THE FRENCH INFLUENCE ON WILLA CATHER

BY

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INTRODUCTION

All writers, great and poor, have been influenced by forces outside themselves. This is only natural, because no man, least of all a writer, lives in a vacuum. He must be influenced to some degree by the sights, sounds and people that surround him from day to day. These influences may take the form of places or events; or they may take the form of other people, or of even another culture.

So it is with Willa Cather. I propose to examine her published work in order to ascertain to what extent, if any, French cultural influences, in their various forms, entered into the spirit and the letter of her work. I propose to investigate the possibility of this influence in two ways: directly, by what she says, either in her own person, or through the mouth of one of her characters; and indirectly, by what others say about her. My criteria for determining whether or not an item is indicative of French influence are based on the following evidence:

1. Any direct statement she makes concerning France or the French.
2. Any quotation from French literary or historical sources.
3. References to ideas or objects definitely French.
5. Obvious parallels between her works (in whole or in part) and some French material that could have suggested ideas.
6. Any relevant statement made by another person in writing about Miss Cather.

7. The use of the French people as characters in a work, especially as protagonists.
PART ONE: DIRECT EVIDENCE

CHAPTER ONE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH ARTS

Literature

Since Willa Cather is an artist and a writer, it would seem appropriate to begin French influence on her work in the sphere of the arts, and, more specifically, in literature. Probably the first direct reference to French writing is in the short story, "The Count of Crow's Nest," published in 1896. It is reprinted, with comment by Mildred Bennett, in Early Stories of Willa Cather.

Mrs. Bennett notes that

The choice of subject matter and character in this story show the influence of Henry James . . . Of course, behind both Cather and James are the French influences — the impact of their interest in historical romances. For Cather, Alphonse Daudet was very important at this time.¹

As we read the story we encounter the following:

One evening as Buchanan sat in the reception room reading a volume of Gautier's romances . . . he glanced up and detected the Count looking over his shoulder. "I must ask for pardon for my seeming discourtesy, but one seldom sees those delightful romances read in this country, that, for the moment, I quite forgot myself. And as I caught the title, "La Morte Amoureuse", an old favorite of mine, I could scarcely refrain from glancing a second time."²

¹Early Stories of Willa Cather, selected, and with notes by Mildred Bennett, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1957), p. 115.
²Ibid., p. 120.
A page later we read:

He shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Yes, I understand your hiatus. These things are quite impossible in English, especially the one we are speaking of. Some way we haven’t the feeling for absolute and specific beauty of diction. We have no sense for the aroma of words as the French have. We are never content with the material beauty alone, we are always looking for something else. Of course, we lose by it, it is like always thinking of one’s dinner when one is invited out."

Mrs. Bennett then interpolates: "Willa Cather's admiration for French literature and French precision of expression began early and continued throughout her life." Then the narrative resumes:

"The Count nodded. 'Yes, you look for the definite, whereas the domain of pure art is always the indefinite.' Included in the same volume, the story "A Night At Greenway Court," also published in 1896, has a few passing implied references to French literature:

"Come join me in a game of hazard, Master Morgan; it is yet half an hour until supper time," said the clergyman, who had little thought for anything but his cards and his dinner.

Mildred Bennett comments that "This clergyman . . . seems to have come out of the pages of Dumas or Balzac." We also find another note by Mrs. Bennett, "Cather said she began by imitating writers she admired. Here we find a reflection of the French writers (intrigue, courtesans, jewels), particularly of Alexandre Dumas, the elder . . . ."
Slightly later there is a reference to French wines and preserved cherries, and Mrs. Bennett comments, "Remember the preserved cherries in Daudet's 'Les Vieux'?" 9

She again comments on another story in the collection, "The Affair At Grover Station":

This story shows the influence of French writers. Remember Prosper Merimee's story of the statue which crushed the bridegroom to death, 'The Venus de Ille'?" 10

Finally, the only direct reference to French literature found in the novels is one occurring in The Song of the Lark.

Dr. Archie is talking to Thea about a set of books:

"They're a history of a live city, not a dead one. A Frenchman undertook to write about a whole cityful of people, all the kinds he knew. And he got them nearly all in, I guess. Yes, it's very interesting. You'll like to read it some day, when you're grown up." 11

Although there are references to all the arts in the works of Willa Cather, it seems that literature, (which has six direct references), painting, and especially music are the most important, judging by the frequency of her references to them.

9 Ibid., p. 84.
10 Ibid., p. 239.
Willa Cather was greatly interested in painting, as one can easily see by the themes of such stories as "The Marriage of Phaedra", and "Flavia and her Artists." Because of her catholic tastes, it was inevitable that her interest should extend to French art (here used interchangeably with painting). Indeed, the first reference in her works to this subject is quite early. It is the story to which I have already referred, "The Count of Crow's Nest;"

He had no acquaintances in the house, and spoke to no one, yet everyone knew that he was Paul, Count de Koch, and during the breakfast and luncheon hours he and his possible history had furnished the piece de resistance of conversation for many months. In that absorbing theme even the decadence of French art . . . was forgotten.\(^1\)

Four years later Willa Cather was to write a more extensive conversation about French art. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul" Eric is writing to Margaret:

My new pictures arrived last week on the Gascogne. The Puvis de Chevannes is even more beautiful than I thought in Paris. A pale-dream maiden sits by a pale-dream cow, and a stream of anemic water flows at her feet. The Constant, you will remember, I got because you admired it. It is here in all its florid splendor, the whole dominated by a glowing senuousity. The drapery of the female figure is as wonderful as you said; the fabric all barbaric pearl and gold, painted with an easy, effortless voluptuousness, and that white gleaming line of African coast in the background recalls memories of you very precious to me.\(^2\)

\(^{12}\)Bennett, p. 118.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 207.
Yet, when we approach the novels, direct references to French art and painting are not many. In *Alexander's Bridge* Alexander is visiting Hilda Burgoyne's apartment for the first time. During the course of the conversation, she comments on some paintings that he is admiring, "They are all sketches made about the Villa d'Este, you see. He painted that group of cypresses for the Salon, and it was bought for Luxemburg." The only other reference to French painting in the novels is a passing reference in *Lucy Gayheart* to French Impressionist paintings in a museum.

**Architecture**

Frequently Willa Cather will combine interests. For instance, in *One of Ours*, religion and architecture are so treated. Claude has just arrived in France, and his steps take him before the church of St. Ouen.

He was hunting for the Cathedral, and this looked as if it might be the right place. He shook the water from his raincoat and entered, removing his hat at the door. The day, so dark without, was darker still within;... far away, a few scattered candles, still little points of light... just before him... As he stood staring, hat in hand, as still as the stone figures in the chapels, a great bell, up aloft, began to strike the hour in its deep, melodious throat; eleven beats, measured and far apart, as rich as the colours in the window, then silence... only in his memory the undreamed-of quality

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of sound. The revelations of the glass and the bell had come almost simultaneously, as if one produced the other; and both were superlatives toward which his mind had always been groping, or so it seemed to him then.  

There then follow some extraneous thoughts of Claude's and he recognizes this as Gothic architecture, and tries to remember more of what he had learned about this type of construction. Willa Cather had deep emotional experiences much as Claude, with regard to certain buildings. Edith Lewis tells us that:

On her many journeys to the south of France, it was Avignon that left the deepest impression with her. The Papal Palace at Avignon — seen first when she was a girl — stirred her as no building in the world had ever done.  

I will have more to say about Willa Cather and Avignon in a subsequent chapter.

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Later, in *Shadows on the Rock*, the architectural influence is still with her:

These heavy grey buildings, monasteries and churches, steep-pitched and dormered, with spires and slated roofs, were roughly Norman Gothic in effect. They were made by people from the north of France who knew no other way of building. 18

In *Death Comes For the Archbishop* we get another reference to French architecture, and the Papal Palace at Avignon is again referred to:

Father Joseph looked at his Bishop, then at the cliff, blinking. "Vraiment? Is the stone hard enough? A good colour, certainly; something like the colonnade of St. Peter's.

The Bishop smoothed the piece of rock with his thumb. It is more like something nearer home—I mean, nearer Clermont. When I look up at this rock I can almost feel the Rhone behind me."

"Ah, you mean the old Palace of the Popes at Avignon! Yes, you are right, it is very like. At this hour, it is like this."19

The conversation continues, and the Bishop confesses his distrust for American architects. It is the French who are preferred:

"I have an old friend in Toulouse who is a very fine architect. I talked this matter over with him when I was last at home. He cannot come over himself; he is afraid of the long sea voyage, and not used to horseback travel. But he has a young son, still at his studies, who is eager to undertake the work. Indeed, his father writes me that it has become the young man's dearest ambition to build the first Romanesque church in the New World. He will have studied the right models; he thinks our old churches of the Midi the most beautiful in France. When we are ready he will come and bring with him a couple of good

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French stone-cutters. They will certainly be no more expensive than workmen from St. Louis."\(^\text{20}\)

And again:

"It would be a shame to any man coming from a Seminary that is one of the architectural treasures of France, to make another ugly church on this continent where there are so many already."\(^\text{21}\)

Much later, the Archbishop sees his dream realized:

Wrapped in his Indian Blankets, the old Archbishop sat for a long while, looking at the open, golden face of his Cathedral. How exactly Molny, his French architect, had done what he wanted! Nothing sensational, simply honest building and good stone-cutting, — good Midi Romanesque of the plainest.\(^\text{22}\)

Thus, any perceptive reader can readily see that Willa Cather is deeply influenced by French architecture, and the fact shows often: six times, at least.

\(^{20}\text{Ibid., p. 243.}\)
\(^{21}\text{Ibid., p. 244.}\)
\(^{22}\text{Ibid., p. 271.}\)
Landscape

The French landscape furnished another point of fascination for Willa Cather. Some of it evoked for her, as for Claude, a feeling of homesickness for the wheat-fields of Nebraska. Other landscapes evoked other feelings, and these too, come to the fore in her writing. She has some magnificent descriptions of the Nebraska landscape in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, and even here, she will sometimes slip in a reference to the French landscape:

Late one June afternoon Alexandra Bergson was driving along one of the many roads that led through the rich French farming country to the big church.23

These are transplanted French settlers in Nebraska, but the important thing is that they are French. I noted how Miss Cather frequently combined her likes in religion and architecture, for instance. Here again, religion is coupled, this time with the landscape:

The French Church, properly the Church of Sainte-Agnes, stood upon a hill... The church looked powerful and triumphant there on its eminence, so high above the rest of the landscape, with miles of warm color lying at its feet; and by its position and setting it reminded one of some of the churches built long ago in the wheat-lands of middle France.24

I have already mentioned Claude Wheeler (*One of Ours*) and his first trip to France, and noted that Willa Cather had a parallel experience. I shall mention it again, also, for it is a gold mine

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24Ibid.
of evidence of the French influence on Miss Cather. This particular time Mlle Olive is talking to Claude:

"It is our trees that are worst," she went on sadly. "You have seen our poor trees? It makes one ashamed for this beautiful part of France. Our people are more sorry for them than to lose their cattle and horses."  

There are a few other scattered references to this idea in other novels. In *The Professor's House* we are told that "The Professor had succeeded in making a French garden in Hamilton."  

In *Shadows on the Rock*, even the flowers are French:

Down the face of the cliff there was but this one path, which probably had been a mere watercourse when Champlain and his men first climbed it to plant the French lilies on the crest of the naked rock.  

It is also here that the Count observes to Cécile that some of Canada looks like the South of France.  

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Music

But in assessing the influence of the French arts on Willa Cather, it is in music that we find the most evidence. To express the theme of artistic frustration, or as Mildred Bennett puts it, "sensitive man's disharmony with his environment," Willa Cather chose and rejected almost every artistic media. She used painting, literature and architecture. Once in "The Sculptor's Funeral" she even used sculpture as the medium for expressing this theme. But it is with music that she feels most comfortable. There are very many references to music throughout her various works. Because it is outside the scope of this paper to document all references to music (I am concerned only with French music), to see the ways in which music in all forms influenced and affected her, I would refer the reader to the article given below. Even taking into account only French music, there is still a sizable amount of material.

The first reference to French music may be in "Peter," probably the first story Willa Cather ever wrote. Since this story was written in 1892, we can see that this influence started early, and persisted until 1935, when Lucy Gayheart, Miss Cather's penultimate novel, was published. At the very beginning of "Peter"

is the following paragraph:

Once a French woman came and played for weeks, he did not remember her name now. He did not remember her face very well, either, for it changed so, it was never twice the same. But the beauty of it, and the great hunger men felt at the sight of it, that he remembered. Most of all he remembered her voice. He did not speak French, and could not understand a word she said, but it seemed to him she must be talking the music of Chopin.30

There are three other references to French music in that volume of early stories published separately at the turn of the century. One occurs in "A Dance At Chevalier's" (1900). It is simply the observation that Frenchmen can play fiddles from the time they are old enough to hold one.31 This, of course, is not to be construed as literally true, but merely an indication of her opinion about the musical ability of the French.

Willa Cather is also concerned with the French and their fiddles in the story "Eric Hermannson's Soul," when she has Jerry Lockhart say to Miss Eliot, concerning a social affair, "A little chap from Frenchtown will bring his fiddle."32

Finally, in the early volume "The Prodigies", published in 1897, mentions French opera, and the French translations of other operas.33 This entire story is about music, specifically,

30 Bennett, p. 5.
31 Ibid., p. 223.
32 Ibid., p. 198.
33 Ibid., p. 173.
musical prodigies. It is evidently taken from her contact with the Menuhin family of musical geniuses.\textsuperscript{34}

With the publication of her first book of short stories, published together as one volume, \textit{The Troll Garden}, (1905), Miss Cather again returned to musical themes. In "The Garden Lodge," for instance, one of the main characters is a French opera star.\textsuperscript{35}

Scattered throughout "A Death in the Desert" there are a few passing references to French music, which have meaning only in context. The same applies to "Scandal," which has a reference to modern French music.\textsuperscript{36}

It is, however, with "A Wagner Matinee" that the influence of music on Willa Cather is shown to be very great. With a communication of her meaning so acute as to be extremely rare, Willa Cather expresses the almost inexpressible. She communicates with words, her only tools, the effect that music has on a perceptive soul. Of course, she manages to combine two major influences, France and music, in passing references to French opera in Paris.\textsuperscript{37} Perhaps this unique perception is why "A Wagner Matinee" appears in two separate volumes, \textit{A Troll Garden}, and \textit{Youth} and the \textit{Bright Medusa}.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 165.

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 110.
Also in the latter volume is "A Gold Slipper," which uses the singer, Kitty Ayrshire, as a main character. Here, we note that when "McKann had been in Paris, Kitty Ayrshire was singing at the Comique..."\(^{38}\) Further on in the story we note a more extensive reference to French music:

At last Miss Ayrshire returned, escorted by her accompanist, and gave the people what she of course knew they wanted: the most popular aria from the French opera, \(^{39}\) which the title role had become synonomous with her name.\(^{40}\)

Nor do we find the importance of French opera neglected when we start reading the novels. The Song of the Lark is itself an entire novel tracing the development of a singer. Here, we find the importance of language in opera stressed, with Harsanyi's comment, "There will not be voice only, but French, German and Italian."\(^{40}\) As if to bear this out, later we find a quote, in the French language, from Gounod's Ave Maria.\(^{41}\)

Since Lucy Gayheart is based on almost the same material as The Song of the Lark, we can expect references to French music: Early in the book there is mention of a French singer,\(^{42}\) and a French opera.\(^{43}\) Slightly later on Clement attends the funeral of

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\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 125.

\(^{39}\)Ibid., p. 30.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., p. 263.

\(^{41}\)Ibid., p. 211.

\(^{42}\)Cather, Lucy Gayheart, p. 31.

\(^{43}\)Ibid., p. 35.
a French singer (it could just as easily have been German, Italian or Spanish, but the fact that it is French is significant), and breaks a date with Lucy, who steals into the church to observe him. It is little matters and minor references, which show that Willa Cather was continually influenced by things French. Other minor references to France, in this particular book, are found in the fact that Clement lived in France as part of his professional musical training, and the fact that he gave a concert tour in France.

But the French musical influence is not restricted to the books with music as a background. Professor and Mrs. St. Peter are presented as a cultured, literate couple, and during the course of The Professor's House they attend a French opera, and discuss it. "How music does make one think of Paris, and of so many half-forgotten things," Mrs. St. Peter murmurs to her husband. Also, in Death Comes For the Archbishop, there is a note to the effect that "Madame Olivares likes to sing old French songs with [Fr. Joseph]."

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 53.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 83.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p. 117.

\(^{47}\) Cather, The Professor's House, p. 93.

\(^{48}\) Cather, Death Comes For the Archbishop, p. 177.
I have quoted seventeen instances in which French music is mentioned by Willa Cather throughout her works. There are even more, for I have not included those references which have meaning only in context.

Thus, my final tally of the references to the French arts stands at: references to literature—six direct; painting, two; architecture, six; landscape, six; and music, seventeen, for a grand total of thirty-seven references to the French arts in the stories of Willa Cather.
CHAPTER TWO

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PERSONAL QUALITIES OF THE FRENCH

Any nation has certain qualities which the people in that nation share (or their neighbors think they share). These may be true or false, but they become stereotyped. For many people all Germans are precise, all Englishmen cold and humorless, and all Orientals excessively polite. For Willa Cather, this attitude was true to a certain extent in her writings about the personal qualities of the French people. With two or three minor exceptions, all references throughout the works portray Frenchmen as having desirable qualities. Even these exceptions seem to be damning with faint praise. The qualities which the French people possess in the works of Willa Cather include the following: politeness, piety, patriotism, love, open-mindedness, honor, sympathy, cleanliness, and the quality of being the most civilized nation on earth.

The Superiority of the French Civilization.

With Willa Cather, one gets the idea that the French have probably the most civilized nation on earth. This in itself shows the extent of the French influence on her. In Shadows on the Rock, Madame Auclair tells her child:

"At home, in France, we have learned to do all these things in the best way, and we are conscientious, and that is why we are called the most civilized people in Europe, and other nations envy us."¹

¹Cather, Shadows on the Rock, p. 24.
Since the action of the novel occurs in the late seventeenth century, I think it safe to assume that to Willa Cather, "the most civilized people in Europe" were also the most civilized on earth. Indeed, at one point we are told that "Cécile had always taken for granted that the Kingdom of Heaven looked exactly like her Church; that this altar was a reproduction of it, made in France by people who knew..."²

Later on in the book, Cécile and Pierre Charron, out strolling, met Monsignor de Saint-Vallier in his garden. The conversation again turned to the French:

"I see your grand neighbor has come home," Pierre observed. "Oh yes, last September. But you must have heard? People say he brought such beautiful things for his house; furniture and paintings and tapestry and silver dishes. Wouldn't you love to see the inside of his Palace?" "Not a bit! He is too French for me." Charron threw up his chin.³

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* we encounter the following exchange between Fathers Martinez and Latour:

"... You know nothing about Indians or Mexicans. If you try to introduce European civilization here and change our old ways, to interfere with the secret dances of the Indians, let us say, or abolish the bloody rites of the Penitentes, I foretell an early death for you. I advise you to study our native traditions before you begin your reforms. You are among barbarous people, my Frenchman, between two savage races..."⁴

²Ibid., p. 64.
³Ibid., pp. 173-174.
⁴Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, p. 148.
In the last line, the contrast between French and other cultures is marked.

Finally, in "A Night At Greenway Court" is the following:

"That's talking, sir; you see the best of life, you French."

Directly below this the editor has interpolated, "Willa Cather felt the same way."\(^5\)

\(^5\)Bennett, p. 81.
Politeness

I suppose that it follows that to Willa Cather the most civilized society is also the most well-mannered and polite. At least, this is the conclusion Willa Cather seems to have drawn subconsciously, if not consciously, for this is borne out in the writings. In *Shadows on the Rock*, the following occurs as part of a description of Pierre Charron:

More than anyone else he realized the romantic picture of the free Frenchman of the great forests which they had formed at home on the banks of the Seine. He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the new.

In *One of Ours* there are two mentions of "French politeness" but they are pejorative because of Claude's distrust of a more polished and sophisticated nation. Nevertheless, their presence is indicative of the predominant French influence. The first instance occurs before Claude enlists: "Lying still and thinking fast, Claude felt that even he could clear the bar of "French politeness" --- so much more terrifying than German bullets --- and slip unnoticed into that outnumbered army." The other instance occurs much later. Near the end of the book, Claude and his buddies are on holiday leave in France. Once again note that innate distrust:

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6Cather, *Shadows on the Rock*, p. 171.

7Cather, *One of Ours*, p. 173.
The Americans were prone, he had observed, to make themselves very much at home, to mistake good manners for good will. He had no right to doubt the affection of the Jouberts, however; that was genuine and personal,—not a smooth surface under which almost any shade of scorn might lie and laugh ... was not, in short, the treacherous "French politeness" by which one must not let oneself be taken in.

Nostalgia

Throughout all of Willa Cather's writing, a dominant strain is that of nostalgia. It is, perhaps, a consequence one can expect, when a writer finds such fruitful material in the past with which to work. Moreover, since much of Willa Cather is concerned with the reverse-Jamesian theme of the impact of the Old World upon the New, (in Mildred Bennett's broader phrase "sensitive man's disharmony with his environment") the clash of the two sets of values will quite naturally induce a longing a nostalgia in a type of homesickness for the Old World.

Indeed, I find this strain starting early in the turn-of-the century story, "A Night At Greenway Court":

The bright firelight gave me an excellent opportunity to observe this man, which I did, for with us, strangers were not too few to be of especial interest, and in a way, their very appearance spoke to us of an older world beyond the sense of which the hearts of all of us still hungered.

Mrs. Bennett comments on this passage: "The old world hunger was to give depth and direction to Cather's best books — a

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8 Ibid., p. 405.
9 Bennett, Introduction.
10 Ibid., p. 80.
hunger for antiquity which she shared with Flaubert, one of the authors she most admired.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, it comes as no surprise to find that the nostalgia is keener, when that which is left behind is a superior way of living. This is the feeling conveyed in the two novels which have French protagonists, \textit{Death Comes For The Archbishop}, and \textit{Shadows on the Rock}. In the latter there are only a few direct statements, yet one unmistakeably feels through the atmosphere of the book, the great warmth with which Euclide Auclair talks about his homeland.

For instance, this feeling is communicated in the description of Auclair's house: "the interior was like home to the French born."\textsuperscript{12} Or, there are references to the fact that "the drama of man went on at Quebec just as at home,"\textsuperscript{13} or, even a comparison in the seasons: "The glorious transmutation of autumn had come on: all the vast Canadian shores were clothed with a splendour never seen in France."\textsuperscript{14}

Just the opposite is true with \textit{Death Comes For The Archbishop}. In this book there are abundant references to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Gather, \textit{Shadows on the Rock}, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 97.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 228.
\end{itemize}
nostalgia which the two French priests feel toward their native country. This occurs quite early, for the third chapter opens with the Bishop writing letters on Christmas Day:

Since his return to Santa Fe his official correspondence had been heavy; but the closely-written sheets over which he bent with a thoughtful smile were not to go to Monsignori, or to Archbishops, or to the heads of religious houses, — but to France, to Auvergne, to his own little town; to a certain grey, winding street, paved with cobbles, and shaded by tall chestnuts on which, even today, some few brown leaves would be clinging, or dropping one by one, to be caught in the cold green ivy on the walls.\(^15\)

Just a short time later, the Bishop is talking with Father Joseph:

Over the compote of dried plums they fell to talking of the great yellow ones that grew in the old Latour garden at home. Their thoughts met in that tilted cobble street, winding down a hill, with the uneven garden walls and tall horse-chestnuts on either side; a lonely street after nightfall, with soft street lamps shaped like lanterns at the darkest turnings. At the end of it was the Church were the Bishop made his first Communion, with a grove of flat-cut plane trees in front, under which the market was held on Tuesdays and Fridays.\(^16\)

Bishop Latour seems the most prone to reverie of any of Willa Cather's characters. There is one point in the book where a reverie brings on another reverie:

It had happened in a street in New Orleans. He had turned a corner and come upon an old woman with a basket of yellow flowers; sprays of yellow sending out a honey-sweet perfume. Mimosa— but before he could think of the name he was overcome by a feeling of place, was dropped, cassock and all, into a garden in the south of France where he had been sent one winter in his childhood to recover from an illness.\(^17\)

\(^{15}\)Cather, Death Comes For the Archbishop, p. 32.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 41.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 43.
There are many conversations between these two throughout the book, and so it is natural that their talk should return to France, and things French:

Father Vaillant took off his glasses, folded them, and put them in their case... "So a year from now you will be in Rome. Well, I had rather be among my people in Albuquerque, that I can say honestly. But Clermont --- there I envy you. I should like to see my own mountains again. At least you will see all my family and bring me word of them, and you can bring me the vestments that my dear sister Philomene and her nuns have been making for me these three years. I shall be very glad to have them." He rose and took up one of the candles. "And when you leave Clermont, Jean, put a few chestnuts in your pockets for me!"18

Again, they are talking, and recalling their patriotism during the war:

The year previous, after the surrender of Algiers, there had been a military review at Clermont, a great display of uniforms and military bands, and stirring speeches about the glory of French arms. Young Joseph Vaillant had lost his head in the excitement, and had signed up for a volunteer without consulting his father. He gave Latour a vivid account of his patriotic emotions, of his father's displeasure, and his own subsequent remorse. His mother had wished him to become a priest. She died when he was thirteen, and ever since then he had meant to carry out her wish and dedicate his life to the service of the Divine Mother. But that one day, among the bands and the uniforms, he had forgotten everything but his desire to serve France.19

Yet, another new twist is effected toward the end of the book:

He loved the towering peaks of his native mountains, the comeliness of the villages, the cleanliness of the country-side, the beautiful lines and cloisters of his own college. Clermont was beautiful, —but he found himself sad there; his heart lay like a stone in his breast. There was too much past, perhaps... When the summer wind stirred the lilacs in the old gardens and

18 Ibid., p. 158.
19 Ibid., p. 225.
shook down the blooms of the horse-chestnuts, he sometimes closed his eyes and thought of the high song the wind was singing in the straight, striped-pine trees up in the Navajo forests.20

Toward the very end of the book, Cather again returns to the nostalgia for one's country: The Archbishop is recalling how he and his friend agreed to steal away from home and volunteer for the missions in the West.

How clearly the old Archbishop could recall the scene; these two young men in the fields in the grey morning, disguised as if they were criminals, escaping by stealth from their homes . . .

"Allons!" said Jean lightly. "L'invitation du voyage! You will accompany me to Paris. Once we are there, if your father is not reconciled, we will get Bishop F--- to absolve you from your promise, and you can return to Riom. It is very simple."21

There is no nostalgia, as such, in any of the characters in One of Ours. But there is recognition of the superiority of French culture. Claude, for instance, dies believing France better than any country can ever be.22 Notice, also, in this book the intense sympathy Willa Cather has with the French peasants. This is borne out by the very sympathetic portrayal of the characters who are French peasants --- the Jouberts, for example. Moreover, the feeling is not exactly nostalgia, but it is an intense feeling for France, and the French which Claude feels:

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20 Ibid., p. 274.
21 Ibid., p. 285.
22 Cather, One of Ours, p. 458.
The name that endured was "La France". How much that name had come to mean to him, since he first saw a shoulder of land bulk up in the dawn from the deck of the Anchises.23

Religion and Piety.

Since one of the concepts which fascinated Willa Cather the most was religion, it is only natural that she direct some of that interest into French religion, and so combine two interests. This combination, of course, reached fruition in the novel Death Comes For The Archbishop. This entire novel proves the point. But there are some explicit examples of the influence of French religion. One occurs as the two priests ride together into the town of Los Rancho de Taos, the reception they get, and the inevitable comparison between the Mexican and the French method of doing things:

The inhabitants were all gathered in the square before the church, when the Bishop dismounted to enter the church, the women threw their shawls on the dusty pathway for him to walk upon, and as he passed through the kneeling congregation, men and women snatched for his hand to kiss the Episcopal ring. In his own country all this would have been highly distasteful to Jean Marie Latour. Here, these demonstrations seemed a part of the high colour that was in landscape and gardens, in the flaming cactus and the gaudily decorated altars, — in the agonized Christs and dolorous Virgins and the very human figures of the saints. He had already learned that with this people religion was necessarily theatrical.24

A few pages further, we are given the same idea from a different point of view, that of the dissolute Padre Martinez:

23Ibid., p. 394.

24Cather, Death Comes For the Archbishop, p. 142.
"... Our native priests are more devout than your French Jesuits. We have a living Church here, not a dead arm of the European Church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here. We do not require aid from the propaganda, and we resent its interference. The church the Franciscan Fathers planted here was cut off; this is the second growth, and it is indigenous. Our people are the most devout left in the world. If you blast their faith by European formalities, they will become infidels and profligates."

Again, in One of Ours we find the opinion aired that the French are not as pious as some other nation. This time, however, it is not Mexican, but German piety in question. Mrs. Wheeler is talking to Claude:

"We know Paris is a wicked city, but there must be many Godfearing people there, and God has preserved it all these years. You saw in the paper how the churches are full all day of women praying." She leaned forward and smiled at him indulgently. "And you believe those prayers will accomplish nothing, son?"

Claude squirmed, as he always did when his mother touched upon certain subjects. "Well, you see, I can't forget that the Germans are praying too. And I guess they are just naturally more pious than the French."

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25 Ibid., p. 147.

26 Cather, One of Ours, p. 170.
Romance

The treatment of love and romance was not one of Miss Cather's strong points. When she does treat of it, her effort is unconvincing. Yet even in this area, we find influence of the French. In *O Pioneers!* Amédée is speaking to Emil: "You wanna get some nice French girl, now. She treat you well..."27

Or, later on:

The auction was the liveliest part of the entertainment, for the French boys always lost their heads when they began to bid, satisfied that their extravagance was in a good cause. Emil precipitated a panic by taking out one of his turquoise shirt studs, which everyone had been admiring, and handed it to the auctioneer. All the French girls clamored for it, and their sweethearts bid against each other recklessly.28

28Ibid., p. 219.
Other Qualities

A certain open-mindedness, a love of anything new or novel is a quality of the French which Willa Cather notes in *O Pioneers!*: "The French and Bohemian boys were spirited and jolly, liked variety, and were as much prejudiced to favor something new as the Scandanavian boys were to reject it." Or, again in the same book: "The French boys liked a lot of swagger, and they were always delighted to hear about anything new: new clothes, new games, new songs, new dances."  

The honor of the French is touched upon only once somewhat directly, and then, obliquely, through a literary reference. In *The Professor's House*, the Professor is speaking to Louie Marsellus, who has been insulted by the professor's family:

"Louie," St. Peter spoke with deep feeling, "do you happen to have read a novel of Henry James, *The American*? There's a rather nice scene in it, in which a young Frenchman, hurt in a duel, apologizes for the behavior of his family."  

Here again, I observe the combination of two influences: Henry James, and the French mind. The fact that it is such a minor part of the James book, and yet manages to mention the French is good evidence for my theory that Willa Cather was deeply influenced by the French.

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31 Cather, *The Professor's House*, p. 169.
Other personal qualities of the French that are mentioned somewhere in the books of Miss Cather are cleanliness, (In Alexander's Bridge, Hilda is speaking to Alex about her maid: "... Marie is clean—really clean, as the French are."), and education, (in Death Comes For The Archbishop there is a description of Doña Isabella Olivares, which notes that she was "pretty, and accomplished, [and] had been educated at a French convent."). This leads into the notation about the French style in dress. The next sentence, after the above, reads:

She had done much to Europeanize her husband. The refinement of his dress and manners, and his lavish style of living, provoked half-contemptuous envy among his brothers and their friends.

Continuing in this "lavish style" vein, in the same book I find two other references: "Doña Isabella was in a hoop skirt, a French dress from New Orleans, all covered with little garlands of pink satin roses." (This was at a reception which she gave.) The other reference is not to "lavish French style" as such, but it does concern clothes, so that this seems to be the logical place to include it. The Bishop is writing to his brother:

"... We missionaries wear a frock coat and wide-brimmed hat all day, you know, and look like American traders. What a

32Cather, Alexander's Bridge, p. 42.
33Cather, Death Comes For the Archbishop, p. 176.
34Ibid.
pleasure to come home at night, and put on my old cassock! I feel more like a priest, then—for so much of the day I must be a 'business man!' —and, for some reason, more like a Frenchman...”

Finally, in *The Professor's House*, Kathleen is talking to the Professor: "Rosie comes home in a handmade French frock that costs more than all of our dresses put together."

There are five direct references to the superiority of French culture; three to politeness; thirteen to nostalgia for things French; four to religion and piety; two to romance; and nine to other personal qualities of the French, for a total of thirty-six references to the personal qualities of the French.

Thus, one may conclude that when Willa Cather wished to portray desirable traits of character, in many, many cases she did so through French characters.

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36 Ibid., p. 35.

37 Cather, *The Professor's House*, p. 86.
CHAPTER THREE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

The use of the French language extensively throughout her works is evidence of the great French influence upon Willa Cather. It is to be expected that this language will be used in the novels with French backgrounds, but when a French word or phrase appears, unexpectedly and perhaps incongruously, in the middle of a novel with a Nebraska setting, (or, as in "The Affair At Grover Station," in such a desolate, inaccessible place as Wyoming in the last century) then one is inclined to attribute a heavier weight to this influence upon the writer.

Throughout all the works, even in the earliest short stories, there are scattered French words. In O Pioneers! we encounter a priest who speaks French in the middle of the Nebraska prairie. One of Ours, is also set (for the most part) on the Nebraska prairie, but this does not prevent Willa Cather from characterizing Mr. Wheeler with a French proverb: "The French saying, 'Joy of the street, sorrow of the home,' was exemplified in Mr. Wheeler, though not at all in the French way."¹

Language seems to be important in this book --- it is the only one of Claude's school subjects that is treated with any detail:

Indeed, he put a great deal of time and thought upon the matter, Claude is writing a paper on the testimony of Jeanne d'Arc at her trial and for the time being it seemed quite the most important thing in his life. He worked from an English translation of the Procès, but he kept the French text at his elbow,

¹Cather, One of Ours, p. 7.
and some of her replies haunted him in the language in which they were spoken. It seemed to him they were like the speech of the saints, of whom Jeanne said: "the voice is beautiful, sweet and low, and it speaks in the French tongue."² Later, Claude arrives in France, and he recognizes the importance of learning the language. It is also an observation on the chaotic quality of war:

"When I find myself riding along in a train, in the middle of harvest, [said Claude] trying to learn French verbs, then I know the world is turned upside down, for a fact!" ... He was constantly interrupted in his perusal of a French phrase-book (made up of sentences chosen for their usefulness to soldiers, -- such as "Non, jamais je ne regarde les femmes") by the questions of curious strangers.³

A lighter tone is assumed in the conversation between Claude and his shipmate Victor, a short time later:

"Are you quick with your French?" Victor asked. Claude grinned. "Not especially." "You'd better brush up on it if you want to do anything with French girls. You must be able to toss the word the moment you see a skirt, and make your date before the guard gets onto you."⁴

The Jouberts -- the French peasants that Claude and some fellow-soldiers are staying with--are pleasant and sympathetic. [Claude] admired the way [Mrs. Joubert] roused herself and tried to interest them, speaking her difficult language with such spirit and precision. It was a language that couldn't be mumbled; that had to be spoken with energy and fire, or not spoken at all. Merely speaking that exacting tongue would help to rally a broken spirit, he thought.⁵

²Ibid., p. 61.
³Ibid., p. 244.
⁴Ibid., p. 289.
⁵Ibid., p. 356.
The use of the French language is combined with patriotism, in the scene in the book where Claude and Hicks are resting and smoking in a French cemetery:

They smoked in silence, meditating and waiting for night. On a cross at their feet the inscription read merely:

Soldat Inconnu, Mort pour La France.

A very good epitaph, Claude was thinking. Most of the boys who fell in this war were unknown, even to themselves. They were too young. They died and took their secret with them, -- what they were and what they might have been. The name that stood was La France. How much that name had come to mean to him, since he first saw a shoulder of land bulk up in the dawn from the deck of the Anchises. It was a pleasant name to say over in one's mind, where one could make it as passionately nasal as one pleased and never blush.

Hicks, too had been lost in his reflections. Now he broke the silence. "Somehow, Lieutenant, 'mort' seems deader than 'dead'. It has a coffinish sound. And over there they're 'tod', and it's all the same damned silly thing. Look at them set out there, black and white, like a checkerboard. The next question is, who put 'em here, and what's the good of it?"

In The Professor's House, Godfrey St. Peter recognizes the importance of the French language. He has just met Tom Outland, and he asks him if he has learned any French from his missionary teacher. This being one of the first questions that he asks Tom, he evidently considers it important, as must Willa Cather.

For the characters in Death Comes For the Archbishop, the French language is used only on special, solemn occasions, as in the Archbishop's final sickness. It is at this time, also, that

6Ibid., p. 394.
7Cather, The Professor's House, p. 114.
he wishes he had written down the old legends, customs and superstitions of the diocese. "He wished now that long ago he had had the leisure to write them down, that he could have arrested their flight by throwing about them the light and elastic mesh of the French tongue."  

Of course, in the "French novels", the extensive use of the French language is expected. Thus, scattered throughout Shadows on the Rock, Death Comes For the Archbishop, and the last part of One of Ours are French sentences, terms and single words. There is no point in publishing an exhaustive list, because the words mean nothing out of context. But that they exist is without doubt. In one particular book, Shadows on the Rock, we encounter more single French words which are not italicized (as most foreign words), and therefore evidently accepted as English words borrowed from the French. This list includes such words as "menage", "porte-cochere", "allee", "chirugien", "atelier", and "polle". Mention also ought to be made of nearly an entire page written in French. (It is a letter, found on page 85 of the Knopf edition of Shadows on the Rock.)

Throughout the works of Miss Cather there are countless uses of the French language, nine of which are in quotable context, the remainder of which are isolated words and phrases, meaningless when separated from their context.

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8 Cather, Death Comes For the Archbishop, p. 277.
CHAPTER FOUR: FRENCH FOOD AND COOKING: THEIR INFLUENCE

In the preceding chapters I have been concerned with French qualities of mind, and how they affected Willa Cather. Since it is mundane but true that man has a body which must be cared for and nourished, as well as a mind, it is only fitting that a chapter be devoted to establishing the amount of influence that the French culinary habits had on Willa Cather. Again, the first reference is early, but modest and minor. Bear in mind, however, that a restaurant specifically French is designated in the following quotations, when a Chinese, Mexican or German establishment could easily have been substituted. Either consciously or subconsciously, the French influence has exerted itself.

Hilda is suggesting a restaurant to Bartley in this quotation from Alexander's Bridge:

"Why not that little French place in Soho, where we went so often when you were here in the summer? I love it, and I've never been there with anyone but you. Sometimes I go by myself when I am particularly lonely."¹

Another example of a restaurant that "just happens" to be French, is the one in the short story, "Coming, Aphrodite!"— "An hour later they were dining in the back garden of a little French hotel on Ninth Street, long since passed away."² As we progress through

¹Cather, Alexander's Bridge, p. 78.
²Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 41
the works, Willa Cather seems to warm to her subject, and enlarges on it more. By the time we reach the end of The Song of the Lark, she has developed as far as:

At nine o'clock that evening, our three friends were seated in the balcony of a French restaurant, much gayer and more intimate than any that exist in New York today. This old restaurant was built by a lover of pleasure who knew that to dine gayly, human beings must have the reassurance of certain limitations of space and of a definite style; that the walls must be near to suggest shelter, the ceiling high enough to give the chandeliers a setting. The place was crowded with the kind of people who dine late and well. . . .

But it isn't until we reach what I have called the "French novels" that the food theme is really developed. It starts quite early in Death Comes for the Archbishop, is developed throughout that novel, and culminates in the pages of Shadows on the Rock. Note, in this passage from the earlier book, the combination once again of two influences: French cooking and French religion compared with those of New Mexico:

When Father Latour asked [his dinner hostess] to give him his portion without chili, the girl inquired whether it was more pious to eat it like that. He hastened to explain that Frenchmen, as a rule, do not like high seasoning . . .

Later, when Fathers Latour and Vaillant prepare for a dinner at home, we get this memorable scene:

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*Cather, The Song of the Lark, p. 367.*

*Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 30.*
On coming into the dining-room, Bishop Latour placed his candlesticks over the fireplace, since there were already six upon the table, illuminating the brown soup-pot. After they had stood for a moment in prayer, Father Joseph lifted the cover and ladled the soup into plates, a dark onion soup with croutons. The Bishop tasted it critically and smiled at his companion. After the spoon had travelled to his lips a few times, he put it down and leaning back in his chair remarked, "Think of it, Blanchet; in all this vast country between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean, there is probably not another human being who could make a soup like this." "Not unless he is a Frenchman," said Father Joseph... The Bishop continued, "... a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup."

Father Joseph frowned intently at the earthen pot in the middle of the table. His pale, near-sighted eyes had always the look of peering into distance. "C'est ca, c'est vrai," he murmured. "But how," he exclaimed as he filled the Bishop's plate again, "how can a man make a proper soup without leeks, that king of vegetables? We cannot go on eating onions forever."

After carrying away the soupiere, he brought in the roast chicken and pommes sautees. "And salad, Jean," he continued as he began to carve. "Are we to eat dried beans and roots for the rest of our lives? Surely we must find time to make a garden. Ah, my garden at Sandusky... You will admit that you never ate better lettuces in France... And I envy the man who is drinking my wine... Father Joseph began to coax the cork from a bottle of red wine with his fingers. "This I begged for your dinner at the hacienda where I went to baptize the baby on St. Thomas's Day. It is not easy to separate these rich Mexicans from their French wine. They know its worth." He poured a few drops and tried it. "A slight taste of cork; they do not know how to keep it properly. However, it is quite good enough for missionaries."

Frequently, when the priest officiated at a Sacrament, whether it be Baptism or Matrimony, he was invited to the feast afterward. This accounts for the long list of dinners that the priests attend in Death Comes For the Archbishop. This, and the

\[5\text{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 36-40}\]
administration of the diocese, the visiting the sick, and the burying the dead account for the invitations to dinner. At one place, after a marriage, Father Joseph cooks his portion of the lamb, and eats it with half a bottle of white Bordeaux. Later he is asked to play cards, then dominoes.

"A game of dominoes, there by the fire, with coffee, or some of that excellent grape brandy you allowed me to taste, that I would find refreshing. And tell me, Manuelito, where do you get that brandy? It is like a French liqueur." 6

Obviously, this last is intended as an accolade. Another, more cultured man than the previous host, "read the newspapers, though they were weeks old when he got them, who liked cigars better than cigarettes, and French wine better than whiskey." 7

Far into the book, traits of the two priests emerge. Here is another development of the gourmet side of Father Joseph:

Fond as he was of good eating and drinking, he not only rigidly observed all the fasts of the Church, but he never complained about the hardness and scantiness of the fare on his long missionary journeys. Father Joseph's relish for good wine might have been a fault in another man. But always frail in body, he seemed to need some quick physical stimulant to support his sudden flights of purpose and imagination. Time and again the Bishop had seen a good dinner, a bottle of claret, transformed into spiritual energy under his very eyes. From a little feast that would make other men heavy and desirous of repose, Father Vaillant would rise up revived, and work for ten or twelve hours with that ardour and thoroughness which accomplished such lasting results. 8

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6 Ibid., p. 59.
7 Ibid., p. 178.
8 Ibid., p. 226.
But sometimes the particular theme in question is treated under another aspect. Food is still the subject, in the following, but under the guise of gardening, not of cooking. The Bishop, out visiting one day, comes upon an apricot tree:

The apricots were large, beautifully colored, and of superb flavor. Since this tree grew against the hillside the Archbishop concluded that the exposure there must be excellent for fruit. He surmised that the heat of the sun, reflected from the rocky hill-slope up into the tree, gave the fruit an even temperature, warmth from two sides, such as brings the wall peaches to perfection in France.9

Or again:

Father Latour's recreation was his garden. He grew such fruit as was hardly to be found even in the old orchards of California; cherries and apricots, apples and quinces, and the peerless pears of France — even the most delicate varieties.10

In the other French novel, Shadows on the Rock, much is also made of French food:

Dinner was the important event of the day in the apothecary's household. The luncheon was a mere gouter. Breakfast was a pot of chocolate, which he prepared very carefully himself, and a fresh loaf which Pigeon's oldest boy brought to the door. But his dinner Auclair regarded as the thing that kept him a civilized man and a Frenchman.11 (emphasis mine)

At another time, the apothecary is buying supplies at the dairy, and the owner comments about the quality of food in Quebec at that time: "You forget you are not in France, monsieur. Here grease is

9Ibid., p. 266.
10Ibid., p. 267.
11Cather, Shadows on the Rock, p. 16.
meat, not something to throw to criminals."^12

The French parish priest is not excluded (shades of Father Vaillant) from being a lover of good food:

Down yonder by the waterside, before one of the rustic booths, he could see a little party seated about a table with lanterns. He could not see who they were, but he felt a friendliness for that company. A little group of Frenchmen, three thousand miles from home, making the best of things, —— having a good dinner. He decided to go down and join them.^13

It is at the end of the book, after the death of Count Frontenac, and Pierre Charron has returned to visit Auclair and Cécile. They sit down to the last supper described in the book:

The supper lasted until late. After the dessert the apothecary opened a bottle of heavy gold-coloured wine from the South. "This," he said, is a wine the Count liked after supper. His family was from the South, and his father always kept on hand wines that were brought up from Bordeaux and the Rhone vineyards. The Count inherited that taste." He sighed heavily. "Euclide," said Charron, "tomorrow it may be you or I; that is the way to look at death. Not all the wine in the Chateau, not all the wines in the great cellars of France, could warm the Count's blood now. Let us cheer our hearts a little while we can. Good wine was put into the grapes by our Lord, for friends to enjoy together."^14

There are, all told, fourteen mouth-watering allusions to French food throughout the works.

^12 Ibid., p. 49.
^13 Ibid., p. 226.
^14 Ibid., p. 267.
CHAPTER FIVE:
THE EVIDENCE IN THE EUROPEAN ARTICLES

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence of the impact that France had on Willa Cather will be found in the articles that she wrote for the Nebraska State Journal in 1902, the year of her first trip to Europe.¹ These articles were impressions of European life, and George N. Kates has collected them in a book, and added an introduction and commentary.² The first half of the book is concerned with England, the second half with France. It is with this second half that I am concerned, and this chapter will be a commentary on the second half of the book, chapter by chapter.

Dieppe and Rouen

In this, the eighth chapter of the book, we participate in Willa Cather's introduction to France. Worthy of notice is the sensitivity with which she describes this introduction, and the events leading up to it.

About three o'clock, however, I heard a rush of feet aft, and, tumbling into my ulster and mufflers, hurried out to see what had occasioned the excitement. Above the roar of the wind and the thrash of the water I heard a babble of voices, in which I could only distinguish the word "France" uttered over and over again with a fire and fervour that was in itself a panegyric. Far to the south there shone a little star of light out of the

¹The reader will note that this is the most important evidence in support of this thesis.

blackness, that burned from orange to yellow and then back to orange again; the first lights of the coast of France. All the prone, dispirited figures we left two hours before were erect and animated, jubilant and rhetorical. They were French people from all over the world: women who had been teaching French in the United States; girls who had been governesses in England; journeymen tailors and workers at various handicrafts. They clutched and greeted each other indiscriminately, for it was the hour when all distinctions were obliterated and when the bond of brotherhood drew sweet and hard. Above all the ardent murmurings and the exclamations of felicity, there continually arose the voice of a small boy who had been born on a foreign soil and who had never been home. He sat on his father's shoulder, and kept crying with small convulsions of excitement, "It is France? It is France?" No wonder a Parisian speaks so pityingly when he says of certain ones of the Bourbon family, "He died in exile."

By the time the first excitement was over a dozen lights outlined the coast, and then the dawn began to come up. The black water broke in long-lashed, regular waves toward the shore. The sky was black behind us and grey before, a yellow crescent of the old moon hung just over the red lighthouse top. The high chalk cliffs of Normandy were a pale purple in the dim light. Little fishing boats passed us continuously, their ragged sails patched with red and blue. When we touched the dock the sky, the gravel beach, the white town, were all wrapped in a pale pink mist, and the narrow streets were canals of purple shadows. Certainly so small a body of water as the English Channel never separated two worlds so different. In the railway station here every poster was a thing of grace and beauty. The very porters spoke in smooth, clear voices that phrased the beautiful tongue they spoke almost as music is phrased. The cries of the street boys were musical.

Quite obviously, this scene impressed her. It is one of the first manifestations of the French influence on her.

When she arrives at Rouen, she recalls that this was Flaubert's home town. Thus it would seem that the French literary influence had already begun. But, of course, the major event for

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3 Cather, In Europe, pp. 93-95.
her in Rouen was the trip to the Cathedral. In his introduction to this chapter, Kates notes that:

Twenty years later, in 1922, when she wishes to express the high meaning of France to Claude, the sensitive, diffident young boy from Nebraska who is to become the hero of *One of Ours*, she describes the sweet and awesome feelings that come over him, also here in Rouen, as silently he first walks down the aisles of an Old Gothic Church. [This passage concerning Claude is quoted elsewhere in this paper.]

This is her great tribute to the art of medieval architecture, to what is finest in the Old World, and has endured; to all that elsewhere (in "The Sculptor's Funeral") she will describe as "chastened and old, and noble with traditions." Trait for trait, her description in *One of Ours* may be compared with the present passage. We could ask for no better example of her sensitiveness, her scale of values.

Here is Willa Cather's description of her own first encounter with the Cathedral:

The most beautiful thing about Rouen is the stillness and whiteness and vastness of its cathedral. The exterior is by no means as fine as that of the beautiful church of St. Ouen, which stands near it, but the interior is vested with a peace that passes understanding. The columns and arches are beautifully fluted and of the most delicate and slender Gothic, vault after vault rising high and effortless as flame. The uniform whiteness of the walls and arches and high, slender columns is varied by the burning blue and crimson of two rose windows almost as beautiful as those of Notre Dame. The place is so vast that even the vesper service could be heard only near the altar, and so dusky that the lighted tapers cast dancing reflections on the white stone. All the light streams from windows so high that one seems to look up at them from the bottom of a well. Behind the choir is a reclining figure of Richard Coeur-de-Lion, and under it is the urn in which his heart was placed. On every side of him is dim, rich light and a very forest of white, slender stone columns, with silence absolute and infinitely sweet. There could scarcely be a better place for so hot a heart to rest.

4Ibid., p. 92.
5Ibid., p. 99.
The Cemeteries of Paris

Whether it was comparing the French and the Mexican arts of cooking, as in *Death Comes For the Archbishop*, or the attitudes of German and French piety, as in *One of Ours*, Willa Cather is continually comparing and contrasting the French view on life with that of other nationalities. Here, she does it with cemeteries:

A really appreciative attitude toward Paris cemeteries is well-nigh impossible to anyone but a Frenchman. There is not a blade of grass anywhere in them, the entire enclosures being covered with gravel, which is occasionally raked to keep it loose. I heard an American remark that "it seemed exactly like burying people in a tennis court."  

She then goes on to describe the execrable taste of the monuments, which are in marked contrast to the impressive monuments to famous men.

But she does not write exclusively of cemeteries in this chapter. The literary influence is too deeply ingrained not to return to literature, and the arts, even in passing:

Montmartre is one of the most picturesque quarters of Paris, and of late years has been much affected by painters, and poets and political theorists, who have colonized there from the Latin Quarter. The Moulin Rouge is there, and the narrow streets leading down from Sacré-Cœur were favorite haunts of Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine.  

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Barbizon

In his introduction to this chapter, Kates writes something which would seem to be obvious thus far, but nevertheless corroborates our argument:

This first stay in France was for Willa Cather a time of impressions that went deep. Here at Barbizon, for instance, we are shown landscapes that will come to actuality again only in One of Ours, her war novel of 1922, twenty years later.°

This, evidently, is only one of many impressions of France that Willa Cather was to use later, in this particular novel. Kates continues:

To France as a whole she brought her feeling for the land, and also much solid knowledge of French culture. How just, then, is her intuitive penetration of these — also "obscure" — destinies!¹⁹

In Barbizon also, Willa Cather "takes delight in telling us of the courtyard at the inn, and the great horse chestnut here under which good food and wine are enjoyed, in the open, as seems possible only in France."¹⁰

Avignon

Kates introduces the eleventh chapter in the following manner:

Reluctant as the two women seem to leave Paris behind, and wearying as becomes their long railway journey southward in a

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8 Ibid., pp. 115-116.
9 Ibid., p. 117.
10 Ibid., p. 116.
fusty and crowded third-class compartment, something quite extraordinary seems to happen to Willa Cather as soon as for the first time she enters the Midi. She notes at once the changes in the countryside; . . . Here, though, beyond anything she has read in Daudet, is wonderful discovery!

It is bliss to install herself in a hotel of character such as she finds in Avignon — good enough to have won praise, she remembers, even from Henry James. "People know how to live in this country"; her surmise runs deep. The dining room, converted from a Gothic chapter house, and the first lavish meal of generous Provencal cooking only confirm her satisfaction. . . .

And then later:

In all these travel articles there is no more impassioned description [than in the Avignon piece]. Willa Cather is moved by this country! Can it be perhaps because unexpectedly it gave back to her all the simple large values of the West, of her girlhood on the land, yet here sanctioned, translated into history, set nobly and with art against a splendid past, whether of Italy or of France?12

Indeed, one can easily tell, by the fervor with which she writes this article, that this land and section of the country meant something special to Willa Cather. Kates ends his introduction by advancing the theory that here Miss Cather was finally able to really rest, in both spirit and body. He concludes: "No wonder, then, that the region was to draw and retain her, by the power of its own genius; and that the values it symbolized were finally to become those to which she was to give her ultimate and perfect, her most mature loyalty."13

11 Ibid., pp. 128-129.
12 Ibid., p. 130.
13 Ibid., p. 131.
Edith Lewis, in Willa Cather Living, tells us that "The Papal Palace at Avignon . . . stirred her as no building in the world had ever done." Miss Cather writes, in this article:

The palace is a huge, rambling Gothic pile, flanked by six square Italian towers, with a beautiful little cathedral in front. The palace faces toward the town, and behind it, overhanging the Rhone, are the popes' gardens. Those popes were luxurious fellows, one would judge, and certainly they were men of taste . . .

[She next describes the terraces and the gardens, the fountains and their surroundings, then continues:] Surely the holy fathers knew where to build their fine home. Immediately below one lies the white town, with its narrow streets and red roofs, and the big, rushing, green river. Beyond that are interminable plains of figs and olives and mulberries, of poplars and willow hedgerows, with here and there a wayside cross and its weather-racked Christ. Then, to the south, the Cevennes Mountains, and to the north and east, Alps and Alps and forever Alps! The first unfolding of it as one mounts the terrace strikes awe to the most phlegmatic soul. It was late afternoon when we first saw it, and it seemed as though, besides Avignon and the Rhone, there was nothing else in the world but the Alps . . . It must have been a fine place for those Italy-loving popes, here where they could watch the Alps with one eye, and with the other look down upon the Rhone, the great highway to Italy, where every day barges and galleys went leaping down the current to Naples.

She ends by a reference to a bridge in Avignon which appears in a Daudet story, and, in her last paragraph you can feel her savoring every little detail of ordinary life:

This, then, is how the days go by in the fine city of the popes. In the morning there is the soup bowl full of chocolate, the hard rolls and pats of fresh butter wrapped in fig leaves. When we go into the dining-room to get it, Jules arises and puts on a black coat over his suit of white duck, and serves us with ceremony. Then it is time to walk to some of the old


15Cather, In Europe, pp. 137-139.
feudal ruins perched about on the hills. Through the heat of the day we read in the ilex arbours of the garden above the river. In the late afternoon we watch the changing glories of the Alps until we go off to dine in our Gothic chapter house, and night comes down with rest and healing over dusty, parched Provence.16

Final Chapters

After the peak of impact was reached in the article at Avignon, there are only a few other instances which strengthen the argument. The first is found when Willa Cather arrives at Marseilles:

It was not until I saw the little white island of the Chateau d'if lying out in the sea before the old harbour at Marseilles that I awakened to the fact that we were at last in Monte Cristo's country, fairly into the country of the fabulous, where extravagance ceases to exist because everything is extravagant, and where the wildest dreams come true.17

Or, again the elation of life:

What more of life could one wring out of twenty-four hours, if you please? At noon the wet olives of Arles; at nightfall a chorus of gay sailors, made up to the life, and the rattle of stage thunder, much blue lightning, and a great tossing of blue water; at dawn a sunrise over feathery date palms, with the sea at one's feet and a porcelain sky above. What more could one ask for; even in the country of Monte Cristo?18

Perhaps, after this, it is not a single place, but many, various parts of France which come alive under the pen of Miss Cather: Marseilles, Hyères, Le Lavandou, and Arles, to name a few. In her description of Arles, she is greatly preoccupied with the arts, as encouraged in that city. Yes, she was profoundly

16 Ibid., p. 141.
17 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
18 Ibid., p. 151.
influenced in her ideas and emotions by her trip to France: one cannot write so feelingly about a place without in some measure being touched by it.
CHAPTER SIX: INCIDENTAL EVIDENCE

This chapter is a necessary potpourri of scattered, casual references to France and the French which are isolated throughout the works of Willa Cather. These do not fit in any other chapter for this reason....the chapter is not as unified as might be desirable, but it is necessary for a complete picture of the direct evidence for the thesis. The only possible basis of unification in this chapter is to assemble the references by books, in chronological order.

Early Stories

In the short story "A Resurrection" (1897), there is a French girl who is the main character. Noted, also in this volume, is the use and influence of French names, especially in the story, "The Dance at Chevalier's" (1900). And finally, in "A Night At Greenway Court" there is a Frenchman who plays a fairly important part in the story. Editor Bennett comments, "This is the first treatment of a Frenchman in the New World. It is a great stride from this to Death Comes For The Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock."1

1Bennett, p. 79.
April Twilights

This volume of poems, published in 1903, shows very little French influence. The only evidence indicated is that of some of the titles of the poems: "Provencal Legend," "Paris," "The Mills of Montmartre."

The Troll Garden

In "The Marriage of Phaedra" there are casual mentions of Paris and Nice, while "Flavia and Her Artists" uses a Frenchman as a character treated sympathetically.

Alexander's Bridge

In this book we have the fact that Hilda first met Alexander in Paris, and this was the start of the clandestine romance. Later, there is a note to the effect that Alexander went to Paris "to be free." Moreover, there are quite a few passing references to Paris. We are also told that Alexander, who is presented as a cultured man, was educated in France. Finally, we are told that "Hilda lived alone, attended by a very pretty and competent French servant."

Youth and the Bright Medusa

In the short story, "Coming, Aphrodite!" there is an implication of the romantic, uplifting quality of the French:

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2Cather, Alexander's Bridge, p. 33.

3Ibid., p. 85.

4Ibid., p. 39.
"Eden enjoyed the boat ride. It was the first time she had been on the water, and she felt as if she were embarking for France."[^5]

In the same story, Miss Cather mentions Paris and French culture as influencing Don Hedger.

One of Ours

This book has been a gold mine for illustrating the French influence on Miss Cather; the last quarter, especially, shows profound sympathy for France and the French way of life. We can see the start of the French influence on Claude Wheeler: one item is the fact that he chooses to go to a costume party dressed as a French emigre.[^6] This interest develops in the war news in France, which is given to Nebraskans much more vividly than it ever happened.[^7] It reaches a peak when France is expressed as the end of the road—

a sense of fulfillment:

Something was released that had been struggling for a long while, he told himself. He had been due in France since the first battle of the Marne; he had followed false leads and lost precious time and seen misery enough, but he was on the right road at last, and nothing could stop him.[^8]

[^5]: Cather, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, p. 34.
[^6]: Cather, *One of Ours*, p. 82.
[^7]: Ibid., p. 168.
[^8]: Ibid., p. 311.
The Professor's House

In characterizing Professor St. Peter, we are given the fact that this erudite man has been educated in France, and then we see a scene in Paris in the Professor's youth, which illustrates his character. 9

Two other items concerning this book: We are told that the French priest who educated Tom Outland was a big influence in his life. Secondly, in the characterization of Augusta, the Professor's housekeeper, we are told that "He had often wondered how she managed to sew with hands that folded and unfolded as rigidly as umbrellas --- no light French touch about Augusta." 10

Death Comes For The Archbishop

One of the main indications of the extent of the French influence is the fact that Willa Cather, both in this book, and in Shadows on the Rock, made her protagonists French. Also, in passing, I might note that the title of Chapter Three in this book is half-French, half-English, perhaps to emphasize the clash between the Old World and the New: "The Bishop Chez Lui."

In this book, moreover, there are many casual references to things and qualities French: many passing reminiscences about the Bishop's sister Philomène, for instance, and his own home town. French cities, Paris, Lyons and others, are mentioned.

9Cather, The Professor's House, p. 103.
10Ibid., p. 23.
quite frequently throughout the text. Nor, as has already been demonstrated, can one ignore the many uses to which the French language has been put.

Shadows on the Rock

In Shadows on the Rock the French flavor is introduced immediately by opening the book, directly before Chapter One, with the quotation following. This is (again, a favorite Cather device) a contrast between France and another country, in this case, the Quebec province of Canada:

Vous me demandez des graines de fleurs de ce pays. Nous en faisons venir de France pour notre jardin, n'y en ayant pas ici de fort rares ni de fort belles. Tout y est sauvage, les fleurs aussi bien que les hommes.\(^{11}\)

It is reinforced throughout by references to Quebec as "New France," and of course, by the setting and characters. Of course, the inevitable comparisons emerge, this time, for instance, in medicine. Auclair is talking to Jacques and Cecile about various medicines that he keeps in his apothecary shop, and the talk turns to medicines made from reptiles:

"Viper broth, Father? I have never heard of that. Is it an Indian medicine?"

"My dear, at the time when we came out to Canada, it was very much the fashion at home. Half the great ladies of France were drinking a broth made from freshly killed vipers every morning, instead of their milk or chocolate, and believed themselves much the better for it. Medicine is a dark science, as I have told you more than once."\(^{12}\) (emphasis mine)

\(^{11}\)Cather, Shadows on the Rock, p. 2.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 212.
Other Novels

Finally, we must take notice of the fact that two of the main characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Henry and Sapphira Colbert, are of French extraction, and mention is made in *Lucy Gayheart*, of Harry Gordon's extended stay in France,\(^{13}\) for a total of thirty incidental allusions to the French.

\(^{13}\) *Cather, Lucy Gayheart*, p. 211.
PART TWO: INDIRECT EVIDENCE

CHAPTER SEVEN: BIOGRAPHIES

In this section I am concerned with what reputable scholars have had to say on the subject of the French influence on Willa Cather. Edith Lewis, who for many years lived with Willa Cather, has written a memoir of those years. She has a few comments which are pertinent to our subject:

In her last two years at the University of Nebraska, Willa Cather had begun with delight to explore modern French literature. She first began to feel the admiration and love of French art, French form which has set such an impress on her own work. On this first trip abroad, it seems to have been the French part of her travels that gave her the greater intellectual stimulus. French culture, coming to it, in her impressionable years, and finding it so new, so challenging and awakening, spoke more directly to her imagination, and more definitely influenced her writing.¹

Later, Miss Lewis is talking about Josephine Bourda, a French cook in the employ of the two women:

She was an important figure in our lives at the time — high-spirited, warm-hearted, impulsive. Her personality was so pervasive and uncompromising that she created a sort of French household atmosphere around us, and I think there is no question that this contributed to a certain extent to such novels as Death Comes For The Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock.²

¹Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. 55.
²Ibid., p. 88.
Miss Lewis' final pertinent comment:

On her many journeys to the south of France it was Avignon that left the deepest impression with her. The Papal Palace at Avignon -- seen first when she was a girl -- stirred her as no building in the world had ever done.\(^3\)

In his book, *Willa Cather, A Critical Biography*, E. K. Brown gives more evidence for the sympathy that Willa Cather had for France:

In September they journeyed to the south, into the warm land of Alphonse Daudet, where the mistral blew "more terrible than any wind that ever came up from Kansas." Willa Cather drank in the warmth and color of the land and its people. The impressions of Provence garnered now were ineffaceable to the last. She rejoiced in the landscape, the history, the architecture, the food, the wine; she stayed at the hotel in the ancient Papal city of Avignon, which Henry James had affectionately praised in his travel writings. Willa Cather and Isabelle McClung were the only English-speaking people in the town; there seemed to be no other tourists and Willa Cather enjoyed saturating herself with the life and aspect of the place. Here on the bank of the Rhone the young woman from the Divide had found something that touched her more deeply than the metropolitan density of London or the luminous quality of Paris; a life rooted in the centuries -- what she later had in mind when she spoke of the things that lie deep behind French history and French art. That art extended to the sense of well-being that comes from sun and light and artfully cooked food; it is reflected in Bishop Latour's remark [quoted elsewhere in this paper] when he tastes the soup cooked by Father Vaillant: "... a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup."\(^4\)

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 190.

CHAPTER EIGHT: HARD PUNISHMENTS

My final comments concern Hard Punishments, Willa Cather's unfinished story about Avignon. By the very fact that she was thinking about writing this "nouvelle" at the time of her death shows that the French influence on her ideas lasted all the way to death. Thus, the theme has come full cycle. From her first attempts at writing during her college years until the final contemplated story at her death, she was continually influenced by France and the French.

George Kates has written an article which gives much information about this unfinished story.¹ He begins by noting,

Not yet enough noticed in the career of a "classic" writer like Willa Cather, whose reputation rests — with justice — on her discovery for American letters of regions like Nebraska, is the increasing and finally dominant pull that Europe exerted upon her. It can be traced from the very beginning of her long career; it impregnates the whole body of her work.²

He then mentions the Avignon story, and quotes Edith Lewis on Avignon (see previous page) and its influence on Willa Cather. Miss Lewis concludes by pinpointing the probable time when the story was planned. The time is June, 1941:

She had brought with her to San Francisco Okey's little history of Avignon; and she often spent her mornings on the open roof garden of the Fairmont, walking to and fro, and


²Ibid., p. 177.
reading in this book. It was probably then that she planned the general outline of the Avignon story. 3

Kates speculates that, except by hearsay, we may never have anticipated the particular subject matter (for it was a great departure from Sapphira and the Slave Girl, the book which preceded it) because the manuscript, by the direction of Miss Cather's will, was destroyed. 4

After summarizing the story as Edith Lewis has remembered it, Kates propounds a very interesting theory: "... The Avignon story, incomplete and vanished as it is, remains the last great testimony of what she believed in, and of what she had lived for." 5

He notes her disillusionment with America and American values. This probably reached its peak when "the world broke all in two" in 1922. Consequently, anything published during that year, (as One of Ours was) would probably reflect this attitude. It does, if one recalls Claude at the end of this book:

He had begun to believe that the Americans were people of shallow emotions. That was the way Gerhardt had put it once; and if it was true, there was no cure for it. Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together. 6

3 Ibid., pp. 177-178.
4 Ibid., p. 178.
5 Cather, One of Ours, p. 406.
"Thus," continues Kates, "France could give one meaning to life which it was impossible to find in America." He concludes:

So it seems as if, rather than shift from the only material she felt important, rather than move into the diminished lives of a younger—and, to her, petty—generation at home, Willa Cather remained true to her principles simply by abandoning America, the later America that she so castigated, as a setting. It was to bypass the morass of shallowness, to avoid a sense of decline, a pervading feeling of insignificance and triviality, that she moved her scene away; now we know with how little essential shift of interest... At the end, therefore, even in this unfinished story set in medieval Avignon, Willa Cather simply remains herself.

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6 Kates, Five Stories, p. 198.
7 Ibid., pp. 212-214.
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

To understand Willa Cather the writer better by trying to isolate some forces which motivated her has been my aim. For an influence, which is attested to by biographers and scholars, which can be traced through the writer's work from the earliest "juvenalia" to the latest full-blooming work of maturity, must necessarily be important in an understanding of that writer.

There are thirty-seven references to the French arts (two references to painting, six to architecture, six to landscape, six to literature, and seventeen to music); thirty-six references to personal qualities; nine direct references to the French language (with countless words and phrases scattered throughout her works); and fourteen references to cooking. The entire second half of Willa Cather in Europe was extremely helpful, with thirteen of her thoughts on France and the French directly quoted, unmasked by narrative. I have tallied thirty incidental references to things French --- these fell into no ready classification; and in critical books and articles on Willa Cather I found eight references to the French influence on her. My grand total is one-hundred-and-forty-seven quotable references to the French by Willa Cather. This figure, of course, burgeons when one takes into account states of mind, settings, characters, and the use of the French language out of quotable context.
Edward and Lillian Bloom seized upon an important quality of Willa Cather's writing when they titled their book *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*, for it surely was a sympathy, for all the people, the ideals and the values that she held dear that is an enduring quality in the work of Willa Cather. This sympathy manifested itself in many ways, as I have shown: through art, language, and the culinary arts, but more especially in the communication of the personal qualities of the French. How fully Willa Cather, like Claude Wheeler, must have found her fulfillment in France!
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