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### **Willa Cather's Two Modernisms**

What does it mean to think of Cather as a modernist? What might we gain by claiming her works for modernism or by trying to establish the distinctively “modernist” qualities of her fiction? Cather scholars might have particular reasons for skepticism about this venture, since scholarly accounts of Anglo-American literary modernism have for the most part been distinguished by their inability to find much to say about Cather’s fiction, and it is fair to suggest that this blindness has had a significant—though happily diminishing—effect on the life her books have led within American scholarship and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Yet the question is a valuable one if it helps us see the ambitions, affinities, commitments, and resonances of her writing more clearly. And it seems to me an especially valuable one to ask at this particular intellectual moment—from deep inside the historicist era (will there ever be another?) in American literary scholarship—for I hear that question as implying another: should talking about Cather’s modernism mean something different from writing a contextualizing analysis of her work? I think it should, and I take the task of describing Cather’s modernism as carrying with it the ambition to bring history and form—two subjects mostly separated in current critical practice—together so as to consider the historical force of a writer’s formal choices.<sup>2</sup> The best reason for doing so is that the conflicts and transformations that mark the move from one historical culture to another typically present themselves to writers as a combat between artistic forms. In Cather’s era, it is what had come to seem the “allegorical” quality of

Victorian culture—its attachment not only to grand outward-looking narratives like “the march of progress” or the reclamation of the savage but (more crucially for the novelist) to deep, inward-turning storylines like the narratives of maturation, disciplined self-recognition, interior enlightenment via difficult experience (the characteristic material of the Victorian novel)—that most provokes the transformations of narrative practice that give her work (and that of many of her fellow writers) its distinctive quality and power and constitute its modernism. In what follows I will make a case for Cather’s modernism—or, I should say, for her modernisms—that will reattach questions of history to choices of form and describe her art, I hope, in a convincing way. I also will propose a view of Cather’s career that suggests that the book taken to be her most definitely modernist work—*The Professor’s House*—is the least representative instance of it: a road taken, but then abandoned. Hence the “two modernisms” of my title.

*The Professor’s House and “authenticity modernism”*

If there is an exception to the general blindness to Cather’s work in critical accounts of American modernism, whether early and classic (Frederick Hoffman, Alfred Kazin) or more recent and contextual (Walter Benn Michaels, Chip Rhodes), it would be *The Professor’s House*.<sup>3</sup> Like *The Great Gatsby* or *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Professor’s House* is an instance of what I will call “authenticity modernism,” an expressive structure shared by many canonical modernist texts. The novel is built upon the boundary, so central to the master-plot of “high” or “classic” modernism, between the authentic and the inauthentic. This is the boundary memorably evoked in Cather’s well-known gloss upon the novel: “In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather

overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland’s face and in his behaviour”).<sup>4</sup> As Cather’s phrasing indicates, the book’s foundational conflict is between the inauthentic values and degraded emotions infected by the economic and the deeper meanings cut loose from and marked off by their freedom from commodification. Hence the Professor’s protest against naming Louie and Rosamond’s new house “Outland” (“the least they can do is be quiet about it, and not convert his very bones into a personal asset”)<sup>5</sup>; hence his refusal to touch any of Tom’s money (“my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue”); hence Kathleen’s remark that Tom has “all turned out chemicals and dollars and cents.” Arrayed along this boundary are the other oppositions that seem to carry the book’s moral argument and emotional loyalties: between a degraded and poisonous consumer culture (“Let’s omit the verb ‘to buy’ in all forms for a time,” the Professor pleads) and genuine aesthetic experience (this latter distinction, and the deep and implicit affinity between the authentic and the aesthetic are particularly crucial to high modernist ideology); between a merely technical and commercial version of university culture and “the purely cultural studies”; between the women who are the instruments and agents of an exigent consumerism and the men who embody or express the repudiation of that culture (in this novel, even domesticity, in its most authentic form, is a male preserve).

Most crucially, this effort to demarcate and evoke the authentic seems to drive “Tom Outland’s Story”—both the free-standing narrative of that name and the longer

trajectory of Outland the character through the text. The lines that I have just cited will have already suggested that Tom's life within the first Book of the novel is in part an emblematic one. One faction of the family strives to convert his legacy into an unending stream of consumer experiences, while those who love him best—the family modernists, so to speak—strive to keep “Outland” synonymous with “authenticity.” “Tom Outland's Story” itself is a narrative of education, which propels him toward the intense experience and vivid articulation of exactly the kind of aesthetically carried experience of authenticity the book has been evoking and endorsing all along. For all his associations with Western adventure fiction and working-class solidarity, Tom's discovery of the Blue Mesa is rendered as a swiftly achieved education in high modernist meaning-making. This resonance is evident in Cather's utterly beautiful account of his discovery of the cliff city, with its free-standing aesthetic authority and emphatically artistic rhetoric, linking meaning and design: “It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition [ . . . ] The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something [ . . . ] It was more like sculpture than anything else.”<sup>6</sup> This education becomes still deeper as the narrative sends Tom to Washington for a definitive “Wasteland” experience of broken institutional authority and emptied out urban life, and then brings him back to the Mesa to suffer the illuminating betrayal of having the relics of disinterested discovery turned into objects of sale. And it is this very betrayal that delivers to Tom his full measure of the experience of aestheticized authenticity as—in a moment of modernist sublimity—this very loss yields an experience of utter and invulnerable meaning: “that was [ . . . ] the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole [ . . . ] Something had happened in me that made it

possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession.”<sup>7</sup>

We can hear in the elements of Tom’s modernist education—his exposure to an outworn and emptied-out official culture and his achievement, on the wings of the aesthetic, of an experience of meaning safely demarcated and protected from commodification—a definitive case for the orthodox modernism of *The Professor’s House*. If we needed extramural support for this claim of “typicality,” we might notice the curious fact that, in its dominant structure of feeling, *The Professor’s House* is virtually the same book as *The Sun Also Rises*. In both books a degraded leisure culture yields a fatigued and fatiguing consumerism, and meaning is sequestered in episodes of intensely aestheticized authenticity—fishing and bull-fighting in Hemingway, Tom’s encounter with the Blue Mesa in *The Professor’s House*.

I have been making the case for the “classic” or “orthodox” modernism of *The Professor’s House* pretty emphatically; I now want to complicate—though not surrender—that argument by acknowledging a significant narrative counter-movement within the book.<sup>8</sup> Here are three “counter-authentic” moments or patterns in the book: moments where a key opposition is becoming unraveled, where a boundary of value is being transgressed or blurred. The first of these counter-movements is stylistic, and it is, accordingly, the most subtle of my examples. To attend to the way characters are described in Book I of the novel is to be struck by how aggressively “aesthetic” is Cather’s narrator’s rhetoric of description. Here, for example, is a bit of the first description of Godfrey St. Peter: “He had a long brown face, with an oval chin over which he wore a close-trimmed Van Dyke, like a tuft of shiny black fur. With this silky,

very black hair, he had a tawny skin with gold lights in it, a hawk nose, and hawk-like eyes—brown and gold and green.”<sup>9</sup> Kathleen notes that “the thing that makes Papa handsome is the modeling of his head, between the top of his ear and his crown,” while the narrator adds that “it was more like a statue’s head than a man’s.” Lillian is said to be “very fair, pink and gold—a pale gold now that she was becoming a little grey”; Kathleen is “pale, with light hazel eyes, and her hair was hazel-coloured with distinctly green glints in it,” while the lilac shade of Rosamond’s silk suit shows “that in the colour of her cheeks there was actually a tone of warm lavender.” All of these descriptions, it seems to me, are rendered not as a simple exercise in realist specification but as, quite literally, instructions to a possible painter or sculptor (“here is how you would paint Kathleen: put ‘green glints’ in the hair”). Their accumulating force is to place these characters within a realm “already” aestheticized, in which perceptions have conformed themselves to the pre-established vision of an emphatically painterly eye. Yet, given the overwhelming presence in Book I of the objects of an aggressively “tasteful” acquisition, this strain of painterly language works to erase, rather than to establish, the border between the commercial and the aesthetic, between the human being and the purchasable object.

The second instance is, I think, the richest and most interesting. As he recounts his betrayal by Roddy Blake—the betrayal that crucially establishes the line between consumerist and aesthetic value—Tom comes to see and explicitly to acknowledge his own betrayal of Roddy, in which he cruelly “requites” the “faith and friendship” Blake showed him by vividly establishing for him the difference between Blake’s commercial conception of value and his own newly minted modernism. In doing so, Tom has simultaneously established a class boundary between the two former comrades (“I see

now that I was working for you like a hired man,” as Blake lucidly puts it), and his account shows us that along with his purified aesthetic relation to the mesa has come a new and fully felt loyalty (“There was an ache in my arms to reach out and detain him, but there was something else that made me absolutely powerless to do so”) to the distinctions of sensibility that underwrite high modernism.<sup>10</sup> This episode thus makes available to us—along with its celebration of the power of purely aesthetic experience, which this counter-story does not erase—a demystifying analysis, not unlike that proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, of the way class interests are encoded in—indeed created by—claims of aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup>

The third instance is the most striking and interpretively resonant. Most readers of *The Professor's House* struggle with what to make of the ending of the novel. How should we see the sequence of emotions, accidents, and actions that compose Book III: the Professor's sense that Tom's death has saved him from the inevitable triviality of a life inside the “trap of worldly success”; his recovery of his “primitive,” pre-social boyhood self; his related attraction to solitude and stasis, which leads to his near suicide; his resolve to face his family and the future, a resolve fueled by the discovery—or is it the illusion—of solidarity with Augusta and “a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound?”<sup>12</sup> Should we view this outcome respectfully, as a chastened and substantial reclamation of his place in the human community, or skeptically, as a desperate and illusory attempt to evade or disguise the death wish so palpable in his thoughts and actions?

What seems clear to me, having tracked the book's establishment and testing of the idea of the authentic, is this: Cather has her Professor turn, as he tries to find a way to



live with the array of losses the book presents him with—of Outland himself, of meaningful work, of sustainable love—toward a strategy we might describe as “serial authenticity.” In Book III, the Professor tries to fill the space first occupied, then evacuated by the spectacular and irretrievable authenticity of “Tom Outland’s Story” with a sequence of smaller “trial” authenticities of his own: the internalized primitivism of the return of his childhood self; the irrefutable authenticity that death would supply; the cross-class solidarity of his connection to Augusta. While the derivative, parodic, and emotionally unconvincing quality of each of these moves might make us skeptical of any of them, it is their very exhaustibility, their sequential quality, that fully reveals their failure to yield and sustain the longed-for plenitude of meaning: serial authenticity is no authenticity at all. What Cather has seen—and shows us—is that the Professor’s impasse as the novel closes is also the impasse of “authenticity modernism” as an expressive form. In showing us the exhaustion of the Professor’s capacity to make meaning, she is discovering and forecasting the exhaustion of modernist fiction’s most characteristic structure and strategy, which seems condemned to the perpetual reiteration of a realm of authentic experience always disappearing from view.

### *Cather’s ‘other’ modernism*

If *The Professor’s House* at once exemplifies and exhausts the prevailing modernist form of her era, what is the nature of Cather’s “other” modernism? I proposed at the start of these remarks that we might begin with form, with the ways her fiction behaves upon the page, and go on to ask how her deployment of key elements of narrative composition resonates historically. Accordingly, I want to look at two such

formal features of Cather's fiction—the way it conceives of the subject of its—and our—interests and attention; and the way it imagines novelistic “action”: What characteristically counts as a significant event in Cather's fiction? What kind of meanings most arrestingly arise from the intersection of character and plot in her writing?<sup>13</sup>

*Subjects.* While Cather may always be fixed in our minds as a Nebraska writer, the subject matter of her fiction is, in fact, astonishingly various: the prairie country and polyglot culture of Nebraska, yes, but also the American Southwest (both prehistoric and contemporary), colonial Quebec, antebellum Virginia, New York City, and the suburban Chicago of the 1920s. Is there a logic, a form of interest, that links together the disparate materials of Cather's fiction, that determines who and what qualifies as an object her novelistic attention? I think there is, but we will need to turn to early twentieth-century intellectual history to capture the force and resonance of her radical reconception of novelistic practice.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, as Cather's career as a novelist was itself unfolding, a group of related ideas emerged in the work of the anthropologist Franz Boas and his students at Columbia University and became widely influential among American intellectuals. There are two crucial conceptual elements to this new science of anthropology, both of which have striking affinities to the way Cather's fiction comes to define its sense of the interesting. First, the concept of “culture” is broken free from its static and honorific association with the refined arts that signify genteel cultural authority. Rather than representing what “civilized” European nations have and “primitive” people lack, “culture” refers, more descriptively and objectively, to the

interconnected and particular ways distinct communities construct meanings for the individual lives that unfold within them. “Culture,” this is to say, becomes an object of study and interest rather than a marker of hierarchical distinctions, and this redefinition of the term equips one to realize that modern American lives, no less than supposedly “primitive” ones, are deeply shaped by distinctive customs. Along with this sense that different cultures—the plural is crucial—comprise distinctive meaning-systems comes a revolutionary claim of their equivalence in value. Thus in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) Boas demonstrates the capacity of putatively savage people to think abstractly, to discriminate aesthetically, and to inhibit impulse, while featuring the irrational customs, prejudices, rituals, and taboos characteristic of genteel Europeans and Americans. Some of Boas’s students, especially, used cultural comparisons to turn overturn customary Victorian hierarchies altogether, arguing that “primitive” cultures made possible much more satisfying and creative individual lives than did American industrial society, as in Edward Sapir’s *Dial* essay (1919) on “genuine” and “spurious” cultures, with its contrasting figures of the “telephone girl” and the American Indian spear fisherman and its analysis of the spiritual hunger characteristic of twentieth-century consumer culture. The works of Boas and his disciples, then, identified “culture” as the central arena of human meaning-making, suggesting new kinds of interest in daily life, more capacious notions of imaginativeness and creativity, more pointed criticisms of orthodox American culture.<sup>14</sup>

What did this anthropological sense of culture—whether derived from the intellectual atmosphere around her, generated by her own experience, or both—give to Cather’s fiction? In several senses, it gave Cather her subject: her sense of who or what

might qualify as a plausible object of fictional attention, and the set of characteristic attitudes she brought to the treatment of that material. First, and foundationally, the democratization of cultural value implicit in Boas's cultural relativism—the sense that there is no central culture, towering above all others, but that all human communities are alike engaged in making meaningful lives for their inhabitants—underwrites the realization Cather describes in “My First Novels [There Were Two]” that, rather than attempting to reproduce a novel of manners in the tradition of James or Wharton (as she had in *Alexander's Bridge*), she might write about the places and people that mattered to her, as she did in *O Pioneers!* As Cather tells the story of her early career, she becomes herself as a writer at the moment that she gives up her ambition to inherit the tradition of the nineteenth-century novel from its most powerful early twentieth-century practitioners, and turns definitively toward a class of materials that would have been invisible to the novelistic tradition that James and Wharton represent.

But if this redefinition of idea of culture, however she came to possess it, freed Cather to recast her sense of who and what belongs in the novel, it also identified for her what would become, in a different sense, the central subject matter of her fiction: the making of meaning itself. Cather found her own way as a writer by finding the making of meaning *in itself* as a fully adequate and continually absorbing subject for novelistic attention. An explicit acknowledgment of her commitment to this sense of the writer's subject comes in a letter to Wilbur Cross, acknowledging a sensitive review of *Shadows on the Rock*. Here is her account of that novel's subject: “An orderly little French household that went on trying to live decently, just as ants begin to rebuild when you kick their house down, interests me more than Indian raids or the wild life in the forests [ . . . ]

And really, a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages. Those people brought a kind of French culture there and somehow kept it alive on that rock.”<sup>15</sup> Cather is adopting here an anthropological view of meaning, in which objects are indeed symbolic of cultural values (the “salad dressing”), but not by symbolizing something other than themselves, and, as she does so, she notes her fiction’s disinterest in the kinds of big ticket events (“Indian raids”) that would usually furnish the materials of such settlement narratives. The kind of “anthropological” interest referred to is to be found everywhere in Cather’s fiction: in the culture of storytelling and storytellers in *My Antonia*; in *Shadows on the Rock*, of course, a book given over to the sustained observation of a year’s work of culture making; in the recurrent visits paid by her texts to the Ancestral Puebloan ruins of the American Southwest; in her treatment of the material culture of daily domestic work itself, as in “Old Mrs. Harris.”

Throughout her work, then, Cather has accomplished a significant re-conception of the subject of the novel, and that re-conception has necessarily freed the novelist and her reader to find forms of meaning unconfined by the customary trajectories of novelistic interest. When the making of meanings and the work of local cultures becomes the subject of fiction, a new kind of responsiveness—a reader’s modernism, if you will—becomes possible: a more open definition of the interesting emerges, and new forms of attention and feeling identify themselves and begin to hold sway.

*Action.* If we are correct in our account of the kind of interest that shapes Cather’s writing, we still need to ask how she meets the fiction-maker’s obligation to turn insights or interests into characters and actions. In this realm of novelistic action, where characters meet the plotlines that define them, Cather’s fiction is remarkable for its

resistance to the related ideas of “depth” and “development,” definitive elements of the conception of experience native to Victorian novels. For many of the characters in Cather’s fiction, the questions that go with a “depth” or “developmental” model of character—What is a character’s deeper or self-obscured motivation? How has a character matured or moved toward self-understanding or self-recognition?—seem irrelevant at best and fatuous at worst. What could be more fruitless than to psychoanalyze Antonia or Old Mrs. Harris, or to posit elaborate schemes of self-recognition or transformation on behalf of any of the characters in *Shadows on the Rock*? Cather’s characters are likely, rather, during the course of a narrative to make evident or transparent their natures, or to come to express or see their lives in a definitive or characteristic way. (In naming this characteristic of many of her works, we are simultaneously observing the anomalousness of *The Professor’s House*, which fits this ‘depth and development’ model of character quite well).

Cather’s deployment of plot in most of her novels is no less reticent, no less oblique and surprising in its relation to novelistic custom. The key moments or events in a Cather text are more likely to be acts of heightened or illuminated witnessing—a scene that etches itself into the mind, the observation of a particular quality of light, the accruing apprehension of a meaning as it is gathered up by an object or a ritual—rather than climactic life events like the marriage or romance plots dear to traditional fiction. Even texts that seem to bring character and plot together in more conventional ways turn out to have a surprising or subversive relation to the traditional novel’s developmental storylines. Thus the bloody adultery plot of *O Pioneers!*—a classic novelistic routine—is curiously “islanded” within a narrative committed to survival and daily continuity; thus

*My Antonia* turns out to be much more of an anti-maturation narrative than a coming of age story, as Jim Burden recommits himself at the book's end to the people and values of his childhood.

What is the goal of Cather's apparent recasting of the modes of attention and action that belong to the Victorian novel? I think it must be this: she sets out, as it were, to free her characters from the forms of emplotment that the tradition of the Victorian novel had designated for them. In so doing she frees her fiction—and its readers—from the values, the stories, and the repertoire of emotions that have constituted the ideological “package” of the novelistic tradition she inherits. What does she put in the place of novelistic action, as traditionally conceived? Here is a passage from “Old Mrs. Harris”:

Sometimes, in the morning, if her feet ached more than usual, Mrs. Harris felt a little low. (Nobody did anything about broken arches in those days, and the common endurance test of old age was to keep going after every step cost something.) She would hang up her towel with a sigh and go into the kitchen, feeling that it was hard to make a start. But the moment she heard the children running down the uncarpeted back stairs, she forgot to be low. Indeed, she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; she became part of a group, became a relationship. She was drunk up into their freshness when they burst in upon her, telling her about their dreams, explaining their troubles with buttons and shoe-laces and underwear shrunk too small. The tired, solitary old woman Grandmother had been at daybreak vanished; suddenly the morning seemed as important to her as it did to the children, and the mornings ahead stretched out sunshiny, important.<sup>16</sup>

We see unfolding here the array of interests that we have proposed as defining Cather's "other" modernism: the location of the field of art in the terrain of the everyday, in the world of broken arches and the vicissitudes of laundry; the notation of meaning's local emergence revealing itself as fiction's supreme subject ("she became a relationship [ . . . ] suddenly the morning seemed [ . . . ] important"). But what is more striking still about this moment of reconceived novelistic action is that, these brief remarks notwithstanding, it leaves us with nothing to say. Faced with a passage like this, we do not judge, we witness. And in that shift from interpretation to observation, from allegory to "anthropology," Cather sets the novel and its readers free.

We are ready now to draw together our observations of the strikingly "anti-novelistic" behavior of Cather's novels into a claim about the nature of her "other" modernism—about the way the formal renovations we have been specifying might yield the kind of cultural, intellectual, and emotional renovation that modernism promises. I have been suggesting that one of the most interesting things about her fiction is what it does *not* find interesting. We have been discovering, as we have examined the characteristic behavior of her fiction, that Cather's modernism is, in part, a project or practice of "dis-investment." By withdrawing its interest from the psychological conceptions of character and the moralizing trajectories of action that underwrite Victorian narrative, Cather's modernist fiction frees its readers, no less than its characters, from a customary repertoire of response, from the habits of feeling and judgment, from the pathways of attention and interest that belong to the Victorian novel and to the cultural dispensation such novels spoke so powerfully for. But her work is also an invitation to "re-investment": by directing its interests elsewhere, to acts of making and



forms of feeling cut free from the depth-seeking, ending-hungry, explanation-driven trajectories of Victorian culture, Cather's novels invite us toward new forms of thought and feeling, toward a new sense of the sources of meaning and value, toward a new repertoire of response.

We are now taught to value novels for writing more richly the history of their era or, more radically, for exposing, intentionally or not, the embedded and contradiction-ridden histories that eras prefer to hide from themselves. But Cather's novels achieve their modernism most powerfully not by bringing a history to light—though that is one of the things they necessarily do—but by recasting the affective lives of their readers. In this sense, they do not write history; they make it. And if we see this, I think we see also that it is this “other” modernism—the unobtrusive “anthropological” or “readerly” modernism of *My Antonia*, of *Shadows on the Rock*, of “Old Mrs. Harris”—that sustains and, for me, most interestingly defines her career. For meaning that is embedded in a community, whose coming-into-being depends not upon abstract distinctions but a particular and local and infinitely witnessable process, is also meaning that, in contrast to the reiterated authenticity dramas of classic modernism, is inexhaustible. Cather's modernism is most powerful and most original when it has all but disappeared from sight.

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of the history of Cather's literary reputation see Sharon O'Brien, "Becoming Noncanonical: The Case against Willa Cather," *American Quarterly* 40 (March 1988): 110-26.

<sup>2</sup> The classic account of the Cather's formal affinities to modernist art is Phyllis Rose, "The Case of Willa Cather," in *Writing of Women: Essays in a Renaissance* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), pp. 136-52. For discussions of Cather's fiction that connect formal and historical questions, see Chip Rhodes, *Structures of the Jazz Age: Mass Culture, Progressive Education, and Racial Disclosures in American Modernism* (London: Verso, 1998), chap. 2; Sarah Wilson, "'Fragmentary and Inconclusive' Violence: National History and Literary Form in *The Professor's House*," *American Literature* 75 (September 2003): 571-99; my own "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Antonia*," *American Literature* 66 (1994): 689-717, and "Where is Cather's Quebec: Anthropological Modernism in *Shadows on the Rock*," *Cather Studies* 4 (1999): 23-44.

<sup>3</sup> See Frederick Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (1949; rpt. New York: Viking, 1955), pp. 153-62; Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), chap. 10; Walter Benn Michaels, "The Vanishing American," *American Literary History* 2 (1990): 220-241; and Rhodes, *Structures of the Jazz Age*.

<sup>4</sup> *Willa Cather On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), pp. 31-2.

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<sup>5</sup> Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (1925; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 36. The subsequent quotations in this paragraph appear on pages 50, 112, 134, and 121, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am following the interpretive lead of Chip Rhodes, who, in a valuable reading of the novel that is too little known by Cather critics, proposes that “this novel operates by setting up and then knocking down seemingly unproblematic hierarchical couplets” (*Structures of the Jazz Age*, pp. 58-9).

<sup>9</sup> Cather, *The Professor's House*, p. 4. This paragraph's subsequent quotations appear on pages 5, 26, 27, and 46, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 222-23.

<sup>11</sup> See *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), especially chap. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 257.

<sup>13</sup> The following account of Cather's ‘other’ modernism is derived from two of my earlier essays: “Where is Cather's Quebec? Anthropological Modernism in *Shadows on the Rock*” (see note 2, above); and “Willa Cather's American Modernism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 51-65.

<sup>14</sup> See Daniel Joseph Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39 (1987): 7-26. Singal identifies the new anthropology as “perhaps the most influential” of the cultural manifestations of modernism (18). The historical account of

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the emergence of cultural relativism I offer here is derived from Singal's essay, from Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America: A History* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), and from George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968). James Clifford offers an important account of this history, chastened by a sense of the tendency of such intercultural exchanges to leave hierarchies mutedly intact, in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 230-36. Edward Sapir's essay, "Civilization and Culture," may be found in *The Dial* (20 September 1919): 233-36.

<sup>15</sup> "On *Shadows on the Rock*," in *Willa Cather on Writing*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Willa Cather, "Old Mrs. Harris," in *Obscure Destinies* (New York: Knopf, 1932), pp. 136-37.