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Material Memory: Willa Cather, “My First Novels [There Were Two]”, and
The Colophon: A Book Collector’s Quarterly

Introduction

Willa Cather’s 1931 essay “My First Novels [There Were Two]” occupies a distinct position in Cather scholarship. Along with essays like “The Novel D meubl ” and “On *The Professor’s House*” it is routinely invoked to establish a handful of central details about the writer and her emerging career. It is enlisted most often to support the degree to which Cather distanced herself from her first novel *Alexander’s Bridge* and established her second novel *O Pioneers!* As a sort of second first novel, the novel in which she first found her voice by writing about the Nebraska prairie and its people. Put simply, “My First Novels” is a significant narrative by which Cather defines herself as an author. What is mentioned only in passing if mentioned at all is where Cather published this essay or rather, for what occasion she wrote it. The periodical that first carried “My First Novels” is *The Colophon: A Book Collector’s Quarterly*. To my knowledge, it is unlike any other in history. I was able to compile forty mentions of “My First Novels” using a range of academic databases and could find only one that goes beyond pointing to *The Colophon* as the essay’s source: the historical essay for the scholarly edition of *Obscure Destinies*.¹

This tendency strikes me as a mistake. In order to understand what “My First Novels” is trying to say, we must first acknowledge the myriad ways it makes its meaning—as a collection of words and phrases, as tactile object made of paper and ink, and as a voice among many on the pages of *The Colophon*. I will argue that reading “My First Novels” as a complex piece of print culture reveals an under-appreciated set of connections among fine presses, book collecting, and

¹ For a complete list of these references, see Appendix A

the history of how authors transgress the proverbial desert of anonymity to reach the equally proverbial oasis of renown.

Scholarly Intervention

In laying out my argument, I want to bridge scholarship on Cather with an existing body of criticism on fine press and bibliophilia in the 1920s and 30s and to that scholarly conversation by looking more closely at *The Colophon* than others have done. I also want to frame the related topic of literary discovery or debut as a rhetorically constructed set of norms that fit broadly into the field of authorship studies, especially its subcategory of authorial identity and celebrity (but I'll say more on that later). The two most important scholars of fine press and modernism (or modernity) are Jerome J. McGann and Megan Benton. McGann's *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* argues that modernist writers used book design to articulate "commitment to a fully materialized understanding of language."ⁱ With the phrase "visible language," McGann refers to the bibliographical codes of modernist books, which is to say the levels of meaning conveyed not linguistically but physically by a material object. In my case, the word *book* extends to other kinds of print matter, especially periodicals. Examples of bibliographical codes include format, textual leading and spacing, margin size, typography, and paper type. Publishers, designers, and authors of the interwar period were deeply invested in a book's physical properties and bibliographical codes as integral to a book's utilitarian and/or artistic function.

Benton provides a bibliographical and historical study of the "craze" of finely made books for two decades after World War I. She charts the rise of "a seemingly insatiable market for fine books, whose desirability lay less in their content than in the beauty, extravagance, status, or scarcity of the edition."ⁱⁱ By her definition, a fine press can be commercial or private

but is defined by its dedication to high quality and artistic taste. The desirability of these books “lay less in their content than in the beauty, extravagance, status, or scarcity of the edition.”ⁱⁱⁱ Their most common attributes included fine paper, distinct typography, a small print run, extravagantly large sizes, wide margins, and heightened leading (**Image 1**).^{iv} Such books were sometimes released as limited or numbered editions, and their prices were generally higher than trade editions. Examples of fine press editions or issues, when compared with their trade counterparts, highlight the distinctiveness of these features.

Benton, McGann, and other scholars of modern publishing have noted the allegiance between fine press and book collecting but have not fully explored *The Colophon* or the many lines of interconnection it facilitated. The range of connections I want to cover here today begins with a simple detail about *The Colophon* that remains absent from most scholarship on Cather, that the “book collector’s quarterly” was the brainchild of one Elmer Adler, who—along with William A. Dwiggins, Frederic Goudy, Bruce Rogers, and Daniel Berkeley Updike—was one of the most distinguished fine press book designer and printer of the twentieth century. Paul Shaw’s work on Knopf book designer William A. Dwiggins, Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism*, and Catherine Turner’s book *Marketing Modernism between Two World Wars* leave the Adler and *The Colophon* untouched. Cather scholars such as Kari Ronning and Charles Mignon, likewise, have discussed the importance of high-quality print aesthetics and fine press editions to Cather’s literary career, and much of this work has appeared in the UNL Press’s Willa Cather scholarly editions series. Yet Cather scholarship has not yet explicated Cather’s ties to the fine press movement, nor to *The Colophon*.

Cather and *The Colophon*

Exposing a history of Adler, Dwiggins, Knopf, and *The Colophon* adds to an argument about Cather's aesthetic of fine printing. Elmer Adler established Pynson Printers in 1922. The printers' first book design project was the 1923 Knopf limited edition of Cather's *April Twilights*.^v In conjunction with Knopf and H.L. Mencken, Adler in 1924 did the design of *The American Mercury*. He designed Knopf's *The Borzoi*, 1925. In 1925, William A. Dwiggins, a friend and associate of Adler's who had worked for Plimpton Press, did his first book design for Knopf—which was Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*. In 1928, Dwiggins became Knopf's principal book designer. Next, Cather collaborated with Adler on the 1929 illustrated edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In February of 1930, the first part of Adler's *The Colophon* appeared with Adler, Burton Emmett, and John T. Winterich as co-editors; Dwiggins, Goudy, and Rogers were on the advisory board. Adler planned a series on authors' first published works and solicited a piece from Cather. She accommodated him with "My First Novels," which appeared in Part 6 of *The Colophon* in 1931. Adler and Cather subsequently collaborated on the limited edition excerpt from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* called *December Night*, which was sold for the Christmas season of 1933. Adler also designed the stationery Knopf used in the 1930s, and the University of Nebraska Lincoln holds a letter in which Knopf thanks Cather for complimenting it (**Image 2**).^{vi}

This summary of connections shared by Adler, Cather, Dwiggins, and Knopf is not comprehensive, but it does show the range of collaborative labor in which they were engaged.² Further study of many of these subjects would certainly be warranted. I would like to take a step toward that goal here today with a closer look at its origins and objectives *The Colophon*. John T. Winterich's essay "In the Original Twenty Parts," which introduces the index to *The Colophon*,

² For a partial list of Adler's numerous book design projects, see Appendix B.

offers a narrative of the periodical's origins. In 1929, a publishing veteran named Vrest Orton who had worked for Mencken's *American Mercury* and Knopf, and later the *Saturday Review of Literature* and *Life* magazine, pitched the idea of "a periodical devoted to book collectors" to Bennet Cerf at Random House.^{vii} Cerf recommended Orton meet with Adler, and together with Adler colleague Burton Emmett, they devised the concept for *The Colophon*. In their prospectus, they defined their reader as someone who "already collects books and knows why."^{viii} With content for collectors, they wanted the material form of the periodical to represent an "experiment and achievement in book design from important American and foreign presses."^{ix} Each essay was treated as "a separate signature of four, eight, twelve, or sixteen pages"; various contributors printed their signatures "independently of each other."^x They were restricted only by "a uniform page size" and the mandatory omission of "page folios [numbering] and book running-reads"; Adler's "Pynson Printers executed front matter signatures for all the parts, all different."^{xi} An annual subscription was ten dollars. They anticipated a subscriber base of no more than 2,000 and oversold the first part by 600.

Regarding content, *The Colophon* planned a running series written by book collectors describing their "adventures."^{xii} They planned pieces on print technology and bibliographical tendencies. Early articles such as "Colophons" by Ruth S. Granniss and "The Book Plates of Bruce Rogers" exemplify this type of editorial material (**Image 3**). Granniss's piece also inaugurated the periodical by explaining its title. A *colophon* in common parlance had come to mean "a mark or device of a printer or a publishing firm, placed anywhere at random in a book."^{xiii} On the contrary, it was a specific bibliographical designation for a printer's "inscription or device, sometimes pictorial or emblematic, placed at the end of a book or manuscript."^{xiv} (The bibliographic description, pictorial element of a colophon is referred to as a printer's mark.)

(Image 4) Additionally, as Beilenson notes, “an original print by a contemporary etcher, engraver, or lithographer, and independent of any text, was included as an integral leaf of each part.”^{xv} As for the series of which Cather was a part, Winterich credits Burton Emmett with the “grand scheme for a series of papers by eminent living authors on their experiences getting into print.”^{xvi} Adler also edited a collection of twenty selections from this series called *Breaking into Print*. It was published in 1937 and did not include Cather’s contribution **(Image 5)**.

I have not yet been able to locate documentation about Cather’s invitation to submit for the series or why she wasn’t included in the book-length collection. An undated letter from Cather to Adler that accompanies the submission of “My First Novels,” however, hints at some of her motives: “Dear Mr. Adler, I am hoping that this fulfillment of a promise, *and* the proofs of my new book, will move you to do great things for me. Faithfully yours, Willa Cather.”^{xvii} This letter suggests Cather was submitting the essay in order to live up to a commitment, and in direct connection with her hope for future collaborations with Adler. In late 1930 when submitted her piece for *The Colophon*, Cather was working on the proofs of *Shadows on the Rock*, which was published with an accompanying deluxe issue (but not one designed by Adler). Cather and Adler did collaborate on the Christmas gift book *December Night* a year later **(Image 6)**.

The importance of “My First Novels” to Cather’s individual career is well established. In the essay she disparaged her first novel *Alexander’s Bridge* as a Jamesian imitation and elevated her second book *O Pioneers!* As her “real” first novel. Yet the appearance of “My First Novels” in *The Colophon* had several important implications in itself, the first of which was in further linking Cather with the world of bibliophilia and book collecting. As Benton points out, “The scramble to produce fine editions of new work by important contemporary authors was fueled in

part by the almost frenzied market for signed first editions among postwar book collectors.”^{xviii} Especially by the thirties, Cather had emerged as a favorite of many collectors of modern editions. John Carter in *New Paths in Book Collecting* (1934) states: “The collector of *Willa Cather* will search long before coming across the sixteen-page wrapped advertising pamphlet issued by her publisher Knopf (about 1924) and entitled *Willa Cather: A Biographical Sketch*.”^{xix} **(Image 7)** John T. Winterich in *A Primer on Book Collecting* (1935), “A man who staked his opinions on George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Barrie, John Drinkwater, Joseph Hergesheimer, Willa Cather, Edwin Arlington Robinson and John Galsworthy will have no difficulty in getting his money back.”^{xx} Dorothy O’Neill, writing for *The Rotarian* in 1939, predicted, “The Vachel Lindsay and the *Willa Cather* volumes you have today may be the rare first editions of tomorrow.”^{xxi} (You can today buy a signed Lindsay for about \$38). Cather’s presence in *The Colophon* emphasized connections to collecting and collectors. In subsequent years, at least two more articles on Cather appeared in *The Colophon*: Helen Cather Southwick’s “Willa Cather, Early Years, Trial and Error” (1939) and George Seibel’s *New Colophon* piece titled “Miss Cather from Nebraska” (1949).

In the widest sense, the essay also underlined Cather’s ties to the very enterprise of fine printing. Benton argues that such editions “enhanced the author’s reputation, connoting literary stature.”^{xxii} That fine printing, ultimately, was about cultural distinction, or symbolic capital. The bibliographical codes of individual contributions, however, speak to what manner of credibility was being pursued. Mencken’s essay, “Breaking into Type,” is an excellent example of what I mean. It appeared the first part of *The Colophon* and inaugurated the series on “Breaking into Print.”^{xxiii} Mencken tells the story behind his 1903 debut book *Ventures into Verse*. He explains

that the book of verse was put forth as an occasion for his friend Marshall, who was establishing himself as a printer, to display his “talent for beautiful composition.”^{xxiv}

The bibliographical codes of his piece contribute to the interplay of iconoclasm and canonization that echoed Mencken’s reputation as a relative cultural outsider who had come to dominate American literary criticism.^{xxv} **(Images 8 and 9)** Note, for example, that the letters of the alphabet appear in sequence on every page, with the letters *H*, *L*, and *M* colored red to offset Mencken’s initials and thus distinguish his authorial identity and allude to the typographic subject matter of his essay. The designer’s use of catch words associated the piece with classical print technique, while the words *breaking into* in his title appear at an angle across line breaks, which suggests both the iconoclasm of unconventional typesetting and the self-referential act of line-breaking. At the close is an explanatory note stating that the contribution “is set in a type face now used in American for the first time, designed by Emil Rudolph Weiss and cast by the Bauersche Giesserei of Frankfurt, Germany.” This detail transforms the running alphabet effect into a sort of typographical showcase. Book design thus becomes a way of mediating and reinforcing the interplay between trailblazing and memorialization.

Cather’s submission, in contrast to Mencken’s, is a much simpler yet distinguished bibliographical sample. It was designed by Pynson Printers (i.e., Adler) and printed on Charles I paper by the J. Barcham Green Company (UK). Adler chose Garamond for the typeface. Apart from being one of the most common typefaces in *The Colophon*, Garamond is unique in its distinctive italics.^{xxvi} **(Image 10)** Italic types were first invented by Aldus Manutius, of Venice, in 1501, to solve an economic problem—how to fit more words on a page without abandoning readability. Manutius’s italics were based on the handwriting of the poet Petrarch. Originally, only lower-case italics existed, and Roman capital letters were retained. **(Image 11)** Claude

Garamond designed his Roman typefaces in 1540s; he was particularly significant in that he was an early designer of italics that functioned as “harmonious counterparts of roman typefaces” instead of “two separate typographic tools with distinctively different purposes.”^{xxvii} Garamond italics stand out and convey a deep, classical history; “My First Novels,” meanwhile, is a four-page essay with thirteen occurrences of five separate, italicized titles: *Alexander’s Bridge*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, *McClure’s Magazine*, and *My Antonia*. **(Image 12)** Adler’s design emphasizes these titles, or to put it another way, emphasizes the act of emphasizing. The title decoration emphasizes this point further by rendering the two halves of Cather’s essay title as words printed on two separate books. The running head is also italicized, as is the printer’s note at the end of the piece. “Wood Nymphs,” a linoleum cut by K.M. Ballyntine, serves as a sort of postscript to the piece and conveys a theme of naturalistic classicism, updated through the use of modern looking silhouettes. **(Image 13)**

In many ways, this interplay of classical and modern themes characterizes what we might think of as *The Colophon*’s brand of material modernism. When taken as collection of symbolic acts, *The Colophon* is a strange balance of conservative refinement mixed with formal experimentation. Peter Beilenson, noting Caslon, Garamond, Baskerville, and Bodoni as the most common types in *The Colophon*’s first twenty parts, describes choices of type as “eminently conservative” and “eminently distinguished.”^{xxviii} **(Image 14)** Paper choices were also conservative—a mix of handmade types from Britain and the U.S., as well as some Japanese papers—but less so than typography, for “papers are not so immediate an index of style as types.”^{xxix} Meanwhile, the “use of different styles of headings, displays, etc. was so various that any attempt at summary would be futile.”^{xxx} Paper colors varied, as did inked color schemes. *The Colophon* elevated the bibliographical codes of the periodical to a position equal to or above the

“editorial content” or linguistic codes. My title uses the phrase material memory to point to *The Colophon*’s distinct way of using book design to preserve and frame important aspects of the past. Cather was aligning herself with this constellation of attitudes toward modernity and print culture. For some, the word *modernist* might immediately conjure the radical typography of something like *BLAST* magazine. **(Image 15)** More often than not, however, the print aesthetic of major works of the modernist period were closer to Adler’s. **(Image 16)**

Publishing “My First Novels” in *The Colophon* also associated Cather with a materially significant series about authorial debut. The editors of *The Colophon* sought to revive artisanal printing, to stave off modernity’s corporate and mechanistic attributes. Their intervention was radical in its classicism. They sought to use paper type, typography, and page design to present literary objects in an idealized material state. With the “breaking into print” series, they went further by enshrining authorial origin stories (and the ritualized act of retrospection itself) in an elevated material state, as if the right set of material conditions could more adequately preserve or even restore the ever elusive past. Cather’s work also departed from the principal theme of the series by addressing her first and second (and third, and fourth) published novels, not her first professional publication or full-length book. Winterich explains that not all authors invited for the series “described their actual baptism in printer’s ink” and some addressed “much later immersions” in the world of print.^{xxxii} Cather used the occasion to disparage her first novel, calling it a “studio picture” made up of “very shallow” impressions of supposedly “interesting people.” She was not the only author to do so—Mencken refers to his early poetry as “dreadful stuff” and “poor newspaper” verse.^{xxxiii} Nor was she the only author to omit mention of a book length work in addressing her ostensibly first foray in print. Yet, by dwelling on her first *novel*, Cather implicitly downplayed her association to her poetic and short story collections *April*

Twilights (1903) and *The Troll Garden* (1905). Almost all contributors skipped over their magazine and newspaper work.

Conclusion: Material Memory

Finally, Cather's exaggerated departure from the theme may also help explain the fact that her piece is not included in Adler's 1936 anthology of the *Colophon* series, *Breaking into Print*. In his preface to the book, he explains that "an occasional author departed from the original theme and discussed some other phase of writing. ... For the most part, however, these papers are confined to the trial of getting started."^{xxxiii} This decision, however, effectively created a fissure in studies of *The Colophon*'s "Breaking into Print" series. Cather scholars have read "My First Novels" without accounting for the context of its initial publication, and scholars tracing Elmer Adler's ties to fine press publishing and authorship have not explicated *The Colophon* as a unique and important periodical. "My First Novels [There Were Two]" represents a better way of understanding Cather's aesthetic of the past, material culture, and the labor of memory. It also raises a series of connections that history of the book scholarship has not previously appreciated. I have pointed to connections among fine press printers and publishers, book collectors, and the construction of authorial identity, namely how authors narrated their rise from anonymity to renown. Clearly these enterprises were connected, with *The Colophon* at the veritable center. In this sense, analyzing Cather and *The Colophon* begins to tell a story of how important authorial debut, book collecting, and "fine book" culture were to the wider, distinctly modernist project of material memory.

Notes

ⁱ Jerome J. McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

ⁱⁱ Megan Benton, *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Leading is defined as the “amount of space between lines of type.”

^v Adams, Frederick B., Jr. “The Four Lives of Elmer Adler,” *The World of Elmer Adler*. New York: The Typophiles, 1964. 3.

^{vi} Of all the connections, the Yale Club Dinner of late 1928 is perhaps the most iconic. Adler extended invitations to his idea of the best fine printers in the country for Yale Club Dinner of February 1929, which led to a “typographic aristocracy” known as the “Crows” (*Ibid.*, 42). Adler was host and master of ceremonies. Dwiggin and Updike traveled together from Boston. Alfred Knopf was in attendance (*Ibid.*, 42-44). Cather was not. Nor were any other women, as the Yale Club was a men’s only establishment until 1969, and it did not open its bar, dining room, or athletic facilities to women until 1974.

^{vii} Winterich, John T., “... In the Original Twenty Parts,” Index to *The Colophon* 1930-1935, 5.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 7.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Beilenson, Peter. “A Listing of Types and Papers,” Index to *The Colophon* 1930-1935, 17.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} Winterich, 13.

^{xiii} *The Colophon* part 1, 1931, n.p.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Beilenson, 18.

^{xvi} Winterich, 10.

^{xvii} Letter, Willa Cather to Elmer Adler, n.d., Willa Cather Collection Box 1, Folder 1, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

^{xviii} Benton, 137.

^{xix} Carter, 208.

^{xx} Winterich, *Primer*, 223.

^{xxi} O’Neill, 37.

^{xxii} Benton, 133.

^{xxiii} It is in fact the first of three such pieces that appeared in the first issue of the periodical. The others were written by Sherwood Anderson and William McFee.

^{xxiv} *The Colophon* part 1, 1931, n.p.

^{xxv} Mencken started as a reporter for the *Baltimore Morning Herald* and later joined the staff of the *Baltimore Sun*. From 1914 to 1923 he and George Jean Nathan edited the *Smart Set*. In 1924 the two founded the *American Mercury*, and Mencken edited it until 1933. Mencken “often used literary criticism as a point of departure to jab at American weaknesses.” He “fulminated against writers he regarded as fraudulently successful and proselytized for such outstanding newcomers as Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. He jeered at American sham, pretension, provincialism, and prudery, and ridiculed organized religion, business, and the middle class (the ‘booboisie’)” (from Americanwriters.org)

^{xxvi} Peter Beilenson notes that the most common types in the first twenty parts of the periodical were Caslon, Garamond, Baskerville, and Bodoni (19).

^{xxvii} Allan Haley, *Typographic Milestones*, 27.

^{xxviii} Beilenson, 19.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 21.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 24.

^{xxxi} Winterich, 11.

^{xxxii} *The Colophon* part 1, 1931, n.p.

^{xxxiii} *Breaking into Print*, viii.