dock bur feels good, intellectually speaking. We cannot read Cather unless we are willing to get interested in a lot of things we do not know: operatic careers, Southwest settlement, orchard planting, theology, slave management. She beckons interested readers to migrate outside the self.

The dock bur thus takes many forms in Cather's fiction, sometimes troublesome, other times revelatory—as if to stop you in your tracks—and very often the bur serves to give flight into a kind of intellectual migration. The Catherian dock bur is a narrative road sign, something that arrests; it works much the same as Cather's explanation of the title of her book of essays, *Not Under Forty*. That title functioned as a sign meaning ROAD UNDER REPAIR, because the world had broken in two and only those over forty would understand (v). Naturally, this would cause people under forty to pay attention. Dock burs mark breaks in the road, and sometimes they mark breaks in the world. Worldly breaks are scriptural or transcendent moments in Cather, when the stuff of ordinary life impinges on, or intersects with, the realm of art—when the real detail (the Bohemian immigrant girl's attempts to learn English, the misfit who enlists in the army, the archbishop's journey through the desert) fires the imagination of the artist and becomes the touchstone to an aesthetic possession. To be "brushed by the wing of a great feeling," as Jim Burden says, is to see the potential for greatness in the mundane, to apply the mind to Nebraska, as it were, or to the coast of New England, or Back Creek, Virginia and the likes of Mandy

Ringer. Someone, in other words, has to engage deeply the toothless, battered woman and see what it is that "could stop one's breath for a moment" and reveal "the meaning in common things" (261). The dock bur, like the scriptural moment in Cather, defines her aesthetics, which is indeed an aesthetics of common things raised to the level of great significance.

DOCK BUR NO. 1

The Breakfast Table at McDonald's, 1997

As I explained recently to another homeless academic over Egg McMuffin, what I really want to say is that Cather writes about slavery and doesn't make it into some grand tragedy but rather draws it as a simple matter of household regulation, like who is going to sleep where and who has the right to have sexual relations with whom. My colleague chewed. I kept talking. For Willa Cather it is not a matter of cosmic justice or the sins of the fathers or the shame of the nation—just a simple matter of who gets to decide when certain people are going to have sex, and what it is going to mean when they do, you know, are they going to get rewards—presents and property—or are they going to lose everything because of it. The people who are comfortable with those rules are the people who really are at home in this world; the others are just a-wanderin'. How Willa Cather came to think this is a long story, too long for a breakfast-table fast-food exchange.

A-wanderin' Agin

But Cather does not stay in flight. Her narratives also become suddenly grounded in the grit of vernacular reality. An emblematic dock bur occurs in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* when Sapphira visits Jezebel on one of the few missions of mercy she takes in the novel, and asks the bedridden old slave woman what she would like to eat. Jezebel replies, "No'm, I cain't think of nothin' I could relish, lessen maybe it was a li'l pickaninny's hand." Cather sticks her readers this way all the time. One thinks of blind D'Arnault in *My Antonia* or the comments about Marsellus in *The Professor's House*, to name some of the more notorious. But there are also incidents such as Ivar's compulsive need to wash his feet, Cécile's priggish behavior at the Harnois household, Father Lucero's commentary about the shape of Father Martinez's nose and chin, or "the lost American" who cannot remember the women in his life, in *One of Ours*. At such points we are likely to say what Nancy says to Sapphira after Jezebel's reply: "Oh, she's a-wanderin' agin! She wanders turrible now. Don't stay, Missy! She's out of her haid!" (89). Cather must have been out of her head, we think, to dream up the plot of

Sapphira, and certainly out of her head in the various discussions of heads in the text. What does she mean by writing that Rachel had “the same set of head” as her father, indicating an “enduring yet determined” (11) character—what is this, phrenology? Sapphira is crippled, Lawndis is lame, and Colbert is blind to Nancy’s predicament. How are we to read this sustained attention to physicality, often brutal in characterization, in a book where race plays so prominent a role? “When kindness has left people,” Cather writes in *My Mortal Enemy*, “we become afraid of them, as if their reason had left them.” Reading Cather provides the repeated experience of being startled by the absence of secure moorings to which the reader can cling. In fact, to borrow again from *My Mortal Enemy*, “we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless” in Cather’s Virginia novel (42). As Merrill Skaggs phrases it, Sapphira Dodderidge is “one of [Cather’s] most startling characters,” and the novel as a whole makes us “deeply uncomfortable” (176, 177). There are many places where a blue pencil could make this text a lot more palatable. Nonetheless, or rather, all the more, Cather has something very interesting to say about race in this novel, something grounded in the relationship between physical reality—the mundane, the everyday, the black and the white—and transcendent meaning, or significance.

Reaction to racial difference is very often sensual, sensory, and immediate. Race consciousness interferes with cognition, rationality, and common sense. To society at large it is crippling; it complicates any issue in which it factors. Cather’s novel about the antebellum South thus compels interest: what is it about race that could make these people behave this way? Think of the ways in which the deck was stacked against Sapphira Dodderidge. First, Frederick Law Olmstead had warned the world about Virginia in 1856: “Under no circumstances can I recommend anyone in the free states to choose in Virginia a residence for a family, unless a move southward be deemed particularly desirable, as offering a chance to prolong life, imperiled in our harsher atmospheres” (340). Olmstead made this assessment based on comparative real estate values in Virginia and Pennsylvania, pointing out that the market price of a farm in Pennsylvania was roughly three times that of an identical farm in Virginia (\$25 an acre in Pennsylvania as opposed to \$8 an acre in Virginia). Second, the limitations on female inheritance and property management make Sapphira emblematic of Fox-Genovese’s statement that women in the plantation South were subordinated “to the domination of male heads of households” (39). Often, not even death could wrest control of property from men. “Slaveholding women might inherit households from their fathers or husbands, but they almost invariably turned the management over to men in practice, even if a will or marriage settlement had left them legally in the women’s control”

(Fox-Genovese 203). Third, Cather’s novel captures the complexity of relationships carried out by the female slaveholder, between herself and her slaves, and among herself, her slaves, and her husband. In the words of one historian, “It was a task at once urgent and disturbingly abstract” (Steven M. Stowe 131).

Reading *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* calls for a combination of formalist and culturally sensitive methods of scrutiny. Cather was interested—very interested—in the complex legacy of race, sex, and property that contributes to the current matrix of class and status in the South and throughout the United States. Given the exactitude with which she presented historical and natural detail (phrases like “oak leaves no bigger than a squirrel’s ear”), we must be on the lookout for dock burs, we must examine very closely those historical incidents that are described on “scriptural” terms, the details that Cather selects to transcend the confines of the historical. Second, we must examine elements that leave no historical or natural traces, places where Cather’s engagement led her to imagine rather than recall. Finally, we must attend to aspects that cause us some discomfort, the points where we might say, “she’s a-wanderin’ agin.” For with Cather, the cultural critic is interested not so much in checking the facts or celebrating the invention but in the peculiar institution in Cather of blending these two realms of existence. A close look at Sapphira reveals this method.

In Acts 5 of the New Testament, the biblical Sapphira and her husband, Ananias, are among the new Christians selling their property and giving away all the proceeds to join the Church. But these two supplicants attempt to keep back part of the purchase price. Their cosmic real estate swindle falls through, and Ananias and Sapphira are caught and then struck dead for trying to beat Christ in trade. Sapphira is cross-examined by Peter: “Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much?” And she said, ‘Yea, for so much.’” Then she, like her husband, is struck down for the offense of having “agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord” (Acts 5:8–11). Sapphira’s is thus a triple offense: once, for lying to God; twice, for holding loyalty to her husband above her obligation to the Lord; and thrice, for her attempt to own property *and* be a member of a community that holds property in common. The central points in the biblical Sapphira’s life thus center on misrepresentation, idolizing marriage vows, and holding property above sacred duties.

The story of Sapphira and Ananias is a tricky one for contemporary Christians. “This Jesus would strike you down dead for lying,” claimed one Web page devoted to such objections. “Is this the ‘love,’ ‘compassion,’ and ‘forgiveness’ of this Jesus of yours? It looks to me as though you people are lying not only to yourselves but to everyone else that hears you preach about this Jesus” (“Sapphira”). The episode of Ananias and Sapphira is a

dock bur in the Good News, to be sure. Acts 5 is an uncomfortable moment in the New Testament; it is scriptural, disturbing, and engaging. By choosing this name for her main character, Cather makes it impossible to read the woman as a simple villain. After all, what kind of people would name their daughter Sapphira? How did this name affect Sapphira's sense of herself, knowing that she carried in name the legacy of a woman struck dead by God for not telling the truth, for wanting to hold back something for herself? Like Melville's Ahab, Sapphira (both the Acts' and Cather's) defied her time and place and our God, and we are thus justifiably fascinated.

At the same time, voices from the antebellum South in support of slavery are equally unnerving. Throughout the nineteenth century, slave management studies were published in the southern agricultural press. Although these studies are not easily found today, they are crucial to an understanding of a major American ideology that, although defeated in war, is far from irrelevant to the nation's historical legacy. "Between 1819 and the outbreak of the Civil War approximately two dozen agricultural publications were started in the South," containing advice on conducting plantation business, managing slave labor, and theorizing slavery. Some of these titles were *American Cotton Planter* (Montgomery, Alabama, 1853–61), *American Farmer* (Baltimore, 1819–61), *Farmer's Register* (Petersburg, Virginia, 1833–42), *Southern Agriculturalist* (Charleston, South Carolina, 1828–46), *Southern Cultivator* (Atlanta, 1843–61), and perhaps the best known, *De Bow's Review* (New Orleans, 1846–61) (Breedon xii). Students of American history are understandably more familiar with abolitionist writing, the word of the victors, than with defenses of slavery, except those filtered through a secondary historical or fictional lens.

We have the tendency, I think, to overly historicize statements such as this one by Robert Collins from his *Essay on the Treatment and Management of Slaves*, published in 1853: "Slavery was established and sanctioned by divine authority; and ever since the decree went forth, that the descendants of Canaan should be 'servants of servants,' slavery has existed in a variety of forms, and in nearly all nations; until now, in the midst of the nineteenth century, we find ourselves the owners of three and a half millions of this peculiar race, *without any agency on our part*" (4; emphasis added). Collins's statement becomes palatable through extreme acts of historicization. However, efforts to historicize often act as apologia, as if all people at all times are not merely products but victims of their time and place. If this were so—if historical figures are essentially *without agency*, trapped by their times—we would have no sense of history, because time would stand still and progress would be impossible, if not inconceivable. Collins's denial of agency signals a universal sense of abject victimization, of having inherited a social and economic system and now being left to maintain it, or at least

cope with it. The statement is as pathetically self-serving as Henry Colbert's Bible study, searching for a condemnation of slavery in textual materials written when enslavement was a historical commonplace, along with various forms of sanctioned cruelty, like crucifixion. Cather's slave owners are far from victims, however, but rather emerge as beneficiaries of a system absent which, it seems clear, they could not imagine existence. Nonetheless, they are surrounded by alternatives to slave agriculture, and cannot by any stretch of the imagination claim to have become slave owners without any agency on their part.

In Virginia in the 1850s, it took tremendous managerial skills to make any profit within an agricultural system so at odds with industrial progress. Because her husband was an ambivalent slave master as best, nearly all managerial decisions were left to his wife. Like her biblical namesake, Sapphira grapples with a conflict between the bonds of marriage and the establishment of economic independence. Comments by "Cecilia," a Virginia planter's wife, writing in 1843, are instructive because they suggest the historical context that engages Cather's antebellum novel. Cecilia, a contemporary of Sapphira's, writes: "the turmoil and labor of the mistress of a family, in the management of her servants seem to warrant the conclusion, that the trouble of housekeeping more than counterbalances the comforts and enjoyments procured by the labors of her domestics. Indeed, very few Virginia ladies, comparatively speaking, are brought up in a way calculated to make them what we call *good managers*" (Breedon 38). Nonetheless, Sapphira *was* a good manager, and she was able to emerge as an effective slave master despite the handicaps of gender, physical health, a countermending husband, and poor land quality. As such, she is one of the "very few Virginia ladies" Cecilia mentions, those who are raised to manage slaves. No victim, Sapphira is a woman of remarkable agency.

DOCK BUR NO. 2

The Trash Receptacle, 1997

I was throwing over my fast-food trash and my colleague asked me what I was going to say, then, about these wandering folk, the ones that are like caged birds held captive by a narrow set of circumstances (we'd been discussing Jewett, also) and I said I didn't know, I hadn't decided yet whether to say that I found Sapphira truly heroic, that if only through the control of property could she achieve independent agency, then she did the best she could, and qualifies, in my mind, for the mantle of Faulknerian common hero, a genuine "poor son of a bitch"² she was, because all she wanted to do was to keep her husband from making a fool of her. And she was successful, you know, she got what she wanted, though it cost her a bit

more than she had planned. A runaway slave is a lot better than a husband fussing over one like she was his daughter or niece or worse—Anyway, I wouldn't say Sapphira was disabled by her circumstances.

Back Creek

Unwed at twenty-four years, unwed even after her two younger sisters are married, Sapphira accounts for her spinsterhood by claiming an obligation to care for her crippled father. Although Cather says that Sapphira “usually acted upon motives which she disclosed to no one. That was her nature” (22), her story reveals a woman who refuses to be trapped by circumstances. After her father dies, at the moment “when the property was divided, Sapphira announced her engagement to Henry Colbert” (24). The announcement astounds her friends, but it shouldn't; if Sapphira does not get married, she won't inherit property and will in all likelihood be compelled to move in with one of her married sisters. “It was not uncommon for spinsters to receive smaller inheritance shares and then to be farmed out to sibling households and expected to sacrifice themselves for the needs of their reproductive kin” (Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 85). To avoid this fate, Sapphira obtains her inheritance before her father's death, and selects a husband to secure her property holdings. Rachel thinks “she herself was by nature incapable of understanding her mother” (219), and given the marriage Rachel experienced, this is not surprising. Her mother would never settle for what Rachel had in Washington, where, for example, Rachel would take “the whole day to prepare [her husband's] favorite dishes” (138). Her mother, on the other hand, went to Back Creek with twenty slaves and sold them back to Loudoun County when cash was needed.³ Her success is marked by the loyalty of her slaves, as shown when Sampson refuses manumission and Nancy has serious doubts about leaving home. In an era of masculine privilege, Sapphira is in nearly complete control of her destiny. “You think me the child of my circumstances,” says Emerson; “I make my circumstances. . . . You call it the power of circumstances, but it is the power of me” (95). Sapphira may be Cather's transcendentalist, a form of Virginia revenge on New England.

In the final section of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather claims to have been sung to sleep each night by the same lullaby Martin sings in his efforts to seduce the slave girl. Young Willa says she “never doubted the song was made about our Nancy” (281), although she informs us that she had never heard of Martin or, presumably, of his connection with the slave girl (290). But it is the adult writer, grown-up Willa Cather, who places “that old darky song” in Martin's mouth when he pursues Nancy at the cherry tree, and thus has young Willa unknowingly sung to sleep by Martin's song of

sexual aggression. Is there something soothing in this song? Or is Cather playing the role that Cynthia Griffin Wolff identifies with her, that of the “dang'ous nigger,” referring to an outburst young Cather once made to a visitor at Willow Shade. “How can we understand the complete meaning of this eruption?” Wolff asks. “What untellable story does it intimate?” (229). It may intimate that Cather knew as a five-year-old child what Faulkner would write in *The Sound and the Fury*, “that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among” (95). Cather could thus imagine the “dang'ous nigger” who put dock burs in your pants and the “dreamy nigger” who attracted and almost welcomed the very action she feared most. In each case, the woman departs from one form of behavior—safe, scripted—and engages in another, “a-wanderin' agin” toward some more deeply felt need, even courting danger, like the diphtheria patient who feeds herself in the middle of the night, marking “how sometimes in dreams a trivial thing took on a mysterious significance one could not explain” (259).

Two dock burs are sewn into the narrative of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: the character of Sapphira, the woman of agency and of much cruelty as a slave owner; and the author herself, who sews herself into the narrative in the last chapter. The two threads are cross-stitched, really. Sapphira Dodderidge has succeeded in a traditionally masculine setting; she has transcended gender and emerged as a property owner and plantation manager. She does with impunity what male slave owners were known to do: she buys and sells her slaves, she sexually abuses them, and she punishes them harshly. This dock bur compels us to think about the structure of gender differences. Her husband, Henry, is feminized in the novel; he seems ineffectual, acts only passively to help his daughter, and reminds Sapphira that she, not he, is master. It is almost to say that a wife is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the husband she lives with. In this case, Henry reflects a master in Sapphira, and becomes wife himself. Sexual dominance is among the master's functions, and hence the dock bur of Sapphira's actions against Nancy. Out of this gender confusion emerges young Willa Cather, author, name giver, and witness. Who knows what songs of sexual aggression were sung to Sapphira as a young girl, but Cather's closing section (“The Return”) makes clear that the lullabies that were meant to soothe her childhood fears (*Down by the cane brake, close by the mill, / Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till*) have emerged, in the mind of the author, as unspeakable horrors. The dock bur of what Sapphira Dodderidge had to do to maintain her role as Master may contain within it the psychic struggles experienced by young Willa Cather as she emerged as Author.

Sapphira may have been temporarily outmaneuvered by her husband and daughter, but she is successful in ridding herself of the slave girl. She exiles

Nancy, absorbs the loss, and manages to “forgive” everyone involved and reunite the family. Rachel also gets away with defying her mother. Nancy gets away with running away. And Willa Cather gets away with inserting herself into the novel, in an encore display of her career-long intersection of biographical, historical, and literary materials. In addition to incorporating remembered events and researched facts, *Sapphira* incorporates its author in the act of writing, making of her, too, something scriptural. In Willa Cather’s fiction, there are no clear borderlines among the real, the remembered, and the imagined. These dimensions of existence continually intersect and vivify one another. Common incidents may transcend their actuality and take on a mysterious significance; figurative, literary qualities may attach to common events like dock burs. In 1921, Cather claimed that “if a person is wide awake and not self-centered he can see those interesting things in the life of those about him” (Bohlke 27).

It is commonplace to observe that the simplicity of Cather’s prose is deceptive, and must be traversed with care. To this we must add that where the narrative signs say ROAD UNDER REPAIR, readers must prepare to be catapulted out of simplicity; they must not allow their own “foolish, dreamy, nigger side” to let them walk into something without comprehension. Such moments require all the intellectual armaments we can muster. Cather refers to the geological structures that interfere with road building: “The road followed the ravine, climbing all the way, until at the ‘Double S’ it swung out in four great loops round hills of solid rock; rock which the destroying armament of modern road-building has not yet succeeded in blasting away. The four loops are now denuded and ugly, but motorists, however unwillingly, must swing around them if they go on that road at all” (*Sapphira* 170–71).

The reader encounters such obstacles throughout Cather’s fiction. Plowing into them can be dangerous, even “dang’ous,” if one does so unprepared for the encounter. Modern road building may blast away much of the mystery and smooth our journey tremendously, but some roads remain impassable.

One can always “swing around” the impasse, ignore the dock bur, and be untroubled by what one elides. When Henry Colbert reads, we are told, he does so “with his mind as well as his eyes,” raising questions and finding contradictions that “troubled him” (66). The question that arises is how to confront narrative troubles. Colbert endured his; what shall we do? Reading brings pleasure to those who love literature, and pleasure allows a process of comprehension to begin. As pleasures of the body open it to seduction and to encounters with other bodies, so too pleasures of the mind make it intellectually receptive, receptive also to ideas and perspectives it might otherwise reject. Catherian dock burs function this way, to push the

reader past pleasure toward transcendence by means of temporary roughness, or discomfort. How much smoother on the seat had Henry raped Nancy and Sapphira risen to her defense. How much easier for us all had Martin been violent and not so mesmerized by Nancy’s beauty and her scent. These details are troublesome and stand like denuded rocks, blocking the way toward easy conclusions. If the destination of readers is contemplative, these narrative burs are ends in themselves, imaginative outcroppings, where the mind of the author achieves full exposure, rubbing up as it were against something deeply disturbing, revelatory, and transcendent.

The author claims that on the day of Nancy’s return she was ill; she had a cold and was not allowed to go outside. Surely, in a novel where physical incapacitation plays such a central role, the illness is not insignificant. Young Willa Cather is placed in her mother’s bed, her body ministered to by others as Sapphira’s had been. Cather’s is the privileged body, her eyes the privileged eyes, set as they are in a manner to serve as witness to the events that inspired the novel. Master in her own right, the author has suffered for this privilege. To this day, we don’t know how well or to what extent young Willa Cather ever recovered from the childhood illness afflicting her on the day of Nancy’s return; but judging by the lifetime of writing that followed from it, we know that she did not, like some hurried motorist, swing around those seemingly insurmountable obstacles to comprehension.

Notes

1. Sven Birkerts explores the idea of vertical reading at some length.
2. See Faulkner, *The Mansion*.
3. The fact that Sapphira was selling slaves to raise money is further indication of the declining economy in Virginia during her lifetime. Olmstead explains that “the cash value of a slave for sale, above the cost of raising it from infancy to the age at which it commands the highest price, is generally considered among the surest elements of a planter’s wealth” (60). Selling slaves to raise money thus parallels the selling of any asset (such as landholdings), and is thus an indication of declining economic status.