

# Epilogue: The Difference That Letters Make: A Meditation on *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*

by ANDREW JEWELL AND JANIS STOUT

Anyone who works on Cather knows what a difference it makes to have or not to have the letters. Years of difficult access and the need to paraphrase, or to read only in someone else's paraphrases, approximate at best, fastened our eyes toward a hoped-for future when the letters themselves, or at least some of them, would be readily accessible in print. Even so, the question posed here—What difference do letters make?—seems worth thinking about, both in a general way and in ways that pertain specifically to *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*.

*The Art of Literary Biography*, John Batchelor writes this about the importance of biography to literary study: “We read the work. Then we read the biography. Then we read the work again and we see more” (9). If we go to a writer's own letters instead of someone else's biography of that writer, the principle that Batchelor enunciates becomes even more sharply true. Our primary purpose remains the works themselves, but having letters available to consult enables us to read the works with more understanding. Everyone knows that's true in a general way, but we hope to show some specific ways in which it is true for Cather. In addition to their value for their own sake, of course, literary works are also read for the access they afford to great and interesting minds. And for that purpose too, letters make a huge difference. It isn't that novels and stories and poems don't provide entrée into a writer's mind; they do, and in ways that letters or diaries or whatever do not. But letters are more direct. Even if the writers of letters sometimes shade the truth a bit, letters provide a more naked access to the human mind that is generating the novels, stories, or poems. So we can see right off two main categories of ways in which letters make a difference: first, we read the letters and when we read the works again we see more in them; and second, we read the letters and we come more closely, more directly, in touch with the author and how she thinks. It is a distinction worth making, because one may be more important to some readers and the other more important to others. But they're both true.

Nevertheless, we have heard, since the release of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, a few voices expressing deep objections to the publication of personal writings that Cather herself explicitly asked not to be published. We received our first piece of hate mail; one reviewer referred to the logic for publication that we outlined in the introduction as “self-

“serving”; and writers of anonymous comments on several media websites made clear, sometimes with the vitriol that Internet anonymity encourages, that they were disgusted we would so brazenly ignore Cather’s wishes. One of those commenting on the London *Guardian*’s site hurled an especially delicious insult by calling us “cheeky blighters.” Several reporters and readers have asked us if we felt guilty for having decided to publish materials Cather didn’t want published. The answer is no. Neither of us has even the slightest sense of guilt or remorse, not the slightest worry that we made a mistake in deciding to produce this volume of letters. We are very happy to have been able to bring these letters to the general reading public, who we believe will find them interesting and illuminating, and to scholars, who we know will find them useful.

Precisely why Cather forbade the publication of her letters remains something of a mystery, but the concerns and contexts that led to her decision, as expressed in her Last Will and Testament, no longer obtain. It was good that her wishes were respected for many decades and that she was empowered, through her will and the efforts of her first two literary executors, to control, for the most part, the public status of her personal writings. But even Cather knew that the demands of the dead should not be heeded indefinitely. While unequivocal in its preferences, her will also recognizes its inability to govern the future, in that she left the decision of whether to enforce her directive as to publication of the letters to the “sole and uncontrolled discretion of [her] Executors and Trustees.” Thankfully, the current executor—the Willa Cather Trust, a partnership between the Willa Cather Foundation and the University of Nebraska Foundation, set up with the cooperation of Cather’s family—believes that its responsibility to care for her literary estate in the twenty-first century means bringing positive public attention to Cather and supporting accurate, informed scholarship on her life and work. The publication of Cather’s letters serves both of these goals.

Yet our personal peace with defying Cather’s wishes is only partially due to the legal blessing of the Willa Cather Trust. The foundation of our comfort is a deeply held sense that these letters are remarkable texts that deserve to be a part of the canon of Cather studies and American literary history more broadly. They are insightful, entertaining, emotional, revealing, and often thrilling to read. They resurrect Cather’s vibrant personality and shake off the image of the distant, remote, obscure, and somewhat crabby author that so many have previously assumed her to have been. Reading the range of the letters she wrote across the decades of her life, one begins to realize how that decision to ban publication, made in 1943 when her mind was clouded by illness, grief, and despair at the world at war, has muddied her biographical legacy. The availability of the letters to a wider public will make considerable difference in the future’s understanding of Cather.

## JANIS STOUT:

My first experience of working with a writer’s letters came about as a result of my being invited (in 1989 or thereabouts) to write an intellectual biography of Katherine Anne Porter for a University Press of Virginia series called *Minds of the New South*. Until that time, and largely because of personal circumstances that prevented my traveling for research purposes, I had solely done close reading of published texts, nothing that involved archival materials. But in order to produce a study defined as an intellectual biography, I obviously had to get behind Porter’s publications into the extensive archival record of her life and her thinking. Fortunately, most of her letters were in one place. Except for a modest-sized though very valuable group of letters to Josephine Herbst at the Beinecke Library at Yale, I was able to use the resources of only a single archive, at the University of Maryland. During the early 1990s, when I was writing *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*, I made a number of trips to College Park, where for days I spent every hour from the library’s opening time in the morning to its closing in the afternoon transcribing, at first by pencil and only later

by computer, what struck me as the most important or most interesting passages from the enormous holdings of letters there. It was impossible to transcribe Porter's letters in their entirety. There were too many, and my travel time was still too limited. But in addition to the excerpted passages I brought away, the experience taught me the value of letters. I knew I was getting to know Katherine Anne Porter when I could read a letter and tell when she was lying.

When the University Press of Virginia asked me to undertake a similar book on Willa Cather, it was again obvious that I would need to draw on letters. But how? This project presented a very different set of problems. With Porter there were so many letters that I couldn't even consider transcribing them in full, only bits and pieces. With Cather there was the problem of how to find letters to transcribe. I knew, of course, that it wasn't true she had burned all her letters. Both James Woodress's *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* and Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* had been published by that time, and both cited letters, as did, for that matter, Mildred Bennett in her 1951 *The World of Willa Cather*. Woodress and O'Brien were my starting places for finding letters. But surely there were more! And indeed there were. I can only wish I had kept a record of how I found others, but I essentially followed every hint and pointer that came my way and looked for collections of the letters of people she wrote to. Sometimes I sent letters of inquiry—the written equivalent of “cold calls”—to places I happened to think of that seemed even the least bit likely. And some of those inquiries brought replies saying yes, we have two or three, or whatever, letters.

Some libraries were glad to send me photocopies of their holdings (for a price, but less than the cost of travel). Some still insisted a researcher had to transcribe with pencil on paper. Some disapproved of transcription in any fashion. But for the most part I traveled to archives and copied down every letter word-for-word electronically. My guess is that I am the first Cather scholar to have the benefit of doing so. Both Woodress's and O'Brien's books, for example, were published before widespread use of portable computers. Because of this tool, we live in a time of great opportunity for archival research.<sup>[1]</sup> In all these ways, and by keying into my computer even those letters I received in hard copy, I built up my searchable file to the 1,817 letters shown in the *Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*.

Toward the end of my work on *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*, the press raised the possibility of my doing a Collected Letters. Of course, I had to explain that legal restrictions made that impossible. Instead, at the suggestion of a colleague at Texas A&M, John McDermott, I undertook the *Calendar*. It was our late colleague Susan J. Rosowski who said she believed that in the wake of the *Calendar*, letters would start coming out of the woodwork. And she was right.

## ANDREW JEWELL:

The number of known letters has expanded considerably since the publication of Janis's *Calendar of Letters* in 2002. At that time there were a little over eighteen hundred known letters; now the number is over three thousand. The bulk of these “new” letters have become available through donations by the Cather family and are found at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Other important collections not known in 2002 are the Knopf-Cather correspondence at the Barbara Dobkin Foundation in New York and the collections at Drew University.

It was this proliferation of new materials that inspired Janis and me to start working together on the letters. At first this meant collaborating on the expanded, digital edition of the *Calendar* found on the *Willa Cather Archive* website. But it wasn't too long after that project got going that we made an agreement to coedit a collection of the letters, if the legal way ever became clear.

We knew, given his advancing age, that Charles Cather, Willa Cather's nephew, would not remain the executor of Willa Cather's literary estate for many more years, and we believed the eventual change in executorship might provide the changes in the legal landscape that would be necessary in order to produce a volume of letters. From the beginning, Janis and I had a shared vision of the kind of publication we desired: a book, first, not a solely digital publication; a one-volume *Selected Letters* that would be designed for a general readership but would also be useful to and reliable for scholars; and a chronological presentation of whole letters, not excerpts arranged thematically. We knew we would need to create an editorial apparatus that would guide readers through these complex documents, but agreed that we did not want Cather's own voice to be overwhelmed by explanatory material. We wanted readers to be able to focus on the unobstructed personal voice of the letters, with little consciousness of the "editing."<sup>[2]</sup>

By the time the legal permission was obtained we were well along in our preparations. Soon we had a contract with Knopf, and we cleared our calendars so as to dedicate our time to producing the book. We started working on it full time right after we left the International Cather Seminar in Northampton, Massachusetts, in June 2011, and delivered it to Knopf in February 2012. Again, though, this does not mean we created the book in just six or seven months. Janis had been gathering transcriptions of letters for nearly twenty years, and we had been engaged with the letters together, in one way or another, for several of those years. By the time we started actually constructing the volume we had a solid foundation on which to build. That said, our process began in 2011 with reading all of the letters again, every one we could find. The experience of reading through roughly three thousand letters in chronological order, so that they essentially told a story, was a memorable one in many ways. It took several weeks, and I realized, personally, that my mood was responding to Cather's as I read. When she was in the joyous thrall of new ideas and confidence, I responded with similar elation; when she was mired in sickness and depression, my days also felt dark. I hope, frankly, that others can have a sense of this experience when reading our selections in the book.

We determined an organizational structure of twelve chronological sections and began making our choices. Janis had actually entered into our collaboration with a tentative selection already made, but I also made my own selections independently as I read. We then resolved discrepancies through discussion. All of this was done by email and file-sharing, often using the "track changes" feature of Microsoft Word. The selection was an iterative process: once the choices were initially made for a section, we would continue to pass that section back and forth, removing letters and adding others. Mostly, however, we *removed*, because we were struggling to meet the word limit set for us by Knopf. Every cut hurt. Our colleague Ann Romines helped a good deal at this stage by providing us a link to a review by Deborah Solomon in the *New York Times* of a volume of letters exchanged by Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. Solomon complained that the bulk of the volume crushed the value of their correspondence and somehow minimized the significance of the documents. In short, in the view of Solomon, the volume suffered from having too little *selection* and too many *selections*. We have no judgment to make on that score, not having looked at the book ourselves, but the reviewer's critique emboldened our sense that most readers would welcome a judicious selection. I had to believe that however much the cuts hurt, they would make the book stronger.

After making our selection, we drafted headnotes, identified full names of people and works referenced in the letters, wrote interstitial notes, and created other apparatus for each section. This stage of the work, which involved engaging with the content of each letter, was a great pleasure, and I believe we were able to represent hundreds of hours of research quietly and succinctly in humble bracketed identifications. We can't claim to have unraveled every mystery, of course. Soon after I received my first copy of the book, my wife, Becca, began reading it and, after getting through the

first letter in the book with its reference to Grandma Boak's inability to walk, asked, "What happened to her grandma's leg?" "I don't know," I replied. "You don't know?" "No," I said, "that's why we don't have a note about it." "But I thought as your wife I would get bonus annotations," she protested. I provided what I could.

It isn't easy, at this point, to identify letters that have made the most significant differences in our own thinking about Willa Cather. We've been looking at them for so long now that it's hard to remember the changes of mind that occurred along the way. But we will each mention a few.

## JANIS STOUT:

One "Aha!" moment that I remember very clearly came a long time ago, when I first read Cather's letters to Dorothy Canfield Fisher. We are all familiar with Cather's statement in the preface to *Not Under Forty* about the world's having broken in two in 1922 or thereabouts. She made that statement in 1936. But a precursor of it appears in a letter to Canfield Fisher written fourteen years earlier, probably on 17 June 1922—that is, in the year she later singled out as the world's breaking point: "We knew one world and how we both felt about it. We now find ourselves in quite another" (*Letters* 319). When I keyed that into my computer, I inserted in brackets and bold type, "[wow! note this! and in 1922!]" To me, it made a difference to know that Cather had thought about her sense of a rupture in historic time long before she wrote her famous sentence in the preface to *Not Under Forty*, and in fact in the very year she later said the break happened. So "1922 or thereabouts" wasn't just a casual date she picked out of the air in retrospect.

Another letter that made a big difference to me came to light at Texas Woman's University in Denton when I was invited to give a lecture there. I had not expected twu to have any Cather materials and had never inquired. But when I was given a tour of the library during my visit, there, on a table in a quiet work area where the librarian had laid it out for me to see, was a letter from Cather to her mother. Cather's relationship with her family generally used to be presented in rather idyllic terms. In an essay published in 1990 titled "A Dutiful Daughter: Willa Cather and Her Parents," for example, James Woodress presented her not only as being dutiful and loving but as having had "a really happy childhood." Though he acknowledged that "her relations with her mother were sometimes difficult," he also implied that such difficulties were confined to the universally troubled adolescent years. In later years, he wrote, Cather "accepted willingly her family obligations," and her relationship with her parents was a "happy" one. Well, maybe not.

I had already seen a letter Cather wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in May 1903 (a letter that is not among those we selected for the volume) in which Cather said, "You are a wonder-worker! Your letter to mother brought me the first one that I have had from her for two years that I could even think of reading through. It was almost without anger or resentment. I begin to think that a peaceable adjustment of things may still be possible." That in itself was enough to call Woodress's characterization into question. And then, on that library desk at Texas Woman's University, I saw the letter dated 2 March, probably 1925, some twenty-two years later than the one to Canfield Fisher.

"My Dearest Mother," she began. "Now what can I possibly have done to upset you so?" (*Letters* 367). It appears that Cather thought her mother was jealous of attentions she had shown her aunt Sarah Andrews, Virginia Cather's sister, or Sarah Andrews's daughter Bess Seymour, Willa's cousin, as she denies having "sent them anything but a book," an "old wadded dressing gown [that] was in rags," and "some paper flowers for a valentine." She then explains why she hasn't written to her mother recently, before turning to what appears to have been the main issue—or rather, issues: As for making trouble between you and father, I've certainly not tried to do that. Really, it's very unjust to accuse me of it. You



must know, Mother, without my telling you, that all that newspaper publicity about Margie<sup>[3]</sup> was harder on me than on any of the rest of you, and it was needless. If you hadn't been so foolish about never letting anyone see her, there would have been no "mystery." But that is past and gone. I wasn't angry about it. I thought you had been unwise, and the result of your mistaken judgement made a good deal of ugly talk about me. But I never felt in the least angry toward you, and I took my medicine and kept quiet about it. I wouldn't speak of it now, if you didn't come at me so. How foolish, Mother, for us to quarrel! I can't quarrel, because I have not a particle of hard feeling. I couldn't be angry with you now if I tried. I think one of the consolations of growing older is that one comes to understand one's parents better. I am too much like you in many ways to criticise you; I sometimes get impatient, just as I lose patience with myself, but I have never felt cross toward you, even for a moment, for years and years. I think the last time was about poor Mrs. Garber [Lyra Garber, the model for Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*]; and you see now, don't you, that I understood her better than you thought I did, and that though I admired certain things, I was never taken in by her. Clearly, the friction between them had been of long standing. "Now you and I have been growing closer together for many years, don't let us spoil it. If I have done anything amiss, I am eager to make it right." And she starts that effort by writing, "I love you very tenderly and am happy in your company," and closing, "With my dearest love to you, dear mother."

The most obvious difference this letter makes is to show us, beyond doubt, that all was not sweetness and light in the Cather family. But what difference does that make? Is it only a retelling of gossip? I think not. I think it shows us how deeply rooted were the hints of tension that crop up now and then in Cather's works—say, in "Old Mrs. Harris." It shows us, not for the first time, how very human and complex Cather was. It shows us, too—and again, this is not a new idea, but with the letters as evidence it is newly vivid—that we must not accept easy readings of her books that glide over the buried tensions or contradictions.

Evidence of conflict within the Cather family extends, in fact, into letters written in her later years in which she expresses more than just passing vexation with some of her brothers and sisters. She tells Roscoe at one point that he is the only one left of all her family who gives a damn about her writing (*Letters* 588). Maybe this wasn't literally true. Maybe it was only her depression speaking, a depression perhaps feeding on bits of inconsiderateness here and there. But that's something else her letters show us: that she did indeed struggle with bouts of depression.

## ANDREW JEWELL:

My struggle to identify specific letters that make a difference arises not from a lack of such moments in letters, but from an abundance. There are *many* moments like that; I run into them over and over. What has made the greatest difference to me is the totality of Cather's voice, the strong presence of her personality in the letters in general.

In demonstration, I would like to look once again at some of the most familiar of Cather's letters, those she wrote to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in 1912 during her trip to the Southwest. Most readers will know the outlines of the story, but it may be helpful to have a brief recap. In April 1912 Cather left the East Coast on a leave of absence from her job at *McClure's* that was meant to last only a few months. She took a train west to visit her brother Douglass, who worked for the Santa Fe Railway in Winslow, Arizona. The trip came on the heels of the publication of Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, which had come out only a few months before, and more immediately on the heels of her writing of "The Bohemian Girl," a long short story published in *McClure's* in August 1912. While in Arizona and New Mexico, Cather stayed with her brother and got to know some of his associates, including the brakeman Tooker and the "tipsy

London cockney” who would later inspire characters in her fiction. She also explored the country, seeing Walnut Canyon, near Flagstaff, and met a man named Julio who seems to have entranced her for a time.

Much has been made of this trip to the Southwest, and with good reason. Woodress uses it as the prologue for his entire biography, claiming that “the successful magazine executive who left Pittsburgh that April morning returned the novelist that we know” (4). Cather herself made similar claims. In “My First Novels [There Were Two]” she wrote, “The longer I stayed in a country I really did care about, and among people who were a part of the country, the more unnecessary and superficial a book like *Alexander’s Bridge* seemed to me. I did no writing down there, but I recovered from the conventional editorial point of view” (*On Writing* 92).

When reading the letters written during this trip, one senses an enthusiasm and growing confidence, an immediate experience that would, over time, be interpreted as transformative. The transformation of Thea Kronborg in Panther Canyon, in *The Song of the Lark*, written only a couple of years afterward, undoubtedly reinforced this understanding of the episode in Cather’s life by others, and perhaps by herself. In the letters actually written at the time, however, Cather details no psychological shift, no epiphany that would alter her creative life. Instead, the letters document the tremendous *fun* she was having. On 21 May 1912, for example, she wrote this to Sergeant from the Grand Canyon: For the first two weeks nothing happened to me. Then things began to happen so fast that I’ve had no time to write letters and I wanted to write to you too much to send postcards. I wrote you about the trip with the Priest over to his Indian missions? The[n] came Julio—pronounce Hulio, please—and he came and came, too beautiful to be true and so different from anyone else in the world. He is the handsome one who sings; from Vera Cruz; knows such wonderful Mexican and Spanish songs: But there, if I began on Julio you would have to like me very much to be patient, and I don’t wish to put you to any such test as yet. But he is won-der-ful!

. . . I meet my brother in Flagstaff Friday to find some Cliff Dwellers along the Little Colorado. Then I shall be in Winslow a few days, for I have to go to a Mexican dance I’ve been asked to; and then if I can really sever Julio’s strong Egyptian fetters, I am going to Albuquerque with my brother and from there trail about over pretty much all of New Mexico. Write to me at Winslow, please, the faithful Tooker will forward all mail. But will you go to Mexico with me some day? My brother and Julio have told me of such splendid places to go as soon as the fighting is over—buried cities and Aztec ruins and gold mines—perfect Arabian Nights stories. Julio knows one such lovely story about an Aztec Cleopatra, and it is called “The Forty Lovers of the Queen” and I am going to write it when I can go to the place where it happened. There are some very sharply cut figures in it, not at all the type-figures. Prescott has a dim account of it, I remember, but Julio’s version is much more alive. He’s never read anything but the prayer-book, so he has no stale ideas—not many ideas at all, indeed, but a good many fancies and feelings, and a grace of expression that simply catches you up. It’s like hearing a new language spoken, because he speaks so directly. He will drive any number of miles to see flowers or running water, but Cliff Dwellers bore him awfully. “Why,” he says raising his brows, “do you care for Los Muertos? We are living. No me importa. They die so long ago. Pobrecitos! (poor fellows).”

Well, I broke into Julio after all! I was afraid I would, and that’s the real reason I have not written before. Next to “travel” letters, I hate to get letters that rave about the beauty of untutored youths of Latin extraction. People always do one to death with such letters when they go to Italy. But Julio is not soft and sunny. He’s indifferent and opaque and has the long strong upper lip that is so conspicuous in the Aztec sculpture, and somber eyes with lots of old trouble in them, and his skin is the pale, bright yellow of very old gold and old races. I really think I must get him to New York. He’d make an easy living as an artist’s model. They’d fight for him. Pardon! W.S.C. (*Letters* 157–59)

Among the letters Cather wrote to Sergeant in 1912 there are several that bubble over like this with the pleasure of her vacation and its discoveries. Some have suggested that the tone of these letters is remarkable or even unique in her correspondence. O'Brien writes, for example, "Among the hundreds of letters I have read, there are none as exuberant and lighthearted as those she wrote to Sergeant about [Julio]" (413).

Well, maybe. But in my experience of editing the letters, I have encountered other letters that seem akin to the 1912 letters to Sergeant. The other letters written from the West that same year don't have the same exuberance—letters to Mariel Gere, S. S. McClure, and Annie Adams Fields from the same trip are full of the pleasure of travel but lack the playful tone and make absolutely no mention of Julio. Instead, what these letters to Sergeant in 1912 remind me of are other letters to Sergeant. I believe that Cather's friendship with Sergeant elicited distinctive notes of sarcasm, irony, and teasing ridicule. I think the two must have liked to make each other laugh.

Between 1910 and 1922 Cather wrote many letters to Sergeant that make a point of humorously (and mostly good-naturedly) mocking people, including Progressive Era reformers ("I can't chat comfortably with people who are panting for the destruction of anything. Would that she could forget it all and begin to be touched by the amusing traits of human nature again!"—4 June 1911, *Letters* 139); Douglass Cather's roommates Tooker and the "tipsy London cockney" ("with the best will in the world, one tires of freaks"—26 April 1912, *Letters* 154–55); *Atlantic Monthly* editor Ellery Sedgwick ("you are not flat enough for Ellery. He doesn't know but your laugh may be dangerous"—12 September 1912, *Letters* 167); Virginians ("You will have a more satisfactory note from me when I've got away from the romantic 'Southern' attitude, and all the oppressively budding and lonely 'gills'—the male of the species is almost extinct hereabouts, and so cowed and house-broken that he can do nothing but carry wraps and dance and touch his hat"—12 September 1913, *Letters* 180); Annie Adams Fields ("Mrs. Fields writes of the last naked woman—they are all alike—on the McClure cover, 'But Oh, this undesirable cover! Undesirable! Nothing has pleased me so much for years! . . . Can't you hear her say it 'un-desirable'!"—19 November 1913, *Letters* 184–85); Olive Fremstad ("While I was in Fremstad's camp we did things every mortal minute except when we were asleep, and even then I dreamed hard. She fished as if she had no other means of getting food; cleaned all the fish, swam like a walrus, rowed, tramped, cooked, watered her garden . . . it was the grandest show of human rigor and grace I've ever watched. I feel as if I'd lived for a long while with the wife of the Dying Gladiator in her husky prime, in deep German forests"—23 June 1914, *Letters* 192–93); and herself, as the author of *April Twilights* ("I really was very young and had never been— anywhere. But, even for a Cliff Dweller, it was pretty bad. I seem to remember one that began 'Stark as a Burne-Jones vision of despair!' I hope you appreciated that fully!"—2 June 1912, *Letters* 159). Though Cather made jokes with other correspondents as well, the letters to Sergeant in the 1910s demonstrate that they shared an appreciation for playfulness and a sometimes biting humor. Cather might refer to the same pleasurable experiences—like her joy in spending time with Olive Fremstad—in letters to others as well, but in writing to Sergeant she often does it with jokey, ironic detachment. The letters to Sergeant *as a group* are distinctive in the corpus of Cather's correspondence.

How does this quality of their relationship affect our reading of the Julio letters? Although O'Brien acknowledges a "double consciousness" in them, suggesting that Cather writes both like "an adolescent girl rhapsodizing about her first love" and as "a thirtyeight-year-old woman looking a little wryly and ironically at her infatuation" (411), I think it is possible to read these descriptions of Julio as a sustained bit of play.<sup>[4]</sup> Though I believe Julio was a real man Cather was acquainted with in 1912, I do think her descriptions of him to Sergeant betray a self-consciousness that she was creating a character, or even a type: a beautiful "untutored youth of Latin extraction." The language she uses to describe him is comfortably detached from lowly human reality. He is "Antinous come to earth again" (12 May 1912, *Letters* 156), "without beginning and without end" and "like all the things in the Naples museum" (15 June 1912, *Letters* 162).



That is, Cather turns Julio into an exotic, spiritual creature, the embodiment of a false idea of another culture.

It is possible that this fantastical characterization of Julio emerges solely from Cather's limited perspective as a middle-class white woman vacationing in Arizona. But the fact that these characterizations appear solely in letters to Sergeant, letters that are performances for another writer as well as jocular exchanges with a friend, suggests that they are willfully and playfully exaggerated. The inclusion of what appears to be Cather's English translation of "Julio's serenade," called "Serenata Mejicana" in the 15 June 1912 letter to Sergeant (*Letters* 162–63), adds to the sense that something is not altogether straightforward in her presentation. The rhymed English lyrics were "clumsy," Cather wrote, and she wished she could give Sergeant "Julio's serenade in the Spanish, with the stars and the desert and the dead Indian cities on the mesa behind it." She then gives a very Catherian, romantic verse:

The flowers of day are dead—  
Come thou to me!  
The rose of night instead  
Shall bloom for thee.  
Stars by day entombed  
In darkness wake;  
The rose of night has bloomed—  
Beloved, take!

It seems to me that the scene Cather paints here for Sergeant—the beautiful Julio singing a song in Spanish in the open desert, Cather hearing the song and transforming it into an English poem—could not possibly be true. Not only does the romantic setting seem too right, too staged, there is little indication anywhere that Cather knew Spanish sufficiently well to make a translation.

The letters to Sergeant, then, make a tremendous difference to our reading of other Cather letters and perhaps even our reading of the fiction, especially *The Song of the Lark*, which was inspired by episodes related in the letters. That is because even if we doubt the verity of their details, they communicate an emotional truth about Cather's experience. Part of that experience is with Julio in the desert, but part of it is also the relationship with Sergeant, the person she chose to tell about Julio.

Among the many letters that make a difference in other ways, we might think for a moment about the one known letter to Edith Lewis. Why do we have only one letter and one postcard to her? What happened to the rest?—because there must have been more. There had to be. One can only guess, of course, as we currently do not know and may never know. But our knowledge of just the one letter to Edith, plus a short passage from one that mentions her, makes a great difference.

On Sunday, 4 October 1936, at about 4:30 p.m., according to her heading, Cather wrote from the Shattuck Inn at Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a letter that opens, "My Darling Edith." It is a breathtaking salutation, especially coming to us as it does after years of guesswork that positioned Edith Lewis as more or less a lackey for Cather. The letter continues: I am sitting in your room, looking out on the woods you know so well. So far everything delights me. I am ashamed of my appetite for food, and as for sleep—I had forgotten that sleeping can be an active and very strong physical pleasure. It can! It has been for all of three nights. I wake up now and then, saturated with the pleasure of breathing clear mountain air (not

cold, just chill air) of being up high with all the woods below me sleeping, too, in still white moonlight. It's a grand feeling.

One hour from now, out of your window, I shall see a sight unparalleled—Jupiter and Venus both shining in the goldenrosy sky and both in the West; she not very far above the horizon, and he about mid-way between the zenith and the silvery lady planet. From 5:30 to 6:30 they are of a superb splendor—deepening in color every second, in a still-daylight-sky guiltless of other stars, the moon not up and the sun gone down behind Gap-mountain; those two alone in the whole vault of heaven. It lasts so about an hour (did last night). Then the Lady, so silvery still, slips down into the clear rose colored glow to be near the departed sun, and imperial Jupiter hangs there alone. He goes down about 8:30. Surely it reminds one of Dante's "eternal wheels". I can't but believe that all that majesty and all that beauty, those fated and unfailing appearances and exits, are something more than mathematics and horrible temperatures. If they are not, then we are the only wonderful things—because we can wonder.

She then shifts to the small practicalities of life: "I have worn my white silk suit almost constantly with no white hat, which is very awkward" and pays tribute to Lewis's careful help—"Everything you packed carried wonderfully—not a wrinkle"—before closing: "Lovingly, W" (*Letters* 519–21). It might be said that this bit about the packing shows that Lewis really was just a practical convenience, after all, a kind of devoted friend who provided useful assistance. But when we listen to this letter as a whole, we can't say that. Besides, people who love each other help each other out in a variety of ways—not as acts of servitude but of love. In the context of this very tender letter, we can see that was so when Lewis helped Cather pack.

The entire question of Edith Lewis's role in Cather's life extends far beyond our discussion here, but perhaps we can pursue it just a bit further. We realize that students of Cather's biography have thought about the complication of her relationship with Lewis not just in itself but in combination with her long and very great love for Isabelle McClung Hambourg. How did she juggle the two relationships? A letter that makes a great deal of difference in our thinking about that question is one from the Drew University collection, written to Earl and Achsah Barlow Brewster on 21 February 1923. Two paragraphs from this long letter bring much to the discussion: I will sail for France about the first of April. Ah how lovely it will be if I can meet you in Paris! That seems about too good to happen in this pesky world. I beg you both to write often to Edith while I am gone. I must tell you a secret that is a little difficult to tell: Edith does not like the Hambourgs at all—never has. They irritate her, rub her the wrong way; Isabelle even more than Jan [Hambourg, Isabelle's husband]. I think it's been hard for her to face that they were seeing you this winter when she was not. We are like that about the people we love best sometimes, we have a kind of loving jealousy about them. It has always been difficult about the Hambourgs, because they are old and dear friends of mine, and yet they do darken the scene for Edith whenever they appear—put rancours in the vessel of her peace, as Macbeth said. I think the way that likes and dislikes interweave is the most disheartening thing about life anyway. It's nothing Edith can help; their personalities simply hurt her. She feels that their attitude toward her is rather patronizing, but there I feel sure she is mistaken.

I hope Edith can see a great deal of you if you are in America this summer. Your being here will make up to her for my absence. As you know, she does not care for a great many people, and for them she cares very much. This has been a hard winter for her—her family has made such heavy demands upon her and she has not been very well. Before a great while I am going to get her away from all these hard and wearing things. (*Letters* 336–37)

This one letter provides insights into the complex dynamic among these three closely knit people that we glean nowhere else. One of the main things it shows us is the care Cather took in trying to accommodate Lewis's feelings and make life easier for her with respect to the tensions of an emotional tangle that really defied not just our understanding but Cather's own.

Cather's letters are perhaps the best articulations she left of her emotional tangles and how they influenced her as a writer. A letter she wrote in 1938 shortly after the deaths of her brother Douglass and Isabelle Hambourg typifies this profound quality of the letters. It reveals the deep emotional vulnerability she would never really overcome. Like so many of Cather's letters, it privileges the emotional moment over reasoned, balanced consideration of the facts. But as she

suggests in the letter, that privileging of emotion may be what draws us to her as readers. On 6 November 1938, from the Shattuck Inn, she wrote to her brother Roscoe: I am up here alone at this hotel in the woods where I have done most of my best work and where the proprietors are so kind to me. I finished “Antonia” here, finished “A Lost Lady” and began the “Archbishop”. The best part of all the better books was written here. It was Isabelle who first brought me here. You cannot imagine what her death means to me. It came just four months after Douglass’s death, before I had got my nerves steady again. No other living person cared as much about my work, through thirty-eight years, as she did. And then she abruptly shifts from the intensity of her grieving for Douglass and Isabelle to her intensity of feeling in itself: As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end. I feel as if I couldn’t go another step. People say I have a “classic style”. A few of them know it’s the heat under the simple words that counts. I early learned that if you loved your theme enough you could be as mild as a May morning and still make other people care. . . . It’s the one thing that simple really caring for an old Margie, an old cat, an old anything. I never cultivated it, from the age of twenty on I did all I could to repress it, and that effort of mind did, after years, give me a fairly good “style”—style being merely the writer, not the person himself; what he was born with and what he has done for himself. Isabelle watched me every step of the way. But the source of supply seems to be getting low. I work a little every day (1 1/2 hrs.) to save my reason, to escape from myself. But the sentences don’t come sharp and clear as they used to—the pictures are a little blurred. (*Letters* 561). This idea of caring, of emotional investment in life, reveals its centrality to her whole artistic project as we read this letter. We might have inferred it from any number of passages in her books, but here she makes it clear. The word “care” in fact appears remarkably often in the letters, early and late. She seems to have pondered the idea of “caring” about things as a wellspring of her work, and “taking care” as a method in her work, for a long time, and here in this amazing letter to Roscoe that long presence of the idea of caring comes to fruition as the key to it all. Perhaps more than any other, this letter makes all the difference in our understanding of Willa Cather.

## NOTES

1. Andrew Jewell agrees and adds, “We do live in a time of great opportunity compared to the past, but also, maybe, compared to the future. Where will scholars find the letters of writers who are coming of age today? Will emails and tweets and Facebook posts survive and overwhelm scholars with so much material that nothing will seem particularly important? Or will all of these digital remnants be lost or trapped on the private servers of corporations? We simply don’t know yet, though in optimistic moments one can hope that the large body of concerned librarians and scholars will ensure we have access and the tools to make meaning from that access.” ([Go back.](#))

2. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* will be followed with a fully digital *Complete Letters of Willa Cather* that will feature an enhanced editorial apparatus. Publication of this complete edition will begin on the *Willa Cather Archive* ([cather.unl.edu](http://cather.unl.edu)) in January 2018. ([Go back.](#))

3. Cather’s reference to “publicity about Margie” pertains to rumors in the local Red Cloud newspaper in the fall of 1924 that the Catheres were hiding Marjorie Anderson, a woman who had come to Nebraska with them from Virginia and worked in their home. The rumors emerged from Marjorie’s unwillingness to venture outside the house for fear of the return of her former husband, a man named O’Leary, who had deserted her soon after their marriage. ([Go back.](#))

4. Jewell: I’m very influenced in my understanding here by Melissa Homestead’s suggestion that one should be wary of taking the Julio descriptions too literally. Much of what I have to say emerged from conversations she and I had about this and details she pointed out to me. ([Go back.](#))

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