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LETTERS FROM OLIVE FREMSTAD TO WILLA CATHER: A VIEW BEYOND

*THE SONG OF THE LARK*

by

Jessica E. Tebo

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Melissa J. Homestead

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2018

LETTERS FROM OLIVE FREMSTAD TO WILLA CATHER: A VIEW BEYOND  
THE SONG OF THE LARK

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University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Melissa J. Homestead

In 1913, Willa Cather met opera-diva Olive Fremstad and the two formed a friendship that would span at least a decade. Fremstad has long been recognized as an inspiration for the character Thea Kronborg of Cather's *Song of the Lark* (1915) but has not been portrayed as influential in any other aspects to Cather's career. Letters sent by Fremstad to Cather have recently been located, and they reveal an ongoing and interdisciplinary dialogue between the two women that negotiates issues surrounding art and professionalism. I locate these letters within the broader context of Cather's public and fictional statements about art during this period and find evidence of Fremstad's influence, particularly in the concept of performative selves as an integral part of the artist's identity and praxis. Furthermore, this relationship challenges the pervasive mythos of Cather as an isolated artist torn between considerations of commercialism and high art. By considering Cather's relationship with Fremstad and its ensuing dialogue, I have found that Cather began her career as a professional novelist fully aware and capable of reconciling the supposed tension between her art, personal life, and commercial acumen. Cather wrote the opera stories collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920) throughout this period and reveal her development of an ideology engaged with feminine vitality as a means for producing art.

On 13 March 1913 Mme. Duchene, a French contralto for the Metropolitan Opera, fell suddenly ill “just as she was about to start from her home for the opera,” and a frantic call was made to Mme. Fremstad regarding the suddenly available role of Giulietta in “The Tales of Hoffman” (“Fremstad as Giulietta”). Serendipitously, American author Willa Cather happened to be in attendance that night and was deeply impressed by Fremstad’s performance after minimal preparation. Edith Lewis later recalled in *Willa Cather Living* that Cather repeated ““But it’s impossible”” throughout the inspired performance (92). This dramatic incident has been frequently cited as critical evidence that Olive Fremstad served as the prototype for Thea Kronborg of Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915), even though there are significant discrepancies between Fremstad’s life and career and that of Cather’s heroine.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, correspondence documenting a sustained friendship between the two women has recently become available and complicates the assumption that Fremstad was merely a source for a single novel.

By focusing on Fremstad merely as a prototype apart from the relationship between the two women, critics have reduced their dialogical exchange to a one-way extraction of information. In contrast, the letters reveal an exchange of ideas concerning art and professionalism in which both artists influenced one another. Only Fremstad’s

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<sup>1</sup> In his article, “Whose Life is it Anyway?”, Marvin Friedman argues that “The biographical parallels that do exist between Thea and Fremstad are of a quite general nature” (51). He also points out that the dramatic substitution plot point in *The Song of the Lark* actually aligns more closely with an incident that occurred in 1912, in which Hungarian singer, Margaret Matzenauer, performed Kundry, a role she had not even rehearsed, after Fremstad was unable to perform due to a sudden illness (53).

side of the correspondence is currently known, though Cather frequently mentions the relationship in her letters to other correspondents. Using Fremstad's letters to Cather and Cather's letters about Fremstad, supplemented by Mary Watkins's<sup>2</sup> memoir documenting her time with Fremstad, *The Rainbow Bridge* (1954), I have reconstructed a relationship much more important to Cather, both personally and artistically, than has generally been assumed. While exact dates remain elusive, it is clear the relationship began sometime around Cather's interview of Fremstad for "Three American Singers." Fremstad's letters to Cather span 1913 to 1922, a period during which both were undergoing dramatic professional and artistic transitions: in 1913 Cather's career as a novelist had just begun while Fremstad's career as an opera singer was about to end.<sup>3</sup> In their ensuing highly performative dialogue, they negotiated their diverging career trajectories but also the inherent differences between their chosen mediums. Moving beyond the prototype discussion, I consider how Fremstad might have influenced Cather's move away from journalism and magazine work and into the profession of a novelist. In order to situate Cather's relationship with Fremstad within the context of her professional and artistic development, I not only consider epistolary materials, but also Cather's statements about

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Watkins was Fremstad's secretary throughout the entirety of Fremstad and Cather's relationship. Some suggest that the two women were even lovers. Watkins wrote the account of her time with Fremstad after the singer's death and after she had married and taken the name Cushing. While the Works Cited identifies her as Cushing, I refer to her as Watkins because that was the name she used during the time period I examine.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I conflate the duration of the friendship with the span of the collected letters. While the relationship could have continued much longer than this, Watkins indicates that it did not last long past the beginning of Cather's literary career.

the artist, art, and professionalism in interviews and short stories collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920).

By examining this relationship, I not only provide new insight into Cather's development into a successful novelist but also refute the persistent depiction of Cather (both in biographies and in criticism) as an isolated artist. Cather is often depicted as ruthless in her use of people as source-material for her novels<sup>4</sup>. Cather herself is partially responsible for this myth, as in her early statements concerning art (collected in *The Kingdom of Art* [1967]) she promotes the idea that art requires a singular and consuming devotion from the artist. I identify a shift, however, in Cather's understanding of the artist's relationship to art that happens concurrently with her friendship with Fremstad. While it is not clear when Cather and Fremstad's friendship ended, Fremstad's last extant letter to Cather is dated 1922, seven years after *The Song of the Lark*. Furthermore, Watkins's memoir makes it clear that from 1913 to 1922 Fremstad responded to personal and professional difficulties by isolating herself and that Cather took an active role in attempting to help the singer. The Cather who emerges from both her and Fremstad's letters is not the isolated priestess of art that so many critics and biographers have depicted.

Critics who discuss Cather's ideas about art and the development of her career often rely upon the mythos that her pursuit of art was full of conflict and contradiction. In

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<sup>4</sup> In *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (1987), James Woodress accuses Cather of "insensitivity to the use of real people as suggestions for her fictional characters" (191). Cather's short stories, "A Wagner Matinée" and "The Profile," are the most frequently cited examples of her insensitivity.

*On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* (2009), David Porter proposes that, “From the beginning of her career to the end of her life [she] constantly lived a divided life” and that these “divisions” informed her fiction (xx). In Porter’s analysis of Cather’s “divided life” he sees her literary ambitions as at odds with both her personal life and commercial acumen. According to Porter, Cather held “two contrasting visions of the artist, one devoted to ‘success,’ the other to transcendent achievement” (xxiii)<sup>5</sup>. Cather’s relationship with Fremstad, as I reconstruct it here, suggests that Cather’s life and writing do not actually reflect a divided self, but rather that she had an acute understanding of the author and the act of writing as highly performative. Cather used the understanding of performative selves she developed through her friendship with Fremstad to achieve success both commercially and within the realm of high art, making her work at times difficult for critics to categorize. In her letters to Cather, Fremstad uses performance to negotiate between her public and private personas and even actively constructs a writerly identity for Cather in contrast with her own performance of the diva.

### **GESAMTKUNSTWEK: AN IDEOLOGICAL MEETING PLACE FOR FREMSTAD AND CATHER**

While both Fremstad and Cather understood the distinctions between their respective art forms, they also used these differences to better understand art itself. Richard Wagner’s philosophical understanding of art, especially his conception of

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<sup>5</sup> Porter is not alone in this perception, David Stouk similarly claims that “Willa Cather was aware of the deep split between the claims of art and life” (172).

*Gesamtkunstwerk*, calls for a cross-disciplinary participation in the creation of art.<sup>6</sup>

*Gesamtkunstwerk* is a notoriously slippery concept, but at its core, Wagner's idea requires a hybridization of mediums. As Juliet Koss explains:

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is often presumed to harbor an undifferentiated mixture of all forms of art, yet Wagner clearly stated in 1849 that it contained three: poetry, music, and dance...Wagner himself privileged poetry...Calling his works 'music dramas' rather than 'operas,' he treated music and dance as supplemental to the dramatic performance. (xiii)

As a lifelong aficionado of opera, Cather was likely exposed to not only Wagner's operas, but also his philosophy. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, and into the early twentieth, "the story of the emergence of American opera singers is inextricably linked to the story of Wagnerism in America. Wagner's works enjoyed a privileged place in American performing arts institutions; the Metropolitan opera programmed only German opera (or opera translated into German)" (Ruotolo 70). While I could find no direct evidence that Cather read Wagner's 1849 essays, her affinity for the composer is well documented, and in several letters, she explicitly references his autobiography<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>While *Gesamtkunstwerk* is usually associated with Wagner, Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahdorff actually first used the term in his 1827 essay, "Aesthetics, or Theory of Philosophy of Art." Wagner did not use the term until writing "Art and Revolution" and "The Artwork of the Future" in 1849.

<sup>7</sup> In a 1912 letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Cather recommended, "When you can, do take up Wagner's Autobiography. It tells you everything that you've always wanted to know about him. All the reviews of it are childish; he was a large enough person to be honest about himself, and he has so much to say that he does not stop to make out a case for himself. It's all action. From his earliest years there was plenty doing, and he wastes mighty little time in reflection" (#0219).



Furthermore, in her preface to Gertrude Hall Brownell's *Wagnerian Romances* (1925), Cather seemingly refers to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* implicitly. Cather compliments Brownell for reproducing "the emotional effect of one art through the medium of another art" and defines opera as "a hybrid art,--partly literary to begin with. It happens that in the Wagnerian music-drama the literary part of the work is not trivial, as it is so often in operas, but is truly the mate of the music, done by the same hand" ("Preface" viii).

Throughout her career, when Cather wrote about the nature of art and the artist, she frequently refers to forms other than literature. In the fall of 1913, having met Fremstad that spring, Cather published an article in *McClure's Magazine* entitled "Training for the Ballet: Making American Dancers," in which she defines the artist expansively: "The great dancer is made, like any other artist, of two things: of a universal human impulse, and a very special and individual experience of it. That this very special experience creates ambition, devotion, very special skill, goes without saying. That is true in any art." Critics have generally characterized Cather's references to other art forms as purely metaphorical<sup>8</sup>. For Cather, the connection between writing and other art forms was much more concrete; she developed her creative methodology through an inclusive understanding of art. Viewing Cather through the theoretical framework of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, we can see that she did not believe maintaining a clear division between art forms was either necessary or desirable; creating art within the tradition of

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<sup>8</sup>Ann Mosely observes that "Although Cather was not a singer herself, from 1915 onward she often uses singing as an analogy for writing" ("Historical Essay").

*Gesamtkunstwerk* instead required an understanding of art as simultaneously including and transcending all mediums.

In Fremstad's letters to Cather (which I will later describe in greater detail), she maintains a distinction between their artistic vocations while simultaneously promotes interdisciplinary engagement. The tension she explores between the similarities and differences between their arts similarly evokes the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In her work as an interpretive performer, Fremstad took Wagner's ideals quite seriously and was interdisciplinary in her methodology. Davis and others have noted the singer's fastidious preparations and "ferocious commitment to what was then considered the operatic ultimate: the Wagnerian ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the total artwork" (165). Cather alludes to the effect of Fremstad's fastidious preparations in "Three American Singers": "How, for instance, when she sings *Giulietta*, in 'Tales of Hoffmann,' does she remold her own strongly modeled countenance into the empty, sumptuous face of the Venetian beauty?—lifted, one might say, from a Veronese fresco." Fremstad's scores were filled with "detailed notation...Every bit of action is written down, steps are counted out, and virtually every part of the anatomy receives its own special set of instructions. As Act II of *Tristan* opens, she reminds herself to gaze 'longingly into the forest where all her thoughts now are...whole body expecting the loved one'" (Davis 167-168). Fremstad's extensive note-taking reveals the degree to which she considered both the musical and literary elements of opera. When asked near the end of her career to sing Wagner in English, Fremstad initially refused rather than compromise what she viewed as the integrity of the original text. While Cather was

certainly impressed by Fremstad's fame, she also appreciated the singer's methodology. Fremstad's performances were deeply informed by Wagnerian artistic ideals and "Cather felt she had witnessed [in Fremstad] the perfect realization of the composer's [Wagner's] aims" (Harbison 152).

Despite obvious differences in artistic practice between being an opera diva and being a novelist, Cather and Fremstad were united by their common interest in Wagnerian ideals and interdisciplinary approaches to art. Furthermore, the very act of communicating across different art forms achieves the Wagnerian idea that only when the arts were joined in "sisterly community [*schwesterliche Germeinschaft*]' could 'each one attain its full value for the first time'" (qtd. in Koss 16, 17). By engaging with Fremstad, Cather better understood Wagnerism and her own process as an artist.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT**

Before reconstructing the friendship between Cather and Fremstad via their letters and Watkins's memoir, I want to establish where each woman was in her career to better contextualize the changes that occurred throughout this period of intense transition. Anna Olivia Fremstad was born in Stockholm, Sweden on 14 March 1871. She claimed to have been a "love child" and was rumored to have been raised by adoptive parents. By giving contradictory reports about her life, Fremstad crafted an enigmatic persona to perform for the press<sup>9</sup>. Various newspapers and magazines provide an aggregation of backstories for

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<sup>9</sup> Several of Cather's biographers have noted a similar quality in Cather's performative re-telling of her own past. In several interviews, Cather modified the details of her Nebraska childhood to better "fit" with the narratives of *O' Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918).

the singer. Sometime in the 1880s Fremstad emigrated to America with her family and settled in Minnesota, where she trained for her singing career under the guidance of her demanding father. By 1890 she held the position of soloist in a church in Minneapolis but left later that year for New York around Christmas without telling anyone. On December 26<sup>th</sup>, after she found a piano teacher, Frederick E. Bristol, “Fremstad immediately cabled back home that she was staying on to study, and in exchange for her lessons with Bristol she labored at the piano as an accompanist for his other pupils. That meager income was soon to be augmented by a prestigious position as soloist at St. Patrick’s Cathedral” (Davis 171).

She began her career as a professional opera singer in 1891 with a brief tour with Anton Seidle, after which she left for Germany to study under Lili Lehmann. After two years of study with Lehmann, Fremstad sang her first role as a contralto in *Azucena* in 1895. She began singing small Wagnerian roles in the *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1896. Based primarily in Munich, where she sang sixty to seventy parts, she also traveled to London, Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Vienna for guest appearances. Fremstad did not return to the United States until 1903, beginning her long contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where she primarily performed Wagnerian roles. Both the press and the public acclaimed her Met debut as Sieglinde. Richard Aldrich for the *New York Times* wrote, “Her accomplishment both as a singer and an actress, the power and depth of her art, were as such as to fill the lovers of the German works in which she is to appear with present satisfaction and jubilant expectation” (qtd. in Davis 173).

While Fremstad's reputation is based primarily on her Wagnerian performances, she is also remembered in operatic history for her one-time performance of *Salome* on 22 January 1907. To prepare for the role, Fremstad visited a morgue to ascertain the weight of a real human head. Her performance at a live dress-rehearsal was so sensual, especially her caressing of the severed head of John the Baptist, that viewers were left "staring at each other with starting eyeballs and wrecked nerves" (Krehbiel 7). In response to public outcry, the Met held an emergency board meeting and decided to cancel the remaining performances of the opera. Less than five months later, Fremstad performed the role again in Paris for the Théâtre du Châtelet, garnering a decoration from the French government. Despite offending New York audiences with her interpretation of *Salome*, Fremstad became one of the Met's most beloved performers. By the 1909-1910 season she was earning \$1,000 dollars a performance, an amount second only to Geraldine Ferrar's compensation (Dorris 256). By 1911, Fremstad was one of the most highly paid opera stars in the world (Watkins).

The 1911-12 and 1912-1913 seasons, right before Cather met Fremstad, were arguably her best. Mary Watkins began working for Fremstad in 1911 and witnessed these final years. On 17 November 1911 Fremstad gave one of the defining performances of her career as Isolde in *Tristan and Isolde*. The *New York Times* reported that Fremstad had surpassed all previous performances: "Never has she so eloquently, so poignantly bodied forth the sweep of emotions and passions that sway the Irish Princess in the first act, never has she been so transfigured by the ecstasy and rapture of her meeting with Tristan in the night, never risen to heights so lofty in her proclamation over his body at

the close” (13). Underlying Fremstad’s overwhelming success during these years, however, were signs of impending disaster. During the 1911-1912 season, Met director, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, with whom Fremstad had a strained relationship, assigned her the role of Giulietta in *The Tales of Hoffman*. According to Gatti-Casazza’s memoir, he assigned her this role to assuage her complaint that all her other parts were “too heavy” (196-197). Her performances did not go well and he soon removed her from the role. It was also during this season that Margaret Matzenauer performed Kundry after Fremstad fell ill. If Cather modeled the substitution plot in *The Song of the Lark* after this incident, her fictional portrayal of the beginning of an operatic career also alludes subtly to its inevitable ending. Gatti recalls the incident occurring “Two days before the performance she [Fremstad] telephones me that she was ill and would not be able to sing...some one [sic] suggested to me that I ask Matzenauer...Not only did she make a complete success, but she went through the entire performance of a very difficult part, which was also new for her without making a single error” (214). Matzenauer’s stunning success might have initiated the termination of Fremstad’s contract as Matzenauer ultimately replaced her on the Met’s roster.

Watkins was especially alarmed when, in 1912, Fremstad forwent her traditional European trip and decided instead to spend the summer in Maine with her old singing teacher. The following season, 1912-1913, however, was the best of her career; Fremstad had no cancellations, sang thirty-six times at the Met, and gave fifteen concert performances. In the summer of 1913 she sailed for Europe on the S.S. George Washington to perform at the Wagner Festival at Munich’s Prinzregenten Theater.

Watkins identifies Fremstad's performance as Brunnhilde there as the pinnacle of "her [Fremstad's] success in Munich—possibly elsewhere too" (236). Given her overwhelming success, the sudden ending of her career at the conclusion of the 1913-1914 season surprised both Watkins and Fremstad. Fremstad was frustrated throughout her final season, as Gatti-Casazza began to maneuver her out by assigning her preferred roles to other singers. Watkins recalls that when Fremstad noticed Gatti-Casazza had scheduled her to play Fricka, a minor character in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, she "could hardly ignore the strong humiliating message: demotion" (179)<sup>10</sup>. On 24 March 1914, the *New York Times* reported that "The management and singer have not yet arrived at an understanding whereby this contract will be renewed for another term, and there is little likelihood that it will be renewed in its present form," and, indeed, the contract was not renewed (1). Gatti-Casazza later defended his decision on the grounds that Fremstad was "rather nervous and difficult to keep happy" (196). Watkins speculated that Fremstad had become too expensive for the opera to keep, while others have claimed that her voice was beginning to fail. Following this announcement, a series of "Fremstad farewell demonstrations" began, culminating with Fremstad's final performance at the Met on 23 April 1914<sup>11</sup>. Fremstad attempted a concert career following her termination at the Met, which Watkins describes as a disappointing semblance of her former mastery<sup>12</sup>. In a letter

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<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Thea takes pride in her performance of Fricka. She "hotly" tells Fred Ottenburg, "'Fat German woman scolding her husband, eh? That's not my idea. Wait till you hear my Fricka. It's a beautiful part'" (*The Song* 283).

<sup>11</sup> Her opportunities to perform for other cities' operas were severely limited. By 1915 both the Chicago and Boston operas were forced into a hiatus because of World War I and a growing hostility towards the German language (Gatti 220).

<sup>12</sup> Watkins compares Fremstad's concert career to "drinking champagne through a straw, or reducing a view of the Alps to a black-and-white kodak print" (272).

to Cather, Fremstad describes one of her “recitals” as not “at all the sort of thing it should have been, the sort of song recital I would like to give some other time, and intend to give” (21 Feb. 1915). Her brief teaching career ended when she showed her students a “pickled human head which had been sliced through lengthwise in order that all the arrangements for breath and voice might be seen and studied” (Watkins 311). While a singer’s career longevity certainly depends more on her body and the caprices of physical health, after Fremstad showed the terrible cost of devoting everything to art, Cather approaches the theme of the artist as priestess in her fiction with greater wariness.

When Cather met Fremstad sometime during the spring of 1913, the singer was at the pinnacle of her career. In contrast, Cather was, as Watkins observes, “not then so famous as she later became” (242). By the fall of that same year, Fremstad’s career was already jeopardized by the Met’s politics. Fremstad’s failed contract negotiations and the ensuing public outcry were well publicized—Cather, while writing *The Song of the Lark*, could not have helped but notice that her friend’s career had taken a disastrous turn. In contrast, Cather was early in her career as a professional novelist. Cather had taken a leave of absence from her job as an editor for *McClure’s Magazine* in the fall of 1911 and resigned a year later, after the publication of her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), and S.S. McClure’s ouster from the magazine. Cather did not sever her ties with the magazine entirely—she could not yet support herself on what she was earning from her novels, and *McClure’s* paid her \$300 a piece for the non-fiction articles on the



performing arts she wrote in 1913, including “Three American Singers.”<sup>13</sup>Cather’s next four books, *O’ Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), were all published following her meeting with Fremstad and span the duration of their known correspondence. These novels mark the beginning of Cather’s professional career and transition away from writing in the Jamesian style of *Alexander’s Bridge* and into voice distinctly hers. During this period, Cather also witnessed Fremstad’s tragic downfall as an artist in her prime into a directionless state. While Fremstad’s letters to Cather only hint at her distress, Watkins’s memoir makes it clear that the singer struggled with depression and even contemplated suicide. Watkins begins *The Rainbow Bridge* with a sobering reflection on the ephemerality of artistic achievement for an opera diva:

Her admirers like to think that Olive Fremstad’s art, if not the artist herself, would live forever. But they were wrong simply because that honor is not for an interpretive performer...The Brilliance, the power, and the glory can be set in no preservative; the luster begins to fade at the moment the last curtain falls. This is the doom of every artist whose immortality is conditioned by mortal memory. (5)

Because Cather was simultaneously developing her professional persona as a novelist and refining her own artistic principles, surely the tragic demise of Fremstad’s career affected the developing sense of herself as an artist. As I will address in the second part

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<sup>13</sup> Cameron Mackenzie, the vice-president of *McClure’s* wrote Cather that he liked “the article on Opera singers very much” and that his recollection was “somewhat hazy, but I think I promised to pay \$300.00 a piece for the Opera Singers article” (12 Sept. 1913).

of the thesis, both Cather's fiction and her dexterous ability to balance the professional and personal sides of writing evince a sensitivity to the ephemerality of art and one's ability to produce it.

### **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LETTERS**

Throughout her life, Cather wrote and received thousands of letters. While the *Complete Letters of Willa Cather* has located just over 3,000 letters Cather wrote, she apparently saved only a small proportion of the letters she received. On 9 May 1945, Cather wrote her brother Roscoe Cather that she "save[d] only the letters from unusual people, whether it's an old cow puncher or Sir James Jeans the astronomer" (#2230). Cather's received correspondence has not, to the best of my knowledge, been actively collected and organized. Her letter to Roscoe indicates that she did not save every letter but instead curated a selection. Of the letters to Cather held by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries Archives and Special collections, the twenty-three letters from Olive Fremstad represent the highest number from a single correspondent<sup>14</sup>. Whether she kept them solely for their "unusual" quality or to preserve the memory of their friendship must be left to conjecture<sup>15</sup>, but by saving them, Cather nevertheless indicated that these letters were important to her. The first extant letter from Fremstad is dated, 5 June 1913, and the last is dated 23 November 1922. Fremstad did not write complete dates on the majority of

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<sup>14</sup> The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives currently possesses twenty-three letters written by Fremstad to Cather, not including two written by Mary Watkins on behalf of her employer.

<sup>15</sup> The process of saving letters as artifacts is "highly individualized," making the "interpretation of correspondence" full of "conceptual problems" (Gerber 201).

her letters, so I have at times approximated a date or date range by drawing on Fremstad's allusions to events in her own life or Cather's life. This process was further complicated by discrepancies between various biographical sources. The presence of competing voices between (and even within) these sources highlights the inherent slipperiness of letter-writing and biography as genres and how a writer taking up these genres develops performative selves. Fremstad's letters are especially notable for their bilateral layering of performing and constructing identities: they challenge traditional epistolary conventions involving the roles of the writer and reader and reveal how epistolary performances never occur in isolation and must necessarily be examined within a relational context. Scholarship about letter-writing is helpful in thinking about how to recover traces of the relationship from these letters. As a genre, letters necessarily have an "ambivalent nature of narrative closure... [and a] paradoxical generation of an aura of spontaneity from within a set of closely defined rules" (Bernier et al. 14). This effect is intensified in this case, in which only one side of the correspondence is extant.<sup>16</sup>

Fremstad's performance of self is especially evident in the various ways she signed her name to her letters. Her earlier letters demonstrate a confidence in her celebrity—her signature reads like an autograph. As the correspondence progresses and her career disintegrates, however, there is a shift in her tone. By 1918, half-way through the correspondence, Fremstad begins to write in a more familiar tone and signs her letters more informally. Near the end of the correspondence, perhaps indicating a growing distance within the relationship, Fremstad resumes formality. The spectrum of names

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<sup>16</sup> Also, there are oddly no letters available for the years 1916, 1917, and 1921.

with which Fremstad signed her letters serve as markers for various performed selves. Watkins notes that “Fremstad was forever concerned with names, and their implications. During the season of 1910-1911 she made an effort, on discovering that there were thirteen letters in Olive Fremstad, to have herself officially billed as Olivia” (70). By employing a variety of signatures at the conclusion of her letters, Fremstad participates in “The ritual opening and closing of a letter” imposing “upon the writer a gesture of self-definition” (Altman 146). Between her letters to Cather and Watkins’s memoir, I count six monikers that the diva used situationally. Most of her letters to Cather are signed “Olive Fremstad,” a version of her name that embodies the hybridity between public and private personas. The name expresses more intimacy than the title “Madame Fremstad,” which the opera used in publicity. Fremstad makes this distinction clear by sending Cather a calling-card printed with her full title, “Madame Olive Fremstad,” with the word “Madame” crossed out. She does not, however, cede all formality and sign the letters as “plain Olive” or use the more intimate names Watkins uses: “Livan” and “Anna Olivia.” Using the name “Olive Fremstad” indicates Fremstad’s awareness that despite their friendship, Cather still occupied the roles of writer and opera-critic. Like her signature, the letters themselves express a general friendliness without disclosing overly personal information. In 1918 Fremstad departs notably from this precedent—she expresses vulnerability and signed several letters with the name “Karen.” I have found no evidence as to why Fremstad adopted this name; perhaps it relates to an attempted performance of an even newer persona in recognition that her career had ended.

### **THE LETTERS: 1913-1922.**

Fremstad's self-awareness as a performing artist is apparent from her first extant letter, written on 5 June 1913. Her relaxed tone suggests that she had written to Cather before<sup>17</sup>. It also exemplifies features reoccurring throughout all Fremstad's letters, particularly her reflexive understanding of epistolary practices and strategic effort to acknowledge the fundamental differences between being a performing artist and being a writer. Despite being literally engaged in the act of writing, Fremstad frequently positions Cather as the writer and herself as the reader, reversing the genre-in-practice and setting up a clear dynamic of expertise within their relationship. Within this dynamic, Fremstad often encourages and praises Cather as a writer. Fremstad began this letter by acknowledging the receipt of a "very long letter" and books from Cather, including Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring*<sup>18</sup>, which she describes as "Just the kind of books [sic] that I like." She also compliments Cather's "article on Elsa," stating, "it has made me long for your comments on all my roles. So—put yourself down as musical [sic] and dramatic critic dear Lady—besides your own work! It is indeed wonderful how you could so dissect a role without knowing or being specially [sic] interested in that kind of work."<sup>19</sup> Fremstad claims expertise for herself in judging musical and dramatic criticism, making a clear distinction between her work and Cather's. She simultaneously compliments Cather's artistic skill and situates herself as a mentor to a less-established artist. Also, I

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<sup>17</sup> In the letter's greeting, Fremstad refers to Cather as "My dear Miss Cather!"—indicating that she is responding to correspondence from Cather.

<sup>18</sup> Cather was familiar with Ivan Turgenev's work and considered him to be a "fine artist" but a "very poor critic" (#2032).

have not located any articles appearing before “Three American Singers” in which Cather analyzed Fremstad’s performance of Elsa in detail (and in *McClure’s* she merely mentions the role). This raises the possibility that Cather allowed Fremstad to read a longer version of “Three American Singers” article before it was published.

Within their epistolary transaction, Fremstad willingly offers Cather the role of “writer” and demonstrates her own confidence as a reader informed by an experiential knowledge Cather did not have. Fremstad explains to Cather, “I shall not attempt to answer your long splendid letter. I am no writer and my own writing bores me so what would it do to you if you got a hold of it. Yours is alive with originality and ideas, mine just the tame letterwriting [sic] of a singer—not [undecipherable] as others—but most singers are stupid.” Fremstad’s admission about her lack of writing ability was not mere self-depreciation; earlier in the letter she deliberately differentiates her artistic skill-set from Cather’s. Displaying indifference towards her own writing, Fremstad made no corrections to her frequent spelling and grammar errors, but she did claim the role of a perceptive reader, capable of discerning quality in another’s writing. In a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant on 22 September [1913], Cather expresses a similar anxiety of “boring her [Fremstad]—for after all the only thing she really cares about is music,” (despite Fremstad’s professed interest in literature) (#0265). This mutual anxiety speaks to the tension Cather and Fremstad experienced as artists from very different mediums negotiating issues of identity and art throughout their correspondence.

Cather was strategic and oftentimes contradictory in her comments on Fremstad’s influence. Fremstad’s influence on Cather’s work has typically been characterized as

indirect, including by Cather herself. In a 15 February 1932 letter, Cather asked Ferris Greenslet to “Please say nothing to encourage the rumor that the character of Thea Kronborg was done from Fremstad. As a matter of fact, not one incident used in the story had any likeness to the incidents of Fremstad’s life. My knowing her had some indirect influence on the book, but mostly in the matter of making me familiar with the routine of an operatic singer” (#1096). In her letters to Cather, Fremstad shares her realm of expertise, and in person she presumably shared the “routine” of an opera singer; her letters also suggest she contributed to Cather’s development into a novelist in other ways.

Fremstad praised “Three American Singers” as “perfectly splendid, as is all that you write, and I have read it over several times from sheer pleasure in your point of view, and the originality and grace with which you express it. I wish also to acknowledge the courtesy of the ‘extra copies.’” Fremstad’s enjoyment of an article that elevated her above its other two subjects, Louise Homer and Geraldine Ferrar, is unsurprising. Not only does Cather give Fremstad more space, she includes more direct quotations from her<sup>20</sup>, including a long quotation about the life of the artist<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps Cather quoted Homer and Farrar less because she was unable to interview them, but I am inclined to believe Cather was interested in Fremstad’s ideas about art. Cather gives biographical details of the three singers equal attention but devotes more space to Fremstad’s ideas

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<sup>20</sup> Louise Homer is never directly quoted and Geraldine Ferrar is only given six short direct quotations, as opposed to Fremstad’s nine quotes, several of which are quite long.

<sup>21</sup> Cather quotes Fremstad saying: “We are born alone, we make our way alone, we die alone...My work is only for serious people. If you ever really find anything in art, it is so subtle and so beautiful that—well, you need never be afraid any one will take it away from you, for the chances are nobody will ever know you've got it” (“Three American Singers”).

about art and the artist. Cather writes that Wagner felt it was “in the musical ideas and in the scoring of them that the poem flowers” and that Fremstad honored the composer’s vision by not forgetting “the great ideas which lie behind these women [her roles], in realizing and releasing their rich humanity. But with Mme. Fremstad one feels that the idea is always more living than the emotion; perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that the idea is so intensely experienced that it becomes emotion” (“Three American Singers”). Fremstad was not merely a conduit for Wagner’s vision (she was not just a “stupid singer”)—she was, as Watkins also describes her, an interpretive performer. As Cather explained to Sergeant in a 14 April [1913] letter, she was drawn to Fremstad not because “her talk is so emotional but because under its vivid imagery it’s so complex and tightly packed and elliptical” (#0256). From the very outset of their relationship, Cather appears to have recognized and appreciated Fremstad’s intellectually driven methodology.

On the 13 May [1914], Fremstad wrote Cather after her final performance from Brighton, Maine, to tell her, “It is wonderful to have such a thoughtful friend as you!”. After the humiliation of her failed contract negotiations with Gatti-Casazza and the emotional toll of her final performances, Fremstad must have been seeking both peace and comfort. She told Cather, “I have forgotten everything but making a garden and augmenting the wood-pile. The woods are so strong peaceful and quiet—so different from this chattering humanity around us. As for the opera and its menagerie, that belongs to a past existence.” In subsequent letters, Fremstad rarely mentions the opera, but her performance of contentment barely conceals that her desire to return to the opera stage



was not at all relegated to a “past existence”; the slippage in Fremstad’s performance of contentment oftentimes reveals underlying regrets. Perhaps Fremstad also believed that her upcoming European summer tour would resurrect her career. The tour was later canceled, however, because of growing unrest in Europe.

In the letter, Fremstad once again mentions the books Cather sent her: “The books look most tempting on the shelf by the open fire, and when I get over this drowsy-ness [sic] which takes hold of me whenever I sit down in the house, I am going to have a beautiful time with them...So in the meantime many many thanks for the books.” Fremstad’s vivid imagery in the May 13<sup>th</sup> letter locates her readerly self in a specific time, place, and emotional state. Fremstad materializes the abstract role of reader using the same skills she employed as an interpretive performer of opera. Fremstad’s letters disclose the ongoing exchange of books and articles between her and Cather, with Cather playing the role of curator. Several other letters mention Cather sending Fremstad books; the exchange appears mostly unidirectional, with Cather sending reading material to Fremstad. Fremstad did not play an entirely passive role, however, she expresses her opinions about what Cather sends her and therefore indirectly influenced Cather’s selection process. By frequently requesting books and articles and then describing her reading experiences, Fremstad demonstrates her interest in Cather’s literary taste and expertise. In a letter from Munich on 4 September 1913, Fremstad even commanded in her postscript, “You know about books—I don’t so I want you to tell me about them.” Like most letter writers, Fremstad attempted to maneuver her addressee into a desired role (Ferguson); in this case Fremstad demands that Cather perform the role of curator.

Seeking Cather's guidance in matters of literary taste, Fremstad demonstrates that opera was not the only art form that interested her. Even though Cather's letters to Fremstad are not extant, her well-documented interest in opera leads me to conjecture that she similarly sought Fremstad's expertise.

At the conclusion of her 13 May letter, Fremstad invited Cather to visit her in Maine, telling her, "I feel that you would make a delightful camp guest."<sup>22</sup> Cather's June 1914 letters to both her brother Roscoe Cather and Sergeant indicate that she took Fremstad up on her invitation in June 1914. Fremstad began summering in Maine in 1912; Watkins believed Maine offered "no haven at all...I realized that for Livan [Fremstad] the chief value of this rural retreat had been its contrast to her busy professional life" (302). By the spring of 1916 Fremstad established herself there more permanently although construction on the cabin she called Nawadyn was ongoing. Watkins, Fremstad, and Cather all separately mention the singer's increasingly frequent retreats to Maine but characterize Fremstad's time there differently. Watkins viewed the Maine retreat unfavorably, recalling that visitors rarely stayed long because of the "chill morning swims, the somewhat inadequate plumbing, and constant diet of fish" (220). In contrast, in a 23 June 1914 letter to Sergeant, Cather recalls her time in Maine with relish:

While I was in Fremstad's camp we did things every mortal minute except when we were asleep, and even then I dreamed hard. She fished as if she had no other means of getting food; cleaned all the fish, swam like a walrus, rowed, tramped,

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<sup>22</sup> This was not Fremstad's first invitation, she also asked Cather on 4 September 1913.

cooked, watered her garden...I feel as if I'd lived for a long while with the wife of the Dying Gladiator in her husky prime, in deep German forests. (#0284)

Prone to hyperbole, especially in her letters to Sergeant, Cather describes Fremstad and her cabin with mythological overtones aligning more closely with the Wagnerian roles Fremstad performed than with the woman herself; that is, she conflates Fremstad with her stage persona. In Cather's account, Fremstad was not the lonely recluse Watkins portrays. In a later letter to Sergeant, however, Cather characterizes Fremstad more realistically: "Fremstad is working hard and firing one cook after another. What a woman is she to look for trouble. Peace is where she is not, and yet it is peace that she is always looking for" (#0285). Fremstad corroborates this account in an apologetic letter written after Cather's visit: "It was nice to have you here and I only regret the domestic disturbance" ([1914]). Nearly a year later, Fremstad recurred to "the disturbance," and promised Cather on 23 May 1915 that "domestic peace reigns, and I trust that when you next come to see me, in the new house, we will be able to entertain you with less confusion."<sup>23</sup> Both of these later letters suggest that Cather's visit may have actually been unappealing, and, it seems, despite Fremstad's invitation, Cather never returned to the cabin. We may never know what Cather's experience visiting Fremstad in 1914 was really like, but conflict between the textual traces of the visit testifies to the strategic construction of self and other within the genres of epistolary practices and biography. The conflicting accounts

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<sup>23</sup> Because Fremstad was notoriously difficult to work for Watkins hired a constantly rotating staff of cooks and maids. The "domestic disturbance" likely involved the sudden departure of a disgruntled employee whom Fremstad later identified as "awful Julia."

also accentuate the difficulty Fremstad experienced while attempting to construct a new identity during these years of transition.

In her early letters to Cather, Fremstad is ever mindful of maintaining her public persona while protecting her private self. As her relationship with Cather progressed, her careful delineation begins to deteriorate and the chances of reviving her career slipped away. In 1915, however, Fremstad remained confident, and negotiating between public and private selves was an integral part of the production of her art. On [30 April 1915], Fremstad wrote Cather to apologize for delaying a drive they were going to take because Mary L. Bristol, the daughter of her voice instructor, Frederick E. Bristol, had died the day before. She also rejects Cather's recommendation for a new apartment in New York,<sup>24</sup> explaining that "Olive—plain Olive adores such places, but is it good enough for Olive Fremstad before the public." By writing in the third person, she creates and performs multiple selves for both public and private spheres. Watkins also presents Fremstad as deliberate in cultivating multiple performative selves. At the end of their first European tour together, Fremstad supposedly told Watkins, "Our vacation is now over, Matinka. We are going back into the world... You do not even know me, for when I am singing I am an altogether different person" (Watkins 86). In her letters to Cather, Fremstad recognizes the contextual nature of performative selves; her performances

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<sup>24</sup> Cather apparently assisted Watkins in her search for an apartment for Fremstad. Fremstad thanked Cather on 23 May 1915 for "all you did in helping Miss Watkins in the search for an apartment."

enable a hybridity between the public and private to exist within the tension of negotiating intimacy and artifice.

The falling of Fremstad's star while Cather became a public figure undoubtedly intensified a tension in her letters to Cather. On 23 May 1915 she continued her conversation with Cather about selecting an apartment, taking a remarkably different approach than she had in April. She begins by apologizing for waiting "weeks before answering your kind letter" and attributes the delay to "days of confusion, packing, and moving, and now the first laziness that comes with my immigration to this pine-laden air." Fremstad's letters are full of apologies for delinquent responses and broken engagements, and while this is a common convention of letter-writing,<sup>25</sup> Fremstad's apologies to Cather also point towards her "immigration" into self-imposed isolation. Although Fremstad initially claimed to have not taken "the studio" because of "nerve wracking traffic," later in the letter she breaks from her performance of self-sufficiency and tells Cather that she had:

Left the city [New York] homeless, so to speak, it seemed so hard to find the right thing that I felt the moment the wrong one. Perhaps when I come back in the fall the right place will be standing with open doors for me, or I may not need one at all. At present all my thoughts and hopes are centered on the development of my new land, and the immanent building of my camp-house [Nawadyn] I am

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<sup>25</sup> Ferguson observes that the letter-writer is "one of the most self-critical and apologetic creatures in the world of literacy, always castigating himself for his delay in writing, his lack of anything to say, or his inability to say it properly, his frequently abject stance goes along with the desire to fashion the self of the letter's recipient" (111).

happy with its natural beauties, and only hope the house will turn out to be a fitting complement to it all.

While Fremstad was ostensibly writing about the challenge of finding the right apartment, her subtext appears to be her difficulty in navigating the world as an artist attempting to craft a new persona out of the wreckage of a prematurely ended career. From this letter, it appears that Fremstad held out hope for a return to New York and the resurrection of her career. This opportunity did come in 1918, but tragically the moment proved to once again be “the wrong one.”

By 1918, all of Fremstad’s extant letters to Cather were sent from Maine, reflecting the final blow to her career when the Metropolitan Opera decided to acquiesce to the demands of growing American nationalism and no longer perform German operas. On 2 July 1917 it was announced that Fremstad’s contract with the Metropolitan would finally be renewed: she was to make her inaugural performance on 1 January 1918 as *Kundry* (Watkins 297). When the board later decided to cancel Wagnerian performances, Fremstad’s former agreement was honored but with caveat that she must sing in English. Given the opportunity to save her career, Fremstad ultimately refused because she was unwilling appease public demand by compromising the integrity of Wagner’s original texts. As Watkins recounts, “She [Fremstad] had always been opposed to using any but the original texts of the opera. Reporters had worried her on the subject for years and her answer never varied: ‘If opera is to be given successfully in English, then the composer must have worked from a book in that language’” (300). This decision was perhaps more

final than Fremstad predicted, and that autumn her operatic career concluded with one last performance in Minneapolis with the Chicago Company.

Given these setbacks it is not surprising that Fremstad's letters in 1918 began to shift away from her earlier confident optimism. Writing to Cather the day after Armistice Day, Fremstad complains,

The Mainites [sic] are doing their worstest [sic] to celebrate—which is very mild indeed. I am sitting in my room—far from the maddening [sic] crowd. This day of all days I should have liked to be in New York. Somehow these people are not made of flesh and blood—they are fish. But this is a comfortable place for resting and doing nothing and I wish you were here.

Even in the midst of celebration, Fremstad alludes to her self-removal “far from the maddening crowd” and also to the presence of Cather's absence. By making a muddled allusion to Thomas Hardy's novel, *Far from the Maddening Crowd* (1874) and asking Cather to send her a book (even though she later admitted, “What business have I to gather books!”) Fremstad tries to engage Cather as an expert on literature. Fremstad also acknowledges Cather's growing success by citing an article written about *My Ántonia* “by a man who knows the right values...And I am supremely jealous. How I wish I could write!”. I interpret Fremstad's confession of envy as much more than deferential politeness<sup>26</sup>. She and Cather were almost the same age, yet her career as an operatic performer was ending while Cather was achieving new levels of success and critical

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<sup>26</sup> Fremstad later responded to a letter Cather wrote from France saying, “I envy your Paris and your life there” (2 August [1920]).

recognition as a novelist. At the end of the letter Fremstad informs Cather that she doubts she will return to New York because “There is nothing to go for.” Fremstad’s desperation becomes even more apparent in a letter sent later that same month. Apparently replying to career advice from Cather, Fremstad wrote, “As for singing Wagner’s in London, what is the use and do you suppose that loyal English [sic] would support a stranger in their midst...But thanks for the suggestion” (21 November [1918]).

In all of her letters to Cather, Fremstad moves back and forth between recognizing and testing the boundaries between her work and Cather’s, so that, at times, these distinctions become blurred. In one such moment, Fremstad wrote to Cather, “Your *Antonia* has just been finished...I saw myself again and again out in Norseland [sic] Minnesota—out on the prairie among the miles of corn and wheat fields. We didn’t [sic] have dugouts to live in but I could boast of one better: we had a mother-father skunk, and six children under the kitchen floor—Put that in your next book!” (12 January 1919). Fremstad’s proclamation that “Your *Antonia* just been finished” conflates writing and readerly experiences. She also encounters *My Ántonia* through the lens of her own experience, thereby expanding the boundaries of the novel. Perhaps the loneliness of Mr. Shimerda, another lost artist, resonated with her because she concludes the letter by admitting, “I am here these days...It is bad for me to be alone. I have been alone all my life but now the end has come. I can do it no more” This letter is perhaps her most despondent. Fremstad and Watkins’s professional relationship had ended around 1918, with Watkins joining the women’s motor corps in WWI, and Fremstad likely spent most of 1919 in almost complete isolation.



By the summer of 1920, Fremstad wrote again from New York of renewed efforts to resurrect her career. On 2 August 1920 she informed Cather that she was going:

to learn the Wagner roles in English. I am having a very busy summer, have not been to Maine yet. I cannot live in Maine and be in touch with my needs. As you—very rightly said—one cannot live on scenery alone I am proving this. I am having a most successful summer. How successful the public, my friends—including yourself and dear Mr. Sanborn<sup>27</sup> will judge when you will see me before the footlights.

Fremstad's declaration to Cather about singing Wagner in English is strange not only because she reverses her earlier staunch opposition to such compromises, but also because the Met had not renewed her contract. Fremstad wrote to Gatti-Casazza on 11 May 1920, the day after papers announced the future production of Wagner's opera in English by the Metropolitan,<sup>28</sup> and confessed "There was a time during the War when it seemed to me almost impossible to convert Wagner into English without tremendous artistic loss. However, I am now convinced that it is the only way at present of giving Wagner to English-speaking audiences...I expect to do better work than I have ever done

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<sup>27</sup> Pitts Sanborn was the music editor for the *New York Globe*. Cather admired his work and introduced him to Fremstad in April 1915 (*Complete Letters of Willa Cather*).

<sup>28</sup> On 10 May 1920, the *Evening World* reported that, "Giulio Gatti-Casazza, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company, who is sailing for Italy tomorrow, has made a preliminary announcement of his plans for next season. Most significant is the fact that two more Wagner operas, "Lohengrin," with Florence Eastman, and "Tristan and Isolde," with Matzenauer, are to be restored to the repertory to be sung in English as "Parsifal" was last season and will be again."

before, and...I should like to do that work at the Metropolitan.<sup>29</sup>” Throughout most of her career Fremstad’s unflinching commitment to her art was focused on the conveyance of a pure ideal. Watkins speculates that the singer’s downfall could have been that “her ideals were too lofty; perhaps she worked too hard and sacrificed too many of her human needs” (7). When Fremstad wrote her letter to Gatti in 1920, she was too late in realizing that her inflexible devotion to Wagnerian ideals had come at a cost; she had not fully accounted for the role of public sentiment in her understanding of art and failed to read the implications of American nationalism during WWI<sup>30</sup>.

### **THE END OF THE CORRESPONDENCE**

After 1922, the extant letters by Fremstad to Cather cease; whether or not this apparent stoppage in correspondence indicates the termination of their friendship must be left to conjecture, however. Addressing the end of an archived letter-series is an especially difficult endeavor, as noted by David A. Gerber, “the problems are wide-ranging, from understanding who undertakes the writing of letters, and why they do so and then cease doing so, to analyzing how letters are saved” (201). Because we do not know the circumstances surrounding the cessation of Fremstad’s extant letters, I rely

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<sup>29</sup> Gatti-Cassaza’s reply is not extant, but Fremstad never again appeared at the Met.

<sup>30</sup> WWI had a lasting impact on American opera: “For several years after the war, German opera was performed on the Met stage only in English, which was presumed to make the return of the Hun less objectionable. To a far extent than the critics ever wished to admit, the popularity of the Wagner repertory had been a function of the presence of great artists equipped and trained to sing it, and the return of German opera in the German language to the Met stage in 1921 did not provoke any flood of such artistry” (Mayer 136).

upon biographical sources to speculate that pressures involving career and identity finally impacted the friendship. Watkins writes that Cather's friendship with Fremstad faltered "when Miss Cather's own work began to make demands for which she had to conserve her energies" (243-44). The friendship was also undoubtedly affected by Fremstad's announcement in 1922 that she was going spend the rest of her life traveling the world<sup>31</sup>. Watkins vaguely alludes to the years of Fremstad's life following 1922 in unsettling terms. According to Watkins, "Olive Fremstad died in April, 1951, having long outlived herself. Throughout her active career she had claimed that between performances she merely existed; that life was empty and unreal until the curtain rose again...She once confessed to me that during the long, impotent years, the idea of suicide had tempted her strongly" (313-14).

In her fiction, Cather regularly conveys her capacity for empathy through the reoccurring theme of the isolated or lost artist in which the "lost" artist struggles with death either literally or figuratively. While critics have only rarely (if ever) identified Fremstad as the inspiration for characters in Cather's oeuvre outside of *The Song of the Lark*, I see strong parallels between the end of Fremstad's career and the character Clement Sebastian of *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). Like Fremstad, Sebastian is an older singer attempting to revive his career through a series of concert tours. Unlike Fremstad, however, he drowns before his career can entirely collapse. Watkins writes that Fremstad "envied Felix Mottl—under whom she made her American debut—for him it was granted

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<sup>31</sup> According to the *Nebraska State Journal*, Fremstad sought a simpler existence, promising to "sell all my real estate, my jewels, my sables, my closets full of costumes, turn them into cash and bonds and thereby become a free woman" (6).

to die in harness. One evening in Munich, while conducting a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, halfway through Act I the baton fell from his lifeless hand. I always thought that Olive Fremstad deserved an equal indulgence of fate” (314). After witnessing the collapse of Fremstad’s career and the long “impotent years” that followed, Cather might have drowned Sebastian as an act of mercy.

During the years of correspondence Watkins thought of Cather as a “most steadfast ally” in her attempt to save Fremstad from self-isolation (243). According to Watkins, Cather “too felt that Fremstad ought to see more of her fellow men, and often took her to matinees or invited her to lovely little French meals at her apartment on Bank Street” (243). In letters, Fremstad frequently thanks Cather for her hospitality and thoughtfulness. Cather’s kindness to Fremstad is especially notable because the singer had an infamously difficult personality<sup>32</sup>. Watkins attributes Fremstad’s anti-social behavior to her devotion to opera: “Fremstad had to live for Fremstad; and she could afford to draw into her only those who accepted this and were content to revolve around her. It was egoism but it was not necessarily selfishness. Whatever happened to her affected her art and she was, before anything else in the world, the fanatical guardian of that art” (119). Even after Watkins had left to serve in WWI, Cather continued to interact with Fremstad. She told Carrie Miner Sherwood that “Since no German operas are being given this winter, she [Fremstad] had more leisure than even before, and we have done

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<sup>32</sup> “Fremstad never had a satisfactory private life or was even able to cultivate a supportive circle of friends” (Davis 176).

many pleasant things together” (#0414). Cather remained socially engaged with Fremstad throughout several difficult years, well after her supposed gathering of “literary material” for *The Song of the Lark*, and Fremstad clearly saw Cather as a source of comfort.

A number of critics rely upon the Fremstad-as-Thea discussion as part of a general argument identifying self-isolation as an integral part of Cather’s career<sup>33</sup>. Stouck observes that “Frequently during her career Willa Cather felt that loneliness was the inevitable fate of the artist and that great art could be achieved only if the artist sacrificed all other forms of personal satisfaction to that one end” (173). Porter similarly writes, “Cather often describes, with at least tacit distaste, the way [Mary] Eddy used people for her own ends, often sacrificing them after they had served her purposes. Cather herself was not immune to this same tendency” (xx; 85). Porter cites Cather’s relationship with Fremstad as an example of such behavior, quoting a letter to Sergeant in which “Cather commented on the delight she took in ‘finding a new type of human being and getting inside a new skin,’ calling it ‘the finest sport she knew’” (118). This letter has frequently been used to characterize the entirety of Cather’s interactions with Fremstad, even though Cather applied the phrase “getting inside a new skin” to a variety of situations. In an interview with the *Philadelphia Record* on 10 August 1913, Cather said “I always felt as if they [old pioneer women of Red Cloud] told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another’s person’s skin” (10). Cather also describes actor Richard

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<sup>33</sup> This argument is problematic also because of its gendered assumptions. It surmises that because Cather was a woman and a lesbian writer at the turn of the century she must have been “emotionally stranded between worlds” (Ammons 10).

Mansfield with this phrase in her 1894 review of *Beau Brummell* (Stout 62). Despite the phrase's suggestive nature, Cather did not use it to indicate exploitative intentions; instead she expresses her interest in encountering people on a deeply personal and empathetic level.

Anne Moseley writes that “In contrast to the portrait of the isolated writer that she would later cultivate, Cather was always a social creature” (“Historical” 134). The Fremstad-Cather correspondence corroborates this statement, but also demonstrates how Cather’s strategic performance of public and private personas evolved and was never solely limited to “the portrait of the isolated writer.” As Cather’s professional writing career took off and she simultaneously became a public figure, she had to develop public and private personas. Access to Cather’s private correspondence has made her own performance of multiple selves quite apparent. Cather, was, however, more flexible than Fremstad in negotiating between these performative selves and using them to her advantage. This flexibility was an important factor in her ability to generate success both commercially and achieve critical respect within the literary community.

## **PART II: CATHER’S DEVELOPMENT AS REVEALED IN HER PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND FICTION**

Cather promotes in her earliest statements concerning art and the artist an uncompromising devotion to art, similar to that practiced by Fremstad. At seventeen, she wrote in *The Hesperian*, ““Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so than even Jehovah”” (4-5). Woodress, not accounting for Cather’s performative approach to interviews and other public statements, claims Cather never deviated from this conviction

throughout the course of her career (74). Porter similarly interprets incongruencies in Cather's statements concerning art as evidence of her supposed "divided self." By reconstructing Cather's friendship with Fremstad in relation to the fiction she wrote during this time, I have found that Cather actually exercised a great deal of flexibility in managing her career as both a respected and popular novelist. Fremstad recognized Cather's adaptability and even told her, "You are—in spite of yourself as well as because of yourself –adaptable to surroundings" (2 August [1920]). Because Cather successfully performed multiple selves throughout her career, her adaptability should not be misconceived as incongruent with her desire to be considered a "high artist." In her letters to publishers, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, Cather enacts business acumen as well as a commitment to maintaining artistic ideals: she allowed *Shadows on the Rock* and *Saphira and the Slave Girl* to be distributed through the Book-of-the-Month Club while simultaneously forbidding the anthologizing of her work in high school textbooks.<sup>34</sup> After Cather witnessed the deterioration of Fremstad's career, she distanced herself from her youthful convictions, choosing *not* to emulate the singer's uncompromising and idealistic devotion to art.

## CATHER'S EARLY STATEMENTS

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<sup>34</sup>Mark J. Madigan notes that Cather resisted "becoming a 'cultural icon,'" by refusing "to allow her work to be issued in paperback, forbade its cinematic adaptation, and for several years opposed its distribution through book clubs. Nevertheless, at the urging of her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who was a Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) judge, Cather granted permission for *Shadows on the Rock* to be designated as a main selection, or "book of the month," in 1931. She would do the same for *Saphira and the Slave Girl* ten years later."

Early in her career, before she became a novelist, Cather mostly discussed art and the artist using abstract and grandiose terms. In contrast, Cather adopted a more tempered and pragmatic approach in her later statements concerning art. By the time she was writing full time, Cather was no longer the journalist but the subject in interviews and had also witnessed the repercussions of Fremstad's idealistic devotion to art. Her early statements focus, in Bernice Slote's words, on art's "difficulties...its exacting and even cruel demands, and the necessity of the artist to endure loneliness, self-abnegation, and sacrifice if he is to choose and serve the god" (69). Her early interest in the artist who makes sacrifices seemingly explains why Cather was initially drawn to Fremstad. In a laudatory 1894 article on Italian actress Eleonora Duse, Cather writes:

No one knows what manner of woman it is that this music comes from.

Apparently, she has no confidential friends, there is no man whom she loves, no woman whom she trusts. She is utterly alone upon the icy heights where other beings cannot live. She is an actress, yet not of 'the profession.' In a calling that is the least austere she leads the life of a nun. ("The Privacy" 12)

These early impressions of Duse might have informed Cather's initial meetings with Fremstad. In "Three American Singers," Cather borrows a quotation from Geraldine Ferrar, very similar to her earlier description of Duse, to introduce Fremstad as "THE singer who is now aspiring to and attaining those frozen heights of which Miss Farrar speaks." Cather learned, from her relationship with Fremstad, however, where "music comes from" and in doing so gained a less romanticized view of its required sacrifices. While Cather admits in that Duse works "too hard" and that the "soulful ones burn out



the quickest” she then goes on to conflate the sacrifice required of the artist with that of a martyr (“The Privacy” 119). In her letters about Fremstad, Cather gradually becomes less idealistic in tone and instead focuses on the singer’s more mundane presence in her life. Cather simultaneously becomes less theoretical and more concerned with praxis in her public statements about art, reversing her early warning that “It is not well to know how the beautiful things of this world are made” (“As You” 12). By acknowledging the *making* of beautiful things, Cather also changes her opinion about the role of creator and offers up a much more sobering depiction of the artist who sacrifices all to art in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. The last four stories of the collection, which were originally written for the *Troll Garden* (1905), directly deal with the death of the artist, but their tone is modified by the addition of the first four opera stories, which Cather wrote during her friendship with Fremstad. The opera stories, the first four in the *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, depict female singers who face various struggles with vitality, making the male artists, who appear in the final four stories in the volume, seem feckless in their idealistic commitment to art<sup>35</sup>.

## CATHER’S TRANSITIONAL YEARS

Cather did not immediately or completely abandon her early convictions; she gradually modified her ideas about art and the artist, as her interviews published early on in her friendship with Fremstad attest. In an interview with Margaret Harvey of the

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<sup>35</sup> Only one female artist appears in the second half of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Katharine Gaylord of “A Death in the Desert,” whom Cather depicts “dying here [in Wyoming] like a rat in a hole” instead of actively producing art (136).

*Denver Times* on 16 August 1915, Cather advises the young writer to “deal with subjects he really knows...No matter how commonplace and ordinary a subject may be, if it is one with which the author is familiar—some every day experience that has thrilled him—it makes a much better story than the purely imaginal [sic]”. By writing from subjects that she really “knew,” I think Cather privileged praxis over pure idealism, refuting the myth of the isolated artist; her use of prototypes was subsequently both relational and pragmatic. In the Harvey interview, Cather continues to promote the importance of work-ethic, but she simultaneously acknowledges empathy and engagement as skills vital for art: “Imagination in the right sense is a response to what is going on—a sensitiveness, to which outside things appeal. It is a composition of sympathy and observation.”

Later that year, in October, Cather gave an interview with Ethel M. Hockett of the *Lincoln Sunday Star*. In this interview she puts a greater emphasis on work and sacrifice than she did in the Harvey interview. Cather told Hockett, “It is up to the writer and no one else. He must spend thousands of uncounted hours at work. He must strive untiringly while others eat and sleep and play. Some people are more gifted than others, but it takes brains in the most gifted to make a success. Writing has to be gone at like any other trade” (14). This interview occurred three days after Cather saw Fremstad perform in Lincoln, Nebraska on October 21<sup>st</sup> and could have been influenced by this recent interaction. During the interview, Cather plausibly had singing on her mind as she employs the iconography of performance-based art to describe writing: “No one without a good ear can write good fiction...It is an essential to good writing to be sensitive to the beauty of language and speech, and to be able to catch the tone, phrase, length of

syllables, enunciation, etc., of persons of all types that cross a writer's path. The successful writer must also be sensitive to accomplishment in others" (14). In the article, Hockett indicates her surprise at this comment, probably because auditory skills are not typically associated with writing. Furthermore, Cather's recommendation that writers should be "sensitive to accomplishment in others" could refer to her interdisciplinary dialogue with Fremstad and the presence of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in her fiction.

Her meeting with Fremstad in Lincoln made an impression on Cather—she commented once more on the interaction in a letter to Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin, on 17 November 1915. Cather reported to Greenslet that she:

had, however, a glorious day with her [Fremstad] in Nebraska, where our trails once more crossed. She had with her a dirty mangled book which had once been "The Song of the Lark," which she said had 'not been read but eaten. I believe Fremstad likes the book better than anyone else does, because she knows just how much of it is her and how much is not...she only said with a shrug that there was nothing about her that was "too good to be used for an idea—when there was a real idea."

It is likely that Cather exaggerated Fremstad's response to *Song of the Lark*—it has been suggested that Fremstad never read the book<sup>36</sup>, and when Cather met Fremstad in Lincoln, the book had only been out a few weeks, scarcely enough time for Fremstad to

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<sup>36</sup> It was rumored that "characteristically the singer never found either leisure nor opportunity to read the novel, until her last year, when fatigue and illness made her return the book with regrets" (Schucker qtd. in Goldberg 49).

batter the book with heavy reading. Nevertheless, this letter potentially documents a literal exchange of artwork: Cather saw Fremstad perform and Fremstad read Cather's novel. Within this exchange, Fremstad and Cather both profess a belief in the existence of "real" ideas: ideas that translate across a myriad of art forms via *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Through her friendship with Fremstad, Cather better understood her own work, even adopting the lens of a performer to describe the process of writing.

### CATHER'S LATER STATEMENTS

Mark Madigan notes that Cather published *Youth and the Bright Medusa* halfway through her literary career ("Historical" 313). The collection was also the first book published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and the penultimate book published before the extant Fremstad letters cease. For Cather, the early 1920s marked another period of transition in which she, as an established novelist, sought to have even more influence in dictating the commercial and critical success of her novels. In a 3 May 1921 interview with Latrobe Carroll of *The Bookman*, Cather indicates the significant shift in her understanding of art and the artist. She departs from her early romanticized statements about the artist who sacrifices all to art and instead describes her writing more realistically as a balanced and fulfilling process:

"I work from two and a half to three hours a day...I don't hold myself to longer hours; if I did, I wouldn't gain by it. The only reason I write is because it interests me more than anything else. If I made a chore of it, my enthusiasm would die. I make it an adventure every day. I get more entertainment from it than any I could buy, except the privilege of hearing a few great musicians and singers. To listen to

them interests me as much as a good morning's work. For me, the morning is the best time to write. During the other hours of the day I attend to my housekeeping, take walks in Central Park, go to concerts, and see something of my friends. I try to keep myself fit, fresh: one has to be in good form to write as to sing. I shut my work from my mind." (23)

In her early writing, Cather metaphorically associated music with writing, in this statement, however, she identifies music as part of her creative praxis and daily professional routine; *Gesamtkunstwerk* continued to inform her understanding of art but it functioned much more pragmatically.

### **CATHER'S NEGOTIATION OF HIGH AND LOW ART**

The pervasive influence of Wagner on American culture at the beginning of the twentieth century provides significant insights into Cather's development during the first part of her career and her transition into the second part. Cather's interest in Wagner helped to initiate her connection with Fremstad and this interest evolved along with the friendship. John H. Flannigan notes that in the early part of Cather's literary career especially, Wagner provided a unifying point of reference in both her fiction and public statements:

Her enthusiasm for high and not-so-high art—for both Wagner and opéra comique—helps to explain and to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the youthful seriousness of her 1896 manifesto—"In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God"—and the mature wistfulness of "Art is too terribly human to be

very ‘great.’” The cultural chasm between these two artistic credos seemed to shrink rather than grow during Cather’s life, if indeed there was ever a chasm at all.

As Cather developed professionally into a novelist, her ideology also changed—bridging the “cultural chasm” identified by Flannigan. By the time she switched publishers, the supposed tension between critical and commercial success no longer presented an obstacle (indeed if it ever did). At the turn of the twentieth century, opera became increasingly associated with “serious” entertainment in America, reflecting a greater cultural trend towards the codification of high and low-brow art (Flannigan). In contrast, American Wagnerism “was a strikingly democratic culture” (Murphy 406). While Cather alternately embraced both high and “not-so-high” art, as Flannigan has noted, she negotiated more effectively between these two forms as her interpretation of Wagner evolved. While debating the name for the novel that would eventually be called *One of Ours* (1922), Cather wrote Knopf that “1. For low-brows ‘Claude’ is as good a name as any. 2. The high-brows ought to give me the benefit of the doubt” (#2514). Despite the modicum of sarcasm in her tone, Cather clearly intended for her novel to appeal to a broad range of readers despite the stratification of audience. Murphy argues that Cather’s revisions to “A Wagner Matinée” in preparation for its 1920 publication as part of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* reflect a maturation of her understanding of both Wagner and America (405). In his analysis of the story, Murphy finds that “The more one descends into the story, the more of Wagner one finds, and the more the divide between Wagner and the frontier seems to break down” (407). In one of her final letters, Fremstad similarly locates Cather within a mediatory space by describing her friend as a “fresh

breeze of Nebraska air” blowing through a “blue-stockings atmosphere.” Arguably Fremstad’s intimate understanding of Wagner, especially American Wagnerism, allowed her to recognize a democratic idealism in Cather.

While Fremstad appears cognizant of the democratizing effect of American Wagnerism, she still struggled to accommodate the shifting demands of the nation’s opera-attending populace. With her initial refusal to sing Wagner in English, Fremstad seriously miscalculated the influence of anti-German sentiment in the American public and the growing social stratification of opera as public entertainment. Flannigan notes, “Opera, like performances of Shakespeare and symphonic music, was indeed becoming a ‘luxury’ and unaffordable for less wealthy audience members<sup>37</sup>.” Fremstad’s decision to ignore popular demand embodied an unpleasant aspect of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which privileged “an artistic environment or performance in which spectators are expertly maneuvered into dumbfounded passivity by a sinister and powerful creative force<sup>38</sup>” (Koss xii). While Cather, as I have already noted, incorporated *Gesamtkunstwerk* into her artistic ideology, particularly its emphasis on art as interdisciplinary, she did not perceive or desire a passive readership. In her interview with Harvey, Cather states that the “publishing business is like any other business. The publisher buys what the public likes.” Cather did not separate her process of creating art from the business of publishing, as her extensive and detailed correspondence with Alfred and Blanche Knopf reveals; she

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<sup>37</sup> Even after her career ended, Fremstad was part of the class that could afford such luxuries—in [1922] she invited Cather to “to a matinee – thinking of Hamlet, the Merchant of Venice or the Russian players.”

<sup>38</sup> Critics of Wagner frequently note the especially sinister appropriation of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Nazi Germany.

always appreciated the care the firm took in managing the appearance of the books it published. In her essay, “A Portrait of the Publisher as a Young Man,” written for *Alfred Knopf: A Quarter Century* (1940), Cather recalls being impressed that Alfred Knopf “had gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to find exactly the right shade of blue among the Chinese blues because he planned to use the paper to bind a volume of Chinese poems translated by Arthur Whaley” (Woodress 317). While Woodress claims Cather fabricated this episode, it still indicates how seriously she considered the materiality of her art, especially the impact of visual appeal in attracting an audience.

### ***YOUTH AND THE BRIGHT MEDUSA***

In her fictional depictions of the artist, Cather typically uses the female artist as a vehicle through which she communicates the material aspects of seemingly immaterial forms. Even in her early writings, Cather used the female performer to confront “the nature and potential rewards of the woman artist” and to ponder “the issues that impinged on her aspirations as a writer, another kind of performer before the public” (Stout 63). While this is certainly true of *The Song of the Lark*, I focus on the opera stories of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. These stories have not received the same critical attention as *The Song of the Lark*, but similarly reveal Fremstad’s influence through their depiction of the lived experience of female performing artists. Porter claims the opera stories lack *The Song of the Lark*’s focus on “transcendent artistry” and instead feature women who embody a “spirited resourcefulness” but do not aspire to “loftier goals” (144). Porter considers these women less ambitious artists because they openly display a concern for



the commercial aspect of their profession. Ironically, Porter's critique of Cather's opera divas replicates the flawed masculine perception of female art, which Cather impugns by presenting the men in these stories as unreliable and at times ridiculous. Murphy notes a similar issue with the male narrator of "A Wagner Matinée" and argues that "Once Clark is recognized as a less than reliable narrator, the focus of the story shifts from Georgiana's aesthetic immolation to the possible significance of the Wagner matinée for her ongoing life on the Nebraska prairie" (418). The men of the opera stories offer a limited perspective of art and oftentimes fail (sometimes comically so) to recognize female artists as uniquely capable of embracing both the idealistic and commercial concerns of art via a performative use of multiple selves.

Early in her career, Cather struggled to conceive of the female artist outside of the heteronormative sphere of masculine artistry. Slote notes that in her early writing Cather "is concerned first of all with the woman as artist. Can a woman be a great writer? Or is she bound by some limitations of sex and temperament to a narrower kind of achievement?" (70). In these early commentaries about the female artist, Cather appears especially wary of the compromises a personal or commercial life might have in hindering the feminine production of art. Fremstad challenged Cather's early convictions by effectively balancing the integrity of her art with commercial success. As evident in her letters, Fremstad reflexively performed multiple personas to manage both her practical and creative concerns. Cather also learned from Fremstad's mistake in elevating art so that her devotion to it competed with her professional career. During and after her

friendship with Fremstad, Cather no longer emphasized the necessity of absolute sacrifice for artistic integrity in both her personal and fictional statements concerning art.

The publication history of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* demonstrates how Cather intentionally mediated between the concerns of high and low art in her fiction. Cather first published all the opera stories in magazines before collecting them in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Magazine publication not only allowed Cather to get paid twice for the stories but also gave her “access to a national audience and an opportunity to build a literary reputation” (Madigan “Historical” 314). Cather first proposed her idea for “a volume of short stories about musicians and singers” to Greenslet on 6 September [1918] (#0430). After Houghton-Mifflin showed no interest, she successfully pursued the idea with Knopf. Cather’s instincts proved correct and the collection enjoyed both critical and popular success.<sup>39</sup> Madigan notes that beginning a relationship with Knopf also “brought her [the] financial security and the freedom to write what pleased her” (“Historical” 313).

Cather chose not to order the stories in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* by their original dates of composition or publication: instead, the four opera stories precede those previously collected in *The Troll Garden*<sup>40</sup>. The first story of *Youth*, ‘Coming Aphrodite!’, is the most similar to *The Song of the Lark* because it documents the beginning of a singer’s career, but it differs significantly from the novel in that it places

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<sup>39</sup> *Youth and the Bright Medusa* was also a financial success; the collection “earned her more money in its first six months than *My Ántonia* did in its first year” (Woodress 310).

<sup>40</sup> Cather published “The Diamond Mine” in October of 1916, “The Gold Slipper” in January of 1917, “Scandal” in August of 1919, and “Coming Eden Bower!” in August of 1920.

more emphasis on the personal and physical toll exacted by artistic greatness. The following stories (“The Diamond Mine,” “A Gold Slipper,” and “Scandal”) account for the difficulty of sustaining a “big career.” Eden Bower, Cressida Garnet, and Kitty Ayrshire all exude a subtle sense of fatigue from contending with the greedy expectations of the press, the public, and even friends and family that they will perform the diva at all times and within all spaces. Cather also uses these hinderances to emphasize the resilient vitality of each singer. Even Cressida Garnet, the most beleaguered of the singers, goes about “the most trifling things that pertained to her profession” with an “undiminished zeal” (36). Even while documenting the physical and emotional cost endured by individual artists, Cather never depicts the art they produce as compromised by commercial interests. Coincidentally, Fremstad’s career ended not because of her pursuit commercial success, but rather because of her uncompromising commitment to “pure” art.

In the opera stories, Cather locates a feminine vitality necessary for the production of art within the space of tension between commercial and artistic interests. Only the male characters are unable to surpass what Porter describes as “[t]he ‘gulf between artists’ public and private lives; the financial pressures that are never far from an artist’s mind” (146). The collection’s title, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, speaks precisely to how art produced by women contends with the male gaze and masculine perceptions of the female artist. By the very nature of the opera diva’s profession, she is highly visible and must contend with the male gaze in a way that artists producing in other forms do not. A medusa, however, has the ability to reverse and ultimately destroy the male gaze—

her gaze turns the male viewer into stone. By featuring the medusa in her collection's title, Cather privileges the feminine production of art. Almost all of the men featured in the opera stories of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* are anxious when they interact with the divas. While Porter observes that Cather's "depiction of Hedger has a satiric undertow from the start," his criticism of the opera stories ultimately reproduces Cather's critical depiction of masculine discomfort with feminine art (154). Porter describes the first part of the collection as:

A series of stories about women consumed by mercenary concerns, three of them singers—and self-promoters—who achieve considerable success but have little of Thea Kronborg's transcendent artistic ambition... Cather explains that the book's title, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, evokes 'youth's adventure with the many-colored Medusa of art,' a theme that mirrors her own ongoing struggle with the opposing pulls of the artist's life. (xxii)

Porter quotes Cather from *Youth and the Bright Medusa*'s original jacket cover, but he fails to acknowledge the contextual significance of a jacket as a largely commercial space. Statements made by Cather on promotional materials are especially performative, and although Porter has found evidence that she did author marketing copy, there is no evidence that Cather wrote this particular jacket copy. In a 12 January 1921 letter to Greenslet, Cather explains that she chose Knopf to publish *One of Ours* because "The publicity work he has done on this volume of short stories [*Youth and the Bright Medusa*] has helped me along very much indeed. The influence of the 'strong talk' on the jacket was perceptible in nearly all the reviews, and in his advertisements he did not hesitate to express an

enthusiasm about my books which he says he quite genuinely feels” (#0528). Much like the divas she portrays in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Cather approached her work with a self-reflexive understanding of commercialism and artistic integrity as mutually constitutive—she recognized that even spaces supposedly separate from commercialism were not immune from the influence of “strong talk” on a book-jacket.

### **THE OPERA STORIES**

While Cather wrote the opera stories over a four-year period, the stories feature consistent themes involving the female artist and art. I examine each story in the chronological order that Cather wrote them (not in their later order in the book) to establish how certain events in Cather’s life, especially those involving Fremstad, might have influenced her writing. The linking-themes I identify offer a more complete view of the diva’s production of art: her resistance to a masculine (mis)interpretation of feminine art, her use of performance to create room for independent creativity, her deliberate attempts to seek out social connections in resistance to personal/artistic isolation, and the latent threat of vocational loss as influencing her artistic/commercial decisions.

### **“SCANDAL”**

Cather composed “Scandal” mid-June of 1916 while staying in Denver, Colorado, but the piece was not published until August 1919 in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (Woodress 282). In this story, Cather reckons with the unavoidable (and at times costly) requirements of the diva’s becoming a publicly recognizable figure, concluding that the artist must practice vigilance to avoid potentially compromising public appearances.

Michael Schueth identifies the formation of “modern American celebrity culture” during this period and sees Cather managing “her career in the increasingly celebrity-driven literary marketplace.” The heroine of the story, Kitty Ayrshire, decides early in her career to “look out for [herself],” which involves a hyper-awareness of audience, the skillful management of multiple performative selves, and the cultivation of relationships outside of her career (94). Ayrshire resembles Fremstad in that illness threatens her career, costing her “week after week” of cancelations, leading to “the name of one of her rivals” being substituted for hers (81). After being “cloistered like a Trappist for six weeks, with nothing from the outside world but notes and flowers and disquieting morning papers,” Ayrshire wisely seeks out companionship to remedy her professional dilemma (83). Her companion for the evening, Pierce Tevis, is more perceptive than the other men depicted in the opera stories and recognizes Ayrshire’s ability to make “myths” as her “singular good luck” (85). While Tevis acknowledges the importance of performance to Ayrshire in managing her career, he falls short in attributing it to “luck.” Ayrshire corrects Tevis by reframing her “myth-making” as costly work: “I am getting almost as tired of the person I am supposed to be as of the person I really am. I wish you would invent a new Kitty Ayrshire for me, Pierce. Can’t I do something revolutionary? Marry for instance?” (85). Ayrshire also criticizes Tevis for his masculine perception of the female artist by playfully insinuating that he can only imagine marriage as a mode by which a woman can create a new self. Later in their conversation, she offers an even more pointed indictment of the masculine perspective telling Tevis, “I could count on four fingers...the men I’ve known who had the least perception of what any woman really looked like...Even painters...never get more than one type through their thick heads; they still try to make all women look like some

wife or mistress. You are all the same; you never see our real face” (88). Like the Medusa, Ayrshire subverts the male-gaze and reduces all men to a sameness, positing that the real “face” of a female artist will always remain elusive<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, her mention of painters in this statement provides readers an insight into the behavior of Don Hedger in “Coming Aphrodite!”.

### **“THE GOLD SLIPPER”**

Cather wrote “The Gold Slipper” sometime during the fall of 1916, soon after she wrote “Scandal.” She features Ayrshire once more, and the singer rebukes masculine (mis)perception of female artists even more directly. Marshall McKann, the target of Ayrshire’s critique, differs from the other men of the collection in that he disavows “high-brow” artistry. Despite professing a lack of interest in art, McKann offers a critique of Ayrshire that resonates with those expressed by the more cultured men of the opera stories. He associates “pure art” with poverty and because of Ayrshire’s flamboyant clothing, he wrongly assumes she participates in the “pampered,” “self-indulgent,” and “appetent” behaviors of the stereotypical diva (75). Ayrshire refuses to fit “into his clever generalization,” however, and informs McKann, ““My mind tells me that dullness, and a mediocre order of ability, and poverty, are not in themselves admirable things”” (78). McKann also misses the significance of Ayrshire’s involvement in a whirlwind concert tour. For opera singers, as in the case of Fremstad, touring sometimes indicated that a

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<sup>41</sup> Cather is not the first artist to associate the medusa with feminine art. Harriet Hosmer, a nineteenth-century sculptor, often used the medusa as a “key image” in her “iconography, serving as a subversive emblem of female endurance” (Dabakis 134)

more comfortable and lucrative contract with an opera house was either in jeopardy or had ended (Ayrshire's inflamed vocal cords of "Scandal," might have resulted in the consequences she feared).<sup>42</sup> McKann, however, views her desire to make money as crass.

Along with the financial pressure the concert tour potentially signifies<sup>43</sup>, Ayrshire also faces the obstacles of an awkward venue and a "frigid" audience. She adapts, however, and Cather shows her skillful artistry in guiding a hesitant audience "all the way" into an emotional crescendo, reminiscent of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. (70). As Koss explains,

Just as *Gesamtkunstwerk* would unite a variety of art forms and blur artistic categories, so, too, would individual spectators be brought together to encounter this achievement, becoming a unified audience through their shared aesthetic experience. For Wagner—following a long line of German thinkers—the presence and the experience of an audience helped create the work of art. (xv)

We cannot take McKann's later critique of the performance seriously because he refuses to participate with the rest of the audience and subsequently denies himself access to Ayrshire's art.

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<sup>42</sup> Fremstad toured the year of 1916 after losing her position at the Met. Similarly, Cressida Garnet in "The Diamond Mine" has "been on the road for several weeks; singing in Minneapolis, Cleveland, St. Paul, then up to Canada and back to Boston" as part of a final tour (60).

<sup>43</sup> Ayrshire appears perfectly aware of and comfortable with the distinction between performing for a "popular" audience during a concert tour and for a more genteel audience at the Met: "She liked to be thought a brilliant artist by other artists, but by the world at large she liked to be thought a daring creature" (68).



## “THE DIAMOND MINE”

Ever since its publication in *McClure's Magazine* in October 1916<sup>44</sup>, “The Diamond Mine” has been associated with opera diva Lilian Nordica<sup>45</sup>, who is widely recognized as the prototype for Cressida Garnet. Not only did Cather refer to “The Diamond Mine” as the “Nordica story” in correspondence,<sup>46</sup> but as Madigan explains, like Garnet, Nordica “had been extraordinarily successful, married three times<sup>47</sup>, and her will had been contested in acrimonious court proceedings” (“Historical” 334-335). While Nordica undeniably influenced this story, “The Diamond Mine” also corresponds closely with events occurring in Fremstad’s life. On 4 November 1916 at Nawadyn, Fremstad married, Harry Lewis Brainard, her second husband and a comparatively mediocre composer, pianist, and vocal coach. Afterwards the couple moved into an apartment on 158 Madison Avenue, presumably the same one that Cather helped her to search for. While writing the “Diamond Mine” Cather was presumably aware and apprehensive of Fremstad’s impending nuptials. The marriage did not last long and supposedly ended when Brainard made it clear he resented playing accompaniment when Fremstad

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<sup>44</sup> The publication of “The Diamond Mine” was initially held up “by fears of a libel suit” because of Cather’s use of Nordica as a prototype (Stout 130).

<sup>45</sup> Nordica was also Fremstad’s voice teacher until the two became estranged supposedly because of extramarital attentions paid to Fremstad by Nordica’s then-husband.

<sup>46</sup> Cather uses this term in a letter written to Ferris Greenslet on 6 September 1918 (#0430).

<sup>47</sup> Garnet is actually about to be married a fourth time.

performed at dinner parties.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps inspired by this incident, in “The Diamond Mine” (as well as “Coming, Aphrodite!”) Cather depicts the potential problems faced by great female artists who align themselves with less-successful male artists. Furthermore, “Cather seems to have believed, women’s opportunities...were limited by male control of the profession” (Stout 82). In both these stories, however, the women artists succeed while the men flounder. Reflecting upon Blasius’s perception of Garnet’s artistic ability, the narrator of “The Gold Mine” realizes,

He [probably] did not think seriously at all. A great voice, a handsome woman, a great prestige, all added together made a “great artist,” the common synonym for success. Her success, and the material evidences of it, quite blinded him... He had his own idea of what a great prima donna should be like, and he took it for granted that Mme. Garnet corresponded to his conception. (57, 58)

Blasius fails to achieve commercial or critical success as an artist because, “During the time when most of use acquire practical sense, get a half-unconscious knowledge of hard facts and market values, he had been shut away from the world, fed like pigeons in the bell-tower of his monastery” (54-55). Before Blasius meets Cressida, isolation and poverty (the stereotypical ingredients for success in art) almost kill him; after he meets her, he then lacks the savvy to negotiate between performative selves and falls into domestic complacency. Garnet succeeds in producing art despite facing immense personal difficulties because she uses performance to hide a “softness under so much hardness, the

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<sup>48</sup> According to Cushing, “It was whispered that Mr. Brainard did not fancy himself in the role of Madame Fremstad’s accompanist and had publicly resented the suggestion” (291).

warm credulity under a life so dated and scheduled and ‘reported’ and generally exposed” (40). Cather depicts Garnet at the “flood-tide of her powers,” but a flood will inevitably recede and leave wreckage behind. Garnet does drown before her powers recede, much like Clement Sebastian does in Cather’s later novel *Lucy Gayheart*.

### “COMING, APHRODITE!”

Cather first published “Coming, Aphrodite!” in August 1920 as “Coming, Eden Bower!” in the *Smart Set* (the magazine asked her to change the title). Of the stories included in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, “Coming, Aphrodite!” received the most positive critical attention, and rightfully so. Cather revisits the same themes of the other opera stories, but with a matured vision of her artistic ideals. Cather also exercises even greater self-reflexivity in “Coming, Aphrodite!” by asking whether or not artists should be burdened by ideals at all. Cather wrote this story on the verge of another transition and faced the legacy of her past ideals and writings. The male artist of this story, Don Hedger, so obsessively commits to the ideal of not having any old ideas that he restricts his chances for success. Hedger is, as the narrator explains, “singularly unencumbered; had no family duties, no social ties, no obligations toward any one but his landlord...he never in his life had more than three hundred dollars ahead at any one time, and he had already outlived a succession of convictions and revelations about his art” (5). Eden Bower similarly seeks artistic freedom but uses a different method to achieve it: she travels, changes her name, and has formative experiences. Robert Thacker identifies Cather with her “character Eden Bower...who ‘knew she was to be Eden Bower,’ [because] Cather

worked doggedly during her early career to become Willa Cather...[and] carefully shaped the persona she became.”

In this story, Cather positions “commercialism” and “pure” art as symbiotic, not diametrically opposed to one another. Unlike Hedger, Bower recognizes the potential artistic freedoms offered by commercial success—not allowing “old artistic ideals” to hinder her career. Bower confronts Hedger over his impractical idealism asking, ““What's the use of being a great painter if nobody knows about you?...Why don't you paint the kind of pictures people can understand, and then, after you're successful, do whatever you like?” (29). Porter interprets Bower’s pragmatism as evidence that her success is “not in her artistry but her brilliance in imagining and promoting her career, in getting her name onto the Madison Square marquee lights” (158). Porter’s only evidence that Bower only produces commercial art comes from Hedger’s snobbish dismissal of her work. Hedger never even considers Bower as an artist because he has “no desire to know the woman who had, for the time at least, so broken up his life...She was the immortal conception, the perennial theme” (12). Hedger’s artistic vision is limited to objectification and he can only perceive Bower as a potential muse for his own work.

Furthermore, Hedger does not anticipate the potential for an interdisciplinary dialogue about art. When Bower attempts to engage him in this dialogue he throws a tantrum and later reflects that he was “unreasonable” “in expecting a Huntington girl to know anything about pictures” (31). Hedger’s dismissal of Bower because of her humble Midwest beginning conflicts with Cather’s paradigm for art as revealed in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Murphy notes that despite Wagner’s associations with “high” culture,

Cather approached Wagnerism with a democratic concern for “national unity and cultural improvement fostered by access to his musical dramas...Cather supplied an introduction championing the book [*The Wagnerian Romances*] as a gateway to Wagner for Americans remote from the opera house...In other words, the Western hinterlands, however barren and remote, have a right to culture” (420). In accord with her own artistic journey, Cather did not disparage humble origins or the consumption of art outside of urban cultural centers. She did, however, recognize the need for the artist interested in commercial and critical success to seek out these cultural centers. At the end of the story, Bower visits New York and M. Jules, a French art dealer to inquire about Hedger’s career. Jules reveals, ““There are many kinds of success...He is a great name with all the young men, and he is decidedly an influence in art. But one can't definitely place a man who is original, erratic, and who is changing all the time”” (35). Unlike Bower, Hedger’s work only appeals to a niche and notably masculine crowd. Generally, critics have applied Jules’s admonition that “There are many kinds of success” exclusively to Hedger, however, Cather extends this consideration to Bower as well, allowing readers to define success in art more broadly and outside of a dualistic configuration.

In “Coming, Aphrodite!” Cather presents a unified vision of the artist’s performative relationship with commercial concerns and “pure” art. Her experience developing into a professional writer, anticipation of a new career shift, and the last years of her relationship with Fremstad deeply inform this story. Cather concludes “Coming, Aphrodite!” by alluding to the eventual end of Bower’s career: “Tomorrow night the wind would blow again, and this mask would be the golden face of Aphrodite. But a ‘big’ career

takes its toll, even with the best of luck” (35). Richard C. Harris notes that “Cather at this point in her life, circa 1920, was clearly pondering the causes, consequences, and meaning of fame and fortune; in finally coming to know the pleasures of success (though real financial success would only come in the next couple of years), she no doubt had developed a heightened awareness of the dangers of success to the serious artist.” I disagree with Harris that Cather saw success as dangerous to “the serious artist”; instead she seems much more concerned with the cost of actually producing art. For Cather, after witnessing the end of Fremstad’s career, the potential “loss of vocation” for an artist remains irresolvable. This theme haunts most of her work, even that not specifically focused on the artist.

## CONCLUSION

In late 1913, near the beginning of their friendship, Cather saw Fremstad sing *Isolde* on Christmas Eve at the Metropolitan. Fremstad’s performance “was a lift” during a difficult holiday, giving her “the feeling I used to have on Christmas Eve when I was little...That is a great opera, and it was one of Fremstad’s great nights” (#1896). From this letter, one gets a sense of the genuine pleasure Cather felt at witnessing a skilled artist perform at the height of her power. Cather had sent a dwarf orange tree to Fremstad’s apartment “after she had left for the opera” to await the diva’s return, because she “thought that would amuse her [Fremstad] if it got to her while her *Isolde* mood was on her. Dwarf orange trees are somehow like that poem; they are a little bit magical, and all those queens and princesses of northern, stormy countriesz [sic] must have always had them, under glass” (#1896). Cather understood Fremstad’s dedication to her art and she willingly participated in the world the singer created for herself. Her whimsical gift of a

dwarf orange tree allowed Fremstad to remain in the role a northern queen, even after the stage-lights dimmed and the applause died away.

The contextual evidence provided by Cather's correspondence necessitates a reevaluation of her career and art, guided by the understanding that she actively cultivated relationships as a vital part of her artistic processes. Cather's sustained relationships, especially those with other artists, like Fremstad, deeply informed her multifaceted understanding of art as something that transcends boundaries. She did not separate the act of writing from the act of performing, nor did she create her work in isolation from her personal life or commercial pursuits. Instead, Cather performed multiple selves, allowing her to fluidly make the transitions necessary for the advancement of her career and to pursue a wide-range of subjects in her fiction. After *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Cather did not explicitly address the subject of the artist and art again until *Lucy Gayheart*. Writing the opera stories throughout her relationship with Fremstad, allowed Cather to develop an ideology engaged with feminine vitality as a means for producing art, despite artificial tensions produced by masculine insecurities surrounding the female artist.

As her letters attest, Fremstad modeled for Cather a self-reflexive performance of multiple selves as a way of crafting and then preserving a realm of expertise. Considering these letters within the genre of epistolary practices further emphasizes the slipperiness of both context and identity in relation to one another. The opera singers of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* employ performative selves with a similar reflexivity, oftentimes subverting the conventional expectations of the "diva." Throughout her career, Cather

similarly alternated between performing and subverting the iconography of the ideal artist, while balancing the demands of praxis and commercial viability. By tempering her original convictions surrounding the sacrificial artist, Cather ultimately achieved a high degree of artistic freedom that became especially evident after the conclusion of her friendship with Fremstad and the beginning of the second-half of her career.



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