

ALICE MUNRO'S WILLA CATHER

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THE FALL AND WINTER of 1927-28 proved a difficult time for Willa Cather: she had been forced to move from her Bank Street apartment in New York City and, just after returning east from a long Christmas visit with family and friends in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she received news of her father's death there. Recalling this period of their life together, Cather's longtime companion, Edith Lewis, wrote that during the following "summer, Grand Manan seemed the only foothold left on earth." They had been visiting Grand Manan island, off the coast of New Brunswick in the Bay of Fundy, since 1922, staying at the Whale Cove Inn but, in 1928, their newly built cottage was ready (Skaggs 128-30, Brown and Crone 41-46). Lewis continues, saying that "With all her things in storage" owing to the move, Cather "looked forward fervently to her attic at Grand Manan. No palace could have seemed so attractive to her just then as that rough little cottage, with the soft fogs blowing across the flowery fields, and the crystalline quiet of the place" (153).¹

These experiences presage the situation of "Before Breakfast," one of Cather's last stories; written in 1944 — about three years before her death — it was included in the posthumous *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948; Arnold 165). It is set on an island — though off the coast of Nova Scotia — and its protagonist, Henry Grenfell, a well-to-do American businessman, is seeking a refuge from his overwhelming sense of ennui. He is fleeing what Alice Munro has described in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 2. The Stone in the Field" as the "pain of human contact" — her narrator admits to being "hypnotized by it. The fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity" (MJ 27). Such sentiments, too, inform Munro's "Dulse" (1980), a story first published in *The New Yorker* and, after revision, collected in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982). And like Cather's story, Munro's derives from its author's knowledge of Grand Manan island: Munro has explained that while working on a story involving the character who became Lydia, the protagonist of "Dulse," she visited the island and there met a person steeped in Cather's history on Grand Manan; that person's veneration of the American writer served Munro

as basis for Mr. Stanley in "Dulse" — the two parts of the story, she said, seemed to fit well together (Telephone interview).

Although critics have examined Munro's Cather connection, more consideration of the matter is warranted. Klaus P. Stich has discussed Munro's use of Cather as both presence and authorial icon in "Dulse," pointing out a wide variety of apt thematic and imagistic parallels ranged throughout Cather's works. But though his article includes much that is relevant to an initial understanding of the Cather-Munro connection, Stich's analysis presents a partial picture only. Even so, his discussion of it is far superior to those offered by the critics who have published extended critical analyses of Munro's fiction: Martin, Blodgett, and Carrington. While presenting detailed readings of "Dulse," none pursues the Cather connection much beyond the superficial — she is merely present, as Blodgett argues, to represent a view of art that is "hermetically sealed," one "that Munro finds wanting" (113).

In "Dulse" Munro offers a story which grew out of her own visit to Grand Manan and which recapitulates the physical setting, midlife-crisis mood, and cathartic *dénouement* of "Before Breakfast." What is more, Cather appears in effect as a character there — a compelling presence whose status as no-nonsense-author-of-consequence needs to be probed and (as far as possible) understood, by Alice Munro, by her protagonist Lydia, and by the readers of "Dulse." Cather's importance to Munro's story, moreover, is borne out by the evidence of draft versions of "Dulse" in the University of Calgary archives. The connection between them extends beyond this pair of stories to a broader parallel, one which persists yet: Munro's recently published story, "Carried Away" (1991), features a protagonist among whose favourite authors is Cather, and that in February 1917, when the American was still rising to the fame that was to be hers (34).² This notwithstanding, Cather's presence in "Dulse" remains the central connection, and it is one that invites further analysis.

That Munro would be drawn to Cather's work is not surprising. As women who have sought to depict the "home place," in Wright Morris's phrase, writing out of their inheritance and lineage to create fictions derived from protracted and intimate knowledge of their respective rural small towns, the two have much in common. Munro would have been aware of Cather's prominence among American writers from the 1920s on but, more than that, she may also have been attracted by the appeal of Cather's work outside of academy; *My Antonia* (1918), for example, has not been out of print since its publication. This quality persists, and it would likely not be lost on an aspiring writer of Munro's intelligence and ability. Nor would Cather's penchant, as Merrill Maguire Skaggs has recently argued, for seemingly revisiting the same material again, since Munro has shown the same tendency.³ Finally, while Munro has been seen as a writer of perception and sensibility, rather than one of erudition or allusion, much recent scholarship

has confirmed in her fiction a detailed awareness of a wide range of literary forebearers, both paternal and maternal (Blodgett, Carrington, York).

Taken together, these lines of parallel treatment and influence suggest a compatibility between Cather and Munro which, if not of the crucial importance of Sarah Orne Jewett on Cather, is a relation far deeper than has been acknowledged thus far.⁴ In fact, Cather's well-known phrase describing Jewett's relation to her subject, "gift of sympathy," may be aptly applied to describe Munro's view of her American precursor, Cather (Preface). Thus the appearance of Willa Cather as a major presence in "Dulse," along with a telling invocation of the messages of Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) there, is not just a singular occurrence within Munro's work: it is a direct acknowledgement of Cather's influence and of their shared values.

AT THE BEGINNING OF "Before Breakfast," Henry Grenfell glimpses the morning star, the planet Venus, but it brings no solace: he has arisen from a difficult night's sleep brought on by his personal dissatisfactions and aggravated by a chance meeting he had with a geologist the evening before. Going about his morning toilet upon rising, "Grenfell rejected his eye-drops. Why patch up? What was the use . . . of anything?" (148; Cather's ellipsis). This final question is what — through the mediations and actions of the story, all occurring before breakfast — Grenfell must get beyond. He does, ultimately, finding solace in the passage of time from youth to old age, in reconciling himself to the geological history of "his" island — a perspective which troubled him the night before — and, finally, in the transformative powers of Venus/Aphrodite.

Like Grenfell, Munro's Lydia has come to Grand Manan seeking a refuge and, like him too, she spends just a single night there during the story. At its end, she is left at least hopeful if not, like Grenfell, seemingly transformed. Her feelings at the outset, however, are not so deeply felt as his, though they appear to be more chronic. Even so, Munro is defining the nascent beginnings of a despond similar to Grenfell's. Lydia is forty-five, divorced with two grown children on their own, working as an editor for a publisher in Toronto; significantly, too, she is a poet — but is not forthcoming about it. She is a person who is particularly unconnected to those around her. Having just broken up with Duncan, with whom she had been living in Kingston, Lydia is travelling, in the words of a rejected draft's phrasing, "hoping to manage some kind of recuperation, or even happiness, before she had to start working again" (38.8.20.1.f1).⁵

Parenthetically, draft versions of the story are being used here for both the greater articulation of authorial intention they reveal and also to demonstrate the process of Munro's composition. Passages from rejected drafts — such as this one

— are not to be seen as preferable to the final versions, although the papers reveal that Munro is an author who works very hard on crucial passages in a story, consequently rejecting descriptions and phrasings which both add to an understanding of her intentions and might well have been retained.

And while this essay is looking at the most direct connections between “Before Breakfast” and “Dulse,” more subtle parallels are present as well. Cather’s use of the planet Venus, replete with its mythological associations as well as a timeless quality, is essentially mysterious: it suggests meaning apprehended but not fully understood. Thus Grenfell’s dissatisfaction arises in part through the well-intentioned factualities of the geologist’s knowledge; these have the effect of dispelling the mysterious attraction he feels for his island, which in turn have been of such solace to him in his daily life away from it — the island is his mainstay in just knowing it is there.

Similarly, in the *The New Yorker* version of “Dulse,” Lydia’s ex-lover is Alex, a geologist, one “absorbed” “in the crust and content of the earth and in his own distinct energies” (38). A more interesting parallel is found in Munro’s title story for the volume in which “Dulse” was collected: “The Moons of Jupiter.” Narrated by the same person who narrates the “Chaddeleys and Flemings” stories, this one focusses on the apprehended death of the narrator’s father. Thinking of herself as both daughter and mother during this time, Janet jokes with her father — in the hospital awaiting heart surgery — about the names of Jupiter’s moons after she had visited a nearby planetarium. Throughout, her concern is finding truths which can be believed with absolute certitude; here, even the facts of science fail, so she is drawn inexorably to the mystery of the solar system: its enormity, mythic proportions (that is, the names of the moons), and ultimate inscrutability.

At the outset of “Dulse,” Munro describes Lydia’s disorientation and her futile attempts to connect to the people and things around her and then encapsulates those efforts in a detached sentence: “She set little blocks on top of one another and she had a day” (36). Stopping at a guest house for the night, she muses over the moves and motives of the people she meets, seeking to infer and then to understand the source of their apparent wholeness.⁸ She realizes, Munro writes early in the story, “that people were no longer so interested in getting to know her” (36), and she seeks an understanding of herself in view of such changes. What Lydia is most bothered by, and wishes most to understand, is “what gave” Duncan his “power? She knows who did. But she asks what, and when — when did the transfer take place, when was “the abdication of all pride and sense?” (50). In a rejected draft version of the same passage, Munro is more precise: “Then what had given him his subsequent power? Easy to say it was the foolishness of Lydia, the abdication of all pride and sense, a most persistent streak of cravenness[.] But it was no help to her, this explanation, it explained nothing, she was left to sit regarding her own life with sad disbelief.” The whole of this passage, a part of a typed draft, is struck

out and a holograph insertion replaces it, reading "Then what had given him his subsequent power?" Munro appears to have considered putting from "Easy . . . disbelief" in parenthesis before rejecting the whole (38.8.20.1.f10-11).

That evening Lydia meets her fellow guests: a Mr. Stanley, to whom she is introduced, eats dinner with, and with whom she discusses Willia Cather; at the same meal she acknowledges at another table three men who work for the telephone company. Throughout the story, Lydia's thoughts focus primarily on her own concerns, especially on Duncan and their relationship (at one point we read of her discussion of it with a psychiatrist), and on their recent breakup. She thinks as well about the members of the telephone crew, with whom she plays cards later in the evening, imagining each as lovers (one of them, Eugene, tries to beckon her to his bed). Each is evaluated relative to Duncan, whom she remembers in considerable detail as to habits, preferences, and peculiarities. She knows she is now, for him, merely the latest in a long line of former girlfriends, "Morose, messy, unsatisfactory Lydia. The unsatisfactory poet" (52).

Even though such thoughts make up most of the story, Lydia meets Mr. Stanley first and through him, the personage of Willia Cather. They talk of Cather generally at dinner and, the next day at breakfast, they have a second — and far more specifically pertinent — exchange about her, one which directly defines her presence in "Dulse." As such, Stanley and Cather frame the story. By using Cather in this way, Munro provides Lydia with another person's (aptly relevant) life to wonder over at this crucial moment in the protagonist's own life. Cather — the author of *A Lost Lady* whose Marian Forrester is, like Lydia, a woman whose whole identity is dependent upon men — is offered as a frame for Lydia's "recuperation." And Lydia, for her part, might well be seen as Munro's "lost lady."

BUT, JUST AS THIS IS Alice Munro's Willa Cather, so too is Lydia offered Mr. Stanley's Willa Cather, itself a persona to be probed. Mr. Stanley, opening their first conversation with "Are you familiar with the writer Willa Cather?" (38), uses his enthusiasm for Cather as mealtime chit-chat, telling Lydia of Cather's summers on Grand Manan island, mentioning her view of the sea, her composition of most of *A Lost Lady* (his "favorite") on the island, and telling Lydia of his plans to talk that evening with an 88-year-old woman "who knew Willa." "I read and reread her," Stanley says, "and my admiration grows. It simply grows" (39). Evaluating Stanley's conversational manner, Lydia thinks of "a time when a few people, just a few people, had never concerned themselves with being democratic, or ingratiating, in their speech; they spoke in formal, well-thought-out, slightly self-congratulating sentences, though they lived in a country where their formality, their pedantry, could bring them nothing but

mockery. No, that was not the whole truth. It brought mockery, and an uncomfortable admiration.” “And his adoration of the chosen writer was of a piece with this,” Lydia decides, “it was just as out-of-date as his speech” (39-40).

Lydia suggests the possibility of creating some sort of memorial on the island, but Stanley rejects the idea, saying that on the island many “thought” Cather “unfriendly and did not like her,” but Lydia realizes that for him this is a “private pilgrimage” so he wants nothing to do with a memorial, which would see, Lydia thinks, their guest house “renamed Shadows on the Rock.” “He would let the house fall down and the grass grow over it, sooner than see that” (41).⁷

The draft versions of “Dulse” suggest that Munro worked hard at getting Stanley’s character — and so the Cather connection — right. Initially, Stanley was named Middleton, “from Boston, a brisk and courtly and menacing old fellow,” and Lydia accompanies him to Cather’s cottage; Grand Manan is named, as is *My Antonia*. Munro has Cather’s date of death over twenty years early, 1925, and Lewis is referred to as “Edith Head” (38.8.19). Subsequently, *A Lost Lady* — parts of which were written on the island — replaced the earlier novel and Lewis’s name appears (38.8.21). Lydia was a university teacher of American literature, then worked in a bookstore but “had majored in American literature at university” (38.8.20; these are alternate versions, the first typed, crossed out, with the latter as a holograph correction). What these changes suggest — beyond getting a series of plausible connections that hang together — is that Munro was trying various ways to make the Cather connections resonate and, equally, to have in Lydia a person of suitable background for their understanding.

Stanley, based on a person Munro actually met, is developed so as to create a particular version of Cather which Munro seeks to first establish and then probe. He is foregrounded: after introducing Lydia and her situation at the outset (presenting only a bit of her fundamental malaise — she wonders if she could find a way to support herself and so live on the island), Munro moves at once to Mr. Stanley and the discussion of Cather, which takes up the story’s first portion. The mockery Lydia anticipates for Stanley is visited upon him by the telephone crew — obliquely during dinner as the men overhear his conversation with Lydia and, later, when he returns for the night after his visit with the woman who knew Cather (48). At the same time, Stanley’s formal manner recalls aspects of Grenfell’s character; the latter, for example, signs cheques for his family’s expenses without looking at what they are for, since to do so would be unseemly (OB 154-55); and Stanley’s devotion to Cather is akin to Grenfell’s devotion to his island retreat.

Finally and most tellingly, his version of Willa Cather, his “durable shelter” (59), shows Stanley to be one hopelessly “out of date” and, almost, insignificant. Given Cather’s critical reputation throughout her later years (from the 1930s on, she was often seen a kind of aged literary dinosaur, charmingly still concerned

with the romance of the past while American fiction had moved on to social relevance), Munro's characterization of Stanley has particular resonance, both for Lydia and for Munro herself (see O'Brien, "Becoming"). In view of Lydia's awareness that "people were no longer so interested in getting to know her" (36), she fears becoming passé, like Stanley, a nonentity. Equally, Cather's parallel fate within literary renown — benign throwback to a simpler time — may be feared by both Lydia, the poet, and by her creator, Munro.

Yet concurrently Munro counters this view of Stanley with another, more positive, one. When the two meet, she leaves Lydia vague as to Mr. Stanley's age; in a brief chat with the woman who runs the guest house, the latter offers Lydia an assessment which applies equally well to Cather's Grenfell: the woman says, almost triumphantly (since Lydia has been unable to guess Stanley's age accurately) that he "is eighty-one. Isn't that amazing? I really admire people like that. I really do. I admire people that keep going'" (43). Cather and Munro are writing about such people: Grenfell and Lydia reach moments on their respective islands in which each must decide how to "keep going"; throughout their work, both have focused on such moments, Cather most clearly in *The Professor's House* (1925) and Munro throughout her fiction, though most precisely in her last two books.

THESE POINTS SPEAK directly to the presence of Alice Munro's Willa Cather, the characterization of whom lies at the heart of "Dulse." What the draft versions suggest is that Munro endeavoured to make Cather's characterization more inscrutable by probing the author's known public persona in tandem with the largely unknown, private being implied by that persona. Thus Lydia, whose poetic vocation seems equivocal since she seldom mentions her work to others and has decided "that probably she would not write any more poems" (37), has reason to wonder about the persona presented by a famous woman writer, generally in view of her own uncertainties but more specifically because of the vocation she shares with Cather. More precisely, Cather is directly relevant to Lydia's situation because of the unwavering persona she presented to the world throughout her life. For her, the preeminence of art, and of her own vocation as artist was, always, *the* uncompromised value. Mr. Stanley, for his part, understands this: speaking of Cather's reputation on Grand Manan during dinner, he says "The people here, you know, while they were very impressed with Willa, and some of them recognized her genius — I mean the genius of her personality, for they would not be able to recognize the genius of her work — others of them thought her unfriendly and did not like her. They took offense because she was unsociable, as she had to be, to do her writing'" (40-41).⁸

In *The New Yorker* version of this passage, “personality” is “person” (31), and the tension between the two words — between the interiority of the first and the externality of the latter — suggests Munro’s direction. For Lydia’s sake as well as her own, she is probing the distance between person and personality, between what a person is seen to be and what she shows herself to be by her “self” — that adumbration of actions, speech, appearance, and presence that make a person herself, both to herself and to others. For Munro as for Cather, this is no easy matter, nor are answers at all unequivocal. This issue, finally, is crucial to Alice Munro’s Willa Cather: in “Dulse” the author of “Paul’s Case” (1905) is offered by Munro as a difficult case in being human, in being an artist, and in being a woman writer — difficult for Lydia, for the reader, and for Munro herself.

During their initial discussion, Lydia passes over Mr. Stanley’s assertion that Cather had to be “unsociable . . . to do her writing,” but they return to it the next morning during breakfast, after Lydia has meditated upon herself and her problems throughout the story proper. A paragraph about Lydia’s lover and their relationship — included in *The New Yorker* but omitted from the book — is directive; its omission, no doubt, was caused by the changes in the lover’s character between versions (his name, profession, and his meeting with bears), but it speaks directly to Munro’s need for Willa Cather:

All this points to a grand self-absorption. A natural question follows: What did I think would be left over? But self-absorption honest as that [Alex’s] can be pure relief, once you’ve seen a few disguises. He was a great man for not lying, and blithe about it; none of your wordy justifications. He had real hopes for us. He thought we could be true companions: me, a poet, a grownup, hardworking woman absorbed in that, as he was in the crust and content of the earth and in his own distinct energies. He hadn’t known poets. (38)

Although the final sentence here is equivocal, it points back at Lydia herself (as well as at her poet colleagues, Cather and Munro)⁹ and, accordingly, so too toward Munro’s point: her version of Willa Cather in “Dulse” is essentially a meditation on the artist’s need for *both* self-absorption and disguises.

Thus in *The New Yorker* version, Munro may be seen pursuing this issue by sidestepping Lydia as first-person narrator and addressing her reader directly:

But there is more to it than that; take a look at Lydia. Her self-absorption equals Alex’s, but it is more artfully concealed. She is in competition with him, and with all other women, even when it is ludicrous for her to be so. She cannot stand to hear them praised or know they are well remembered. Like many women of her generation, she has an idea of love which is ruinous but not serious in some way, not respectful.

The personal sacrifices she made for her relationship are catalogued, and Munro concludes, saying of them: “They were indecent. She made him a present of such power, then complained relentlessly to herself, and much later to him, that he had

got it. She was out to defeat him" (38). This paragraph is retained in revised form in the book version of the story, but Munro moves it, in effect, away from herself as author; it is placed far more clearly in relation to Lydia's psychiatric analysis. The key to these meanderings — both perceptual and textual — is found in the question asked abruptly, a separate paragraph, after "defeat him" in *The New Yorker*: "Is that the truth?" (38). In *The Moons of Jupiter*, the same question becomes "That is what she said to the doctor. But is it the truth?" (55).

The difference between these two versions — along, one thinks, with the need to shift from first to third person — is crucial. In *The New Yorker*, owing to the narrative fissure between narrator and author demanded by the story, the question encompasses more than Lydia's situation: it expands, given Munro's detached commentary on it, to include herself as author. In the book version, Munro has revised and backed away from these implications; this passage is more circumscribed and focused on Lydia herself. In both cases, however, the issue is the truth of self-absorption, and all the characters in the story — including Willa Cather — are decidedly self-absorbed.

THE OVERALL EFFECT OF the shift from the first-person perspective of *The New Yorker* version to the third-person in *The Moons of Jupiter* is one of distancing: Lydia seems more disconnected and detached in the revised version. At the same time, these two articulations of Lydia's self-analysis confirm Judith Kegan Gardiner's argument concerning narrative techniques employed by women in relation to an author's personal identity and, more specifically, offer a parallel to Cather's *A Lost Lady*; there, Cather uses a third-person point of view (although an early use of "us" [10] reveals the authorial presence behind the narrative), but she creates Niel Herbert's vision of Marian Forrester so vividly that readers often recall the narrative as his first-person account.¹⁰ Munro's need to comment directly on Lydia in *The New Yorker* version, and her subsequent shift to third person, suggest a similar situation, solved through the creative distance afforded by the more detached narrative approach.

The shift in point of view between the published versions of "Dulse" was not a last-minute change, however; there are drafts using each point of view in the papers: the holograph drafts (38.11.7 and 38.8.19) are, respectively, in third and first, and the typescript drafts (38.8.20, 21, 22) are third, first, and third. Munro frequently tries both points of view to see which is the more appropriate, although the shifting back and forth throughout this story's composition and publication indicates more than usual difficulty in settling on a narrative perspective. As well, the change from Alex to Duncan, from a geologist bothered by polar bears to a historian nudged by black bears may be part of this self-absorption — the ordinari-

ness of Duncan's life being preferable to the more exotic nature of Alex's; or it may have to do with the demands of *The New Yorker* and its audience — there is something of an American cliché about Canada in Alex's polar bears — although Alex's background is present in the draft materials (38.8.20).

When Lydia joins Mr. Stanley for breakfast, "The telephone crew had eaten and gone off to work before daylight." She inquires after "his visit with the woman who had known Willa Cather," whereupon Stanley launches into a full report, and the ensuing discussion goes directly to the heart of "the case of Willa Cather." The woman had run a restaurant when Cather was staying on the island and she and Lewis would often have their meals sent up; sometimes, however, Cather would not like the meal and send it back, asking "for another dinner to be sent." He smiled, and said in a confidential way, 'Willa could be imperious. Oh, yes. She was not perfect. All people of great abilities are apt to be a bit impatient in daily matters'" (56-57). Speaking to Lydia's mood at this moment, the narrator comments: "Sometimes waking up was all right, and sometimes it was very bad. This morning she had wakened with the cold conviction of a mistake — something avoidable and irreparable." This is by way of accounting for Lydia's mental response to Stanley's last comment: "Rubbish, Lydia wanted to say, she sounds a proper bitch" (57).

Continuing, Stanley reports that sometimes, "'If they felt they wanted some company,'" Cather and Lewis would eat in the restaurant. On one such occasion, Cather discussed a proposal of marriage the woman was considering: "'Of course,'" Stanley says, Cather "'did not advise her directly to do one thing or the other, she talked to her in general terms very sensibly and kindly and the woman still remembers it vividly. I was happy to hear that but I was not surprised.'" Lydia's reaction to this, and the ensuing discussion, bears quoting at length:

'What would she know about it, anyway?' Lydia said.

Mr. Stanley lifted his eyes from his plate and looked at her in grieved amazement.

'Willa Cather lived with a woman,' Lydia said.

When Mr. Stanley answered he sounded flustered, and mildly upbraiding.

'They were devoted,' he said.

'She never lived with a man.'

'She knew things as an artist knows them. Not necessarily by experience.'

'But what if they don't know them?' Lydia persisted. 'What if they don't?'

He went back to eating his egg as if he had not heard that. Finally he said, 'The woman considered Willa's conversation was very helpful to her.'

Lydia made a sound of doubtful assent. She knew she had been rude, even cruel. She knew she would have to apologize. (57-58)

Retreating to the sideboard and feeling bad for the hurt she has just done, Lydia talks briefly to the owner of the guest house, who speaks of longing to get away and, remembering something, gives Lydia a bag full of dulse — an edible seaweed which she professes to have a taste for — left for her by Vincent, the man on the

telephone crew she found most attractive as a potential lover. She takes it back to the table as “a conciliatory joke,” asking “‘I wonder if Willa Cather ever ate dulse?’”; Stanley ponders the question quite seriously, looking at the leaves and “Lydia knew he was seeing what Willa Cather might have seen.”

The three paragraphs that conclude the story encapsulate the essential question posed by “Dulse,” and so speak most directly to Alice Munro’s Willa Cather; they need to be quoted together because of their mutuality, amounting to a symbiosis:

But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live? That was what Lydia wanted to say. Would Mr. Stanley have known what she was talking about? If she had asked how did Willa Cather live, would he not have replied that she did not have to find a way to live, as other people did, that she was Willa Cather?

What a lovely, durable shelter he had made for himself. He could carry it everywhere and nobody could interfere with it. The day may come when Lydia will count herself lucky to do the same. In the meantime, she’ll be up and down. ‘Up and down,’ they used to say in her childhood, talking of the health of people who weren’t going to recover. ‘Ah. She’s up and down.’

Yet look how this present slyly warned her, from a distance. (58-59)

COMMENTING ON THE story, some readers have made much of the exchange over Cather’s relationship with Lewis, assuming the lesbian cast that has been a central concern of some Cather critics. Thus Munro is seen as either taking a swipe at lesbians on behalf of heterosexual women or, more charitably, she is adopting the point of view of some of the marginalized.¹¹ Without engaging this view, the very partiality of such arguments need to be recognized, as does the partiality of any such single analysis. The story, and Munro’s creation of a particularly resonate version of Cather, is far more complicated than that. Munro’s work shows itself open to alternative ways of seeing any single event in a character’s life; such an approach is evident throughout “Dulse,” but it is especially so in its concluding paragraphs where — through successive drafts — Munro can be seen honing her version of Cather by making that writer’s presence more, not less, ambiguous.

Overall, the book version is more articulate and, equally, more open-ended. In *The New Yorker*, Lydia thinks that Mr. Stanley “wouldn’t have known what I was talking about” in the face of her question, “How did she live?” (39); in the book that assertion has become “Would Mr. Stanley have known . . . ?” Likewise, the flat statement in *The New Yorker*, “She was Willa Cather” (italicized in an earlier draft: 38.8.21.f19) becomes “If she had asked . . . she was Willa Cather.” Finally, “The day might come when I’d find myself doing the same,” has “will count herself lucky” added to it. Indeed, given the open-endedness of Munro’s

conclusion, it is not far-fetched to see the rejected paragraph from *The New Yorker* version, which makes mention of “true companions,” in reference to Cather and Lewis as much as to Lydia and Alex.

Eudora Welty — one of Munro’s acknowledged influences (“A Conversation”) — has asserted that “The story is a vision; while it’s being written, all choices must be its choices, and as these choices multiply upon one another, their field is growing too” (245). Willa Cather’s presence is essential to the choices Munro has made in writing “Dulse”: through the echoes of “Before Breakfast” there, through her apt presence on Grand Manan island as shade, local character, and most fundamentally by “the mystery of her life” — to paraphrase Munro’s own words in “The Stone in the Field” (MJ 33) — Cather is central to the story. Taken together, the choices Munro made created a version of Willa Cather which resonates throughout “Dulse,” amplifying the mysteries and uncertainties of Lydia’s confusions. The case study Cather represents in both the self-absorption and disguises of the artist, most particularly the woman artist, continues to whet the imagination for Munro, for Stanley, for Lydia, and for the reader even after the story has been laid aside.

Accounting for the composition of “Dulse,” Munro has said that she was working on a story involving Lydia when, with a friend, she visited Grand Manan and there met a Willa Cather “fanatic”; the two parts of the story just seemed to fit well together (Telephone interview). The initial inaccuracy of the draft references to Cather bear her out as, indeed, does the flavor of Mr. Stanley’s character generally. But more significant than a holiday incident providing a new element for a story in process is how Munro used her experience of meeting a Cather “fanatic” close up. It became the basis for a complex invocation and meditation upon Cather which is, at once, both something of a homage, an acknowledgement of their shared vision and purpose, and also a caustic analysis of “fanatical” self-absorption — Cather’s, Stanley’s, Lydia’s and, finally, her own. This invocation, moreover, serves as a precise object lesson for Lydia, though the matters it raises are not resolved, only intimated and essayed.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE issues Munro confronts in “Dulse” are evident by moving backwards through the story’s final three paragraphs. Lydia is “slyly warmed” because — Marian Forrester-like — she sees her ability to attract a man, still, confirmed in Vincent’s present of dulse. Yet the obverse of her pleasure here is the implication that Lydia is still getting her identity from men — giving them the same “power” over her that she allowed Duncan, which so obsesses her, and which Cather and Munro both confronted as artists in a male-dominated world. The notion of being “up and down,” with its connection to Mr. Stanley’s

“durable shelter” and to “the health of people who weren’t going to recover,” recalls Grenfell’s predicament in “Before Breakfast”; throughout each writer’s work, moreover, is the acknowledgement that none of us, ultimately, is “going to recover.” Thus the central questions posed by “Dulse,” by way of both point and counterpoint, are those which speak directly to the “mystery” that was—and is—Willa Cather: “But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live?”

Writing of both biography and autobiography, James Olney quotes an observation of Clarrisa M. Lorenz’s: “‘What ordinary mortals can’t swallow about artists is the ravaging of others. But the daemon will continue to destroy with impunity. Art, after all, is born of a colossal ego re-creating the world in its image. ‘A creative person has little power over his own life,’ said Jung. ‘Those pay dearly who have the creative fire.’ So do those who are closest to them” (436).¹² Elsewhere in the same essay, Olney asserts that “it is autobiography, or the presence of the biographer’s life, the presence of the authorial ‘I,’ that draws biography across the vague, wavering, and indistinct line that separates history from literature . . .” (429).

As a writer who has often shown herself to be uncomfortable with the “authority” the role seems to demand of her as a person, Munro is writing what amounts to a meditation on the artist’s self-absorption. Perhaps, too, “Dulse” should be seen as a meditation on the self-absorption of us all. And the implications of Cather’s work beyond *A Lost Lady* and “Before Breakfast” — which, including them, are now rightly seen as nowhere near as simple as they once were — are also an unstated but very clearly implied presence in the story. In “Dulse,” too, Munro is writing autobiography, biography, and fiction: the commingling is indeed, following Olney, literature, but it is also an acknowledgement on Munro’s part of her kinship with Cather at a fundamental level. Its sense of an ending that is not really conclusive echoes both *A Lost Lady* and “Before Breakfast,” and it is an acknowledgement of their shared values. Yet in keeping with each woman’s own distrust of absolutes, Lydia’s unanswered questions about Cather acknowledge, finally, the very mystery of being which drives any artist: “But was she lucky or was she not, and was it all right with that woman? How did she live?” Mr. Stanley does not know, Lydia does not know, Munro does not know. Nor, really, do we. But by asking these unanswerable questions, Alice Munro both acknowledges and celebrates Willa Cather’s ability to take the mystery of her life with her. Rather than emissary from a simpler time, an anachronism, Alice Munro’s Willa Cather is kindred spirit, influence, foremother.

NOTES

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- ¹ The Cather-Lewis companionship has received considerable attention; the two met in 1903 and, five years later, when each was working at *McClure's*, they began sharing an apartment. This living arrangement continued until Cather's death in 1947, after which time Lewis guarded her friend's reputation as executor until her own death in 1972. For a judicious overview of the relationship, see Marilyn Arnold's foreword to the most recent edition of *Willa Cather Living*; also O'Brien's discussion of it — though perhaps overstated — recognizes its importance in Cather's life (WC 353-57).
- ² This essay is a part of an ongoing project involving Cather and Munro's fiction, among others. Although "Dulse" offers the most discrete indication of the influence of Cather's fiction on Munro, numerous other echoes are worth pursuing. Not the least of these is the structural symmetry between Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932) and Munro's "The Progress of Love" (1985). Both stories focus on three women — grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter — and probe the paramount values of each; that is, how each woman lives with dignity, given the social mores of the time and her own personal values. Munro, moreover, has called "Old Mrs. Harris" her favourite Cather story (Telephone interview). Similarly, this comparison could be extended further throughout both writers' works in that relations between women of different generations, and especially mother-daughter relations, is a shared central theme.
- ³ Thus when Munro published *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), some reviewers complained that it was a revisiting of her earlier material in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Carrington, however, has recently refuted these claims, arguing convincingly that Munro does not "repeat herself," she "demonstrates the validity of her own aesthetic: by returning to the same theme, she clarifies her misconception of what she thought was happening and sees what she had not understood in the earlier attempt" (98).
- ⁴ Jewett's influence on Cather — coming as it did at a propitious time, when the younger woman was struggling to free herself from her duties at *McClure's* in order to write — has been seen as critical to her development. See Woodress (201-06); O'Brien (WC 334-52 and *passim*).
- ⁵ Unless indicated otherwise, parenthetical page references from "Dulse" are from its final form, that in *The Moons of Jupiter*; all quotations from Munro's papers are from the second accession; the identification numbers are from the published catalogue.
- ⁶ Of those in print, Carrington's reading of "Dulse" is much the best. "With the paradigmatic clarity of a psychiatric case history," she writes, the story "dramatizes self-destructive ambivalence" (146). Carrington relates the story well to the rest of Munro's work, applies Karen Horney's work on neurosis to Lydia's situation, and sees Cather as "an alter ego of the writer-protagonist" (148), but she makes no real attempt to probe Munro's Cather for its full meaning, nor does she suggest Cather's influence on "Dulse" more broadly.
- ⁷ Munro may have been aware that what Lydia envisions here for Cather's cottage is exactly what Edith Lewis allowed to happen to it after Cather's death, and this despite pleas from Grand Manan residents to see to repairs, according to Brown and Crone (129-36). Through the same sorts of oral sources they used, Munro may have heard this history.
- ⁸ As regards Cather after her reputation was established, this description of her behaviour is accurate. What is more, a vital part of Cather's persona was her great determination to succeed, a quality she evinced from her university years onward,

and which is treated autobiographically in *The Song of the Lark* (1915). When she arrived at Grand Manan for the first time, in 1922, however, her reputation was established and was in the process of being cemented. Brown and Crone, in their study of Cather in the northeast, offer a version of Cather on Grand Manan which accords with Mr. Stanley's (36-43); this book, which O'Brien has rightly called "maddeningly undocumented" (WC 244, n.47), could probably not have been a source for Munro since it was published in the same year as "Dulse." The more likely source for Mr. Stanley's version of Willa Cather is the person whom Munro met on Grand Manan; it conforms to the folklore surrounding Cather on Grand Manan as presented by Brown and Crone.

- ⁹ Though known primarily for fiction, each wrote and published poetry. Cather's first published book was a collection of poems, *April Twilights* (1903) and Munro, for her part, wrote poetry, although the extent of its publication has not yet been established. An untitled poem of hers, signed Anne Chamney (her mother's maiden name) appeared in 1967 in *The Canadian Forum*. I should like to thank Jean Moore, of the University of Calgary Special Collections staff, for bringing this to my attention.
- ¹⁰ Gardiner's article is particularly useful as regards the workings of the autobiographical in Cather and Munro. There, drawing upon the identity theories of Erikson and, especially, Choderow, and arguing that "female identity is a process," Gardiner looks at "typical narrative strategies of women writers—the manipulation of identifications between narrator, author, and reader and the representation of memory" in order to suggest ways that an author's text relates to her own identity. Following this, Gardiner asserts that "novels by women often shift through first, second, and third persons and into reverse. Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero" (349, 357).
- ¹¹ This reading of the story is one that I have heard in discussions of "Dulse" but I have not seen in print; it was also put to Munro herself in a letter she received just after "Dulse" appeared in *The New Yorker* (38.1.82).
- ¹² Lorenz was Conrad Aiken's second wife; Olney is reviewing her *Lorelei Two: My Life with Conrad Aiken*.

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