

Religion and Spirituality in Willa Cather's Journalism

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Introduction

*A*s a young journalist, Willa Cather's regular newspaper columns gave her the opportunity to publish anecdotal material, reviews, and speculative observations about life in all its variety, including topics such as religion and spirituality. In one of her pieces, she opined that in order to be exceptional, art had to have fire in its belly. She termed it "the 'feu sacre,' or whatever it is, that separates good work from mediocre work and gives it a flavor and individuality of its own" (Cather, 23 September 1894).¹ Cather's allusion to 'sacred fire' as the beating heart within artistic creation, giving it energy and authenticity, echoes Matthew 3:11, which speaks of being baptized by Jesus, by fire and the Holy Spirit.² This is but one example of how Cather, although critical of religion at times, was steeped in a spiritual understanding of the world which shaped her journalistic prose and aesthetics. As Slote argues: "Willa Cather's first convictions and principles of art were unchanged through the years, down to the fundamental religious metaphor of art" (82).

Exploring representations of religion and spirituality in Cather's journalism, this article addresses the period of the 1890s prior to 1900, when she worked as a journalist for the *Nebraska State Journal* and later Pittsburgh's *Home Monthly*, as well as contributing to other newspapers.³ Cather's decision to take up journalism was driven by financial preoccupations, which were exacerbated by the restrictions on women's opportunities in the public sphere in American society: "Writing for the newspaper or magazine was the way out of woman's sphere for many" (Downs 27). Journalism was a means for Cather to reconcile "a 'calling'

to write with financial necessity and the need to remain a self-reliant woman, independent of the institution of marriage and her family” (Beyer 76). These were “fundamental contradictions” (Donovan 155) in Cather’s professional and personal life, which also reflected a more widespread effort by *fin-de-siècle* American women writers to gain visibility in public life and letters, at a time when the outmoded notion of women’s sphere still impacted on what women could say and write publicly (Downs 14).

The first part of this article discusses Cather’s journalism and its exploration of the value systems underpinning organized religion and public spectacle in America. As the country drew toward the *fin-de-siècle*, and the traditional values associated with the frontier ethos faded, alternative imaginary outlets were needed for the new emerging literary and intellectual departures. According to Underwood, the American “intellectual élite [...] was shifting its view in favour of science and against conventional religion as an explanation for the workings of the cosmos” (243), challenging the status quo. Journalism played an active role in addressing those shifts. Cather was representative of a new, emergent type of literary journalist in America and Britain whose “public image [was] irreverent, hostile to or at least deeply skeptical of traditional religion, full of grandiose ambitions, and committed to art and writing as the way to measure life’s transcendent meaning” (Underwood 242). Cather was also known for her rather uncompromising idealism (Slote 59) regarding the spiritually-elevated role and function of art, and these ideas did not always sit easily with her surroundings.

In the second part of the article, I explore Cather’s representations of private faith and spirituality, focusing on her depiction of inner moments of revelation and reflection, as well as on her explorations of art. Cather’s journalism reflected a tension between her need to acknowledge middlebrow experience and striving for a “higher” truth in her art, and her keen appreciation of the arts, which was, at least to some extent, “an antidote to the philistine American materialism” (Lee 49).⁴ She developed a most effective textual strategy for exploring areas of private spir-

ity – namely a unique voice and narrative prose style of “literary journalism” (Beyer 78). This prose form became central to Cather’s style and her sense of modernity (Downs 29), and enabled her to forge links between religion and spirituality and her emerging critical and aesthetic principles regarding art and the role of the artist.

Organized Religion and Public Spectacle

A number of late nineteenth-century journalists, Cather included, were hostile to organized religion (Underwood 242) and the rigidity of its public formalities. The ambivalence that they felt was a reflection of the wider upheaval in America toward the *fin-de-siècle*, when the country witnessed rising industrialization and urbanization, and challenges to Christian paradigms by scientific and technological developments (Underwood 242). As Ribuffo argues:

Amid the social turmoil, Protestants in particular faced serious intellectual challenges. The Darwinian theory of evolution undermined the Genesis account of creation. Modern science raised doubts about all biblical miracles. Less known to the praying public but especially distressing to educated clergy, archaeological discoveries and “higher criticism” of the Bible suggested that Scripture was in no simple sense the word of God.

Furthermore, immigration from Europe, the closing of the frontier, and challenges to gender and race inequality brought changes to American public life and religion.

American “women, too, were adjusting their vistas, looking to broader horizons” (Donovan 11). The emerging concept of the “New Woman” and her search for independence and integrity was pivotal for Cather’s development as it was for other American women writers toward the turn of the century (Donovan 90). This period was “distractingly, glitteringly ‘modern’ as any time is when its years are new and change is more noticeable than permanence” (Slote 32). Up-and-coming writers and journalists such as Cather challenged the restraints of the es-

tablishment and the dominant literary culture (Lee 47). The profession of journalism evolved during the 1890s (Frus 68), as the newspaper world started to “shape the face of America” (Downs 121), and was gaining influence when it came to representing the nation’s life and character. The journalist-literary figures “who began their careers on newspapers or magazines” such as Cather, Crane, Dreiser, Norris, and London (Underwood 252) also wrote about, and contributed to, religious and spiritual expression publicly and privately. The growing industry of journalism thus played a pivotal role in providing outlets for writers to voice their anxieties over the status of the nation’s values in times of social change.

Cather’s journalistic reflections on the role and function of religion and private spirituality were in many ways indicative of the rather conflicting responses of her contemporaries. These included “insular bigotry and cosmopolitan reflection, apocalyptic foreboding and millennial optimism, intellectual adaptation and retrenchment, withdrawal from the world and expanded efforts to perfect it” (Ribuffo). Cather’s writing did echo the ambivalence of her contemporary culture toward religious and cultural difference, such as anti-Semitic sentiments that dated back to the Civil War (Ribuffo). As Melzer states, “there are traces of anti-Semitism in Cather’s writings” (98), which can be seen in her obituary for the composer Anton Rubinstein, “Whom the gods love die young” (Slote 160).⁵ Her journalism also at times echoed American anxieties over the influence of Catholicism (Lindemann 11-12) on its white Protestant self-image, as reflected in her vignette in *Nebraska State Journal* (Cather, 12 November 1893). Ribuffo observes that, “Starting in the 1880s, millions of poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants began to arrive from eastern and southern Europe. Although the population remained predominantly Protestant and the elite institutions overwhelmingly so, politics and popular culture were soon affected.” Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of this, Cather’s journalism encompassed a diversity of sometimes conflicting religious perspectives and ideas. She was anxious to maintain her credibility, particularly in her assessment of the values in-

herent in art, but also suspicious of overly populist views that appealed to the lowest common denominator.

Cather's early journalism for the *Nebraska State Journal* frequently "launch[ed] a surprisingly aggressive assault on the falsities of organized religion [....] they show us a Cather in active rebellion against her Baptist upbringing and the general religiosity of her culture" (Stout 72-73). Later, however, there were times when Cather was forced to modify her expression as well as her opinions with regard to religion, and outwardly to conform to the expectations of her immediate surroundings. She had to demonstrate that, in Lee's words, "she was prepared to adapt for the sake of the job" (47). With a rapidly rising reputation as a feisty and exceptionally-gifted young writer (Lee 40), and working for the *Home Monthly* journal in mid-1890s Pittsburgh, Cather found herself in "the pious heart of the Puritan city" (Lee 46). Here she was obliged to outwardly conform to religious ritual for the sake of appearances, in order to conform to the community's expectations. Cather "pretended to an interest in church work and Sunday schools, and joined in with the singing of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'" (Lee 47). This knowing willingness to compromise may seem contradictory or inconsistent, yet one must assume that her actions were driven by a sense of pragmatism and self-preservation – a survival strategy that secured her standing in the community while permitting her to continue to express herself in her writing.

In the journalistic writings by Cather discussed in this article, her encouragement of the reader's identification with marginalized perspectives is often evident (Beyer 80). Empathizing with such perspectives enabled Cather to put a human face on her portrayals of the changing role of religion in American public life. However, Cather was far from consistent in her attitudes. In one piece, featured in her column "As You Like It" in December 1894, Cather rather optimistically stated that "the only thing to do is to have faith in humanity and wait" (Cather, 16 December 1894). At other times, however, she was far less idealistic. In a piece in the 2 November 1895 *Courier*, Cather expressed a profound pessimism and apprehension at the impending age of modernity, "when our

civilization has grown too utterly complex, when our introspection cuts all action, when our forms have killed all ambition, when sincerity and simplicity have utterly gone from us" (Slote 232).

The long article, "An Old River Metropolis," featured in the 12 August 1894 *Nebraska State Journal*, illustrates Cather's ambivalence toward modernity (Curtin 102). She had "visited the decaying river community of Brownville on the fortieth anniversary of its founding" (Woodress 97), and subsequently used the location as her focal point for examining the problems arising from too-rapid cultural change, and the resulting loss of religious and moral values. In the article, Cather describes "the plight of 'forgotten' places and individuals in her description of a visit to Brownville, a small town in south-eastern Nebraska" (Beyer 79). She shows how a number of external factors led to the town's demise. According to Woodress, "the town, which had been the first settlement in the Nebraska Territory, had lost its future when the Missouri River silted up, the Union Pacific was routed through Omaha, and the founding fathers built a brand-new city for the state capital" (Woodress 97). Exploring the marginalized perspectives of those left behind by industrialization and urbanization, her article describes the depressing effects that material and spiritual decay have had on individuals and the community (Beyer 79). Formerly a thriving and busy place, Brownville was left behind by the rapid social and economic developments of late nineteenth-century America, and descended into obscurity and poverty. However, Cather's article also concerns itself with exploring the internal factors leading to the demise of the town and its community. She suggests Brownville as a sort of allegory of the decline of American cultural values, arguing that spiritual apathy is at the heart of Brownville's demise (Beyer 80). This loss of vitality is mirrored in the town's river, which appears to have been drained of all its energy, and "rich with disappointment and chagrin, has tried to commit suicide by burrowing and burying itself in the sand" (Curtin 106). Cather's use of natural imagery, in the form of the river's flow ebbing away, is an apt symbolic representation of the malaise which has struck Brownville. It echoes Job 14:11:

"As the water of a lake dries up or a riverbed becomes parched and dry," reminding humans of their mortality and humility before God. Like the river, the young people in Brownville have lost their drive and initiative to "reach the highest kind of scholarship and the noblest sort of achievement" that is characteristic, she notes, of the "frontiersman" (Curtin 105).

Importantly, the river's loss of its natural dynamism, drive, and purpose is mirrored in the poor state of repair of the churches of the town, symbolic of their loss of relevance. In her description of the now dilapidated Episcopal church, Cather notes the broken stained glass windows, the mouldy decaying walls, the broken prayer benches, even Bible and marble cross destroyed by neglect and the elements (Curtin 107-8). She deplores the loss of community spirit and common faith that the collapse of the old church building implies. Its deterioration is all the more poignant and also deplorable, Cather concludes, because it "possessed beauty, originally, and had something to lose" (Curtin 108). Another church, the oldest in the town, has fallen victim to neglect and become infested by mice (Beyer 76). The image of the opportunistic vermin, casually destroying the church organ, a musical instrument capable of producing great beauty, draws attention to the decay of the artistic and spiritual roots sustaining the community, for which the church was once a vibrant gathering point. Regardless of their denomination, these melancholy church buildings, previously at the heart of the local community, now serve as wistful symbolic reminders of a spiritual dimension that has been lost – namely the "water of life" (Revelation 21:6). Artistic endeavor and religion remain closely linked in Cather's work, even in her early journalism. Hence, in the Brownville article, Cather homes in on the connection between the demise of spirituality for this local community, and the dearth of artistic endeavour. Years ago, she reminds the reader, "Amateur theatricals were encouraged" and "play after play given in the little hall by the Brownville Dramatic Society" (Curtin 107). Cather observes how, deprived of religious energy, and artistic and cultural drive – the "water of life" – the town has entered a state of spiritual and physical decay. As a counterbalance to corruption, her piece champions the im-

portance of safekeeping art as a community endeavor, and organized religion as a meaningful public spectacle. With its nostalgic evocation of the earlier pioneering values that had vitality and questioned the status quo, Cather's Brownville article thus foregrounds the importance of life-affirming spirituality and art in maintaining American communities.

Writing theatre and art reviews provided Cather with a platform for exploring connections between art, religion, and social change. Her views on the didactic purposes of art in communicating religious ritual were, however, not always clear-cut or consistent. Writing about the "gallery gods," Cather uses the religious reference as a pun on the inexpensive "gods" seats in the theatre (Cather, 24 January 1894). The pun also suggests an ironic subversion of the idea of the "critic as god," endowed with superior authority and judgment. Proposing instead that the less financially- or socially-privileged community members may be worthier critics, Cather argues, "The most alert and observing, and certainly the most courageous and candid dramatic critics in Lincoln are the gods of the gallery" (Cather, 21 January 1894). This privilege is only afforded to those in the audience and critics who occupy the "cheap seats." This to Cather signal a desirable humility rather than a vanity-driven desire for public visibility and a showing off one's material wealth: "They are never cold and uncertain like the people down stairs, who are afraid of splitting their kid gloves if they applaud [...]. The gallery folks enjoy a play instead of analyzing it" (Cather, 21 January 1894). As it echoes biblical scripture, namely Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Cather's piece suggests that the "kingdom of heaven" is the reward of seeing art authentically and on its own terms.

In her regular column, "As You Like It," in December 1894, Cather furthermore questioned the tendency in some of her fellow reviewers to sermonize, to the detriment of their first duty as critics assessing works of art: "Occasionally the stage affords a moral object lesson and on such occasions the people who write about the stage generally take occasion to preach a little" (Cather, 2 December 1894). Referring to "the sermon" as a religious discourse and critical attitude, Cather warns against critics'

and reviewers' over-emphasizing their own subjective judgment and prejudices, echoing the warning against false prophets in Jeremiah 14:14. The real threat to social cohesion, Cather cautions, is a malfunctioning spiritual compass – a "faithlessness to art" (Cather, 2 December 1894). Her deliberate use of the term "faithless" underscores Woodress's comment that, in Cather's vision, artistic commitment and intensity were closely linked with spirituality (75). Such views did not always sit easily with her contemporary society, which did not attribute much cultural capital to art (Stout 72).

Cather's 4 March 1894 column in the *Nebraska State Journal*, which saw her discuss the moral imperatives and ethical obligations of theatre as public art, concludes: "the supreme virtue in all art is soul [...] the greatest art in acting is not to please and charm and delight, but to move and thrill; not to play a part daintily or delightfully, but with power and passion" (Curtin 37). Cather deplored the loss of values and the old certainties which "the greatness of the old faded frescos that told roughly of hell and heaven and death and judgment" (Curtin 37) represented to her. As these old certainties were now fading, and with them the "power and passion" that Cather admired, new "establishment" expectations of art as "light entertainment" fell short in her view. "Faithlessness to art," resulting from cynicism and spiritual vacuity, is indicative of a corrupted "ritual for the sake of ritual" mentality in some public art, Cather warns. Only absolute, whole-hearted faithfulness to art through uncompromising commitment and patient labor may redeem the artist: "it takes a whole long life not only of faith but of works to give an artist salvation" (Cather, 2 December 1894). Equally, she scorned élitism in art: "[Art] should not sit in the high place in the temple" (Cather, 23 September 1894), drawing on religious imagery in this description of art's duty to reflect a human commonality of experience. Art had to be based on real, felt values, not abstract knowledge: "Hate, love, nobleness in the theory and the abstract are easy things to enact" (Cather, 29 April 1894). In her incisive reflections on the role of artists in her contemporary American culture in an article in the *Courier*, dated 23 November 1895, Cather

used overtly religious terms, describing artists as “priests in verse and prophets in stone” (Curtin 251). Predictably, her endowment of the artist with such a responsibility for truth and virtue did not always sit comfortably with her contemporary culture and its perception of art as a commodity and light-hearted entertainment.

In seeking to take art down from the “high place in the temple,” Cather often turned to everyday experience and observations in conveying public spectacle and organized religion in wider social contexts. Far from merely reflecting a young writer’s “groping for material for the paying work she now had an opportunity to do” (Stout 72), Cather’s journalistic sketching reflected her deliberate work on her emerging prose style of “literary journalism,” and its preoccupation with observational detail and the everyday. This view is supported by Slote’s point that Cather found “details of stories in every street corner” (33). Although Cather’s own personal relationship to matters of faith experienced stages of flux and doubt,⁶ she remained committed to the subject and reserved some of her sharpest attacks for what she perceived as formal religion’s self-serving ways. These were preoccupations which, according to Underwood, she shared with her contemporary “journalist-literary figures” whose “disappointed moralism [...] reflected great disillusionment that the Christian establishment was not living up to the high standards of its founder” (242).

In an article from 1893, written for her regular column “One Way of Putting it” for the *Nebraska State Journal*, Cather describes spectacles of organized religion through a series of snapshots of Sunday morning church services from contrasting social settings, all reflecting in their differing ways and contexts on the Christian idea of “the brotherhood of man” (Cather, 5 November 1893). Her observations here are sometimes satirical, at other times wistful or even angry, and demonstrate her “tendency to develop her material by contrast and juxtaposition” (Curtin 5). Cather’s piece starts with a detailed description of a “fashionable” service (Woodress 90) held in a church catering for a comfortably-wealthy white American community: “The church was crowded; hundreds of

men and women were sitting in front of the minister who stood under the twisted brass-chandeliers and spoke about the brotherhood of man. He looked over the well-dressed, well-educated audience and his interest quickened under the pleasant knowledge that he was being appreciated" (Cather, 5 November 1893). The high-brow sensibility of the service is evident in the literary references scattered by the preacher throughout the sermon: "As [the preacher] quoted an extract from Browning he took a white hothouse rose from the cut glass rose bowl" and "closed with five of the grandest lines that Shakespeare ever wrote" (Cather, 5 November 1893).

Woodress observes that "this vignette is then contrasted by the subsequent piece; an account of a prison chaplain preaching to three hundred convicts" (90). The stark contrast between the well-to-do congregation and the church service for the prison convicts, held "in a bare, barn-like room with a low ceiling and grated windows" (Cather, 5 November 1893) does not negate the fact that God's word is spoken on both occasions. The prison chaplain also speaks of the "brotherhood of man" (Cather, 5 November 1893), even as he preaches to what Cather drily refers to as "the brotherhood of crime" (Cather, 5 November 1893). In this portrayal of the contrasting fortunes of late nineteenth-century American church-goers (Woodress 90), Cather draws on a passage from Hebrews 6:17 to describe the convicts: "God's younger, less favored sons, not the heirs of the promise" (Cather, 5 November 1893).⁷ This intertextual allusion reflects the biblical notion of the "less favored sons" who will not inherit the kingdom, but also criticizes the evident failure of America to deliver its idealistic promise of "life, liberty, and happiness" to all its people.

Cather's next sketch in this sequence presents a strong contrast with the two first snapshots in both tone and content, as Woodress explains: "The third of these Sunday morning sketches is set in a Salvation Army where a collection of human derelicts are singing 'Washed in the Blood of the Lamb'" (90). The hymn depicts the salvation of humanity through Christ's sacrifice, a paradox which was not lost on Cather. Portraying the

utter degradation of the destitute individuals in the crowd, and contemplating the injustice of the fate that has befallen these people, Cather sourly reflects: "If the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, he is letting some of His property go to pieces most shamefully" (Cather, 5 November 1893). Her note of bitter abjection insists that these destitute outcasts, too, are God's children, who have been loved by God and saved by Jesus' sacrifice – salvation is not the prerogative of the socially respectable and well-off. Through these rhetorical devices, Cather's text becomes itself a meta-textual reflection on the idealism inherent in the notion of a "brotherhood of man" or a common humanity, and the reality of its failings.

In contrast, another of Cather's vignettes, dated later that year, specifically interrogates the topic of "the brotherhood of man" through the prism of race, with a different conclusion. Portraying the anticipation of Christmas in a black American church, Cather depicts an old black preacher, who is visually impaired (he is depicted as wearing two sets of glasses). Different readings of this portrayal are possible – Stout argues that the detail of the two sets of glasses "stigmatizes" the old black preacher and makes him look "foolish" (Stout 73). However, the reference to two sets of glasses could allude to the effects of class and race inequality (the lack of financial means to purchase appropriate eyewear), and furthermore serves as a textual marker that draws attention to the issues of seeing and spiritual perceptions of reality – ideas that are central concerns in Cather's piece. Relying on memory and empathy in his preaching, the ageing black preacher renders an emotionally honest insight into the spiritual heart of the tale: "his voice trembled and he unconsciously put the words to measure and chanted them slowly" (Cather, 17 December 1893). Clearly moved by the proceedings she reports, Cather concludes that "if we cannot hear the carol and see the heavenly messenger, it is because our ears are deaf and our eyes are blind, not that we turn willfully away from love or beauty" (Cather, 17 December 1893). Paradoxically, although the old black preacher is all but blind, he is able to intuit the love and beauty of the message, and to communicate

these values through his empathetic and unselfish delivery. Cather may be alluding to the blind man in Mark 10:46-52, who in an encounter with Jesus was healed by his faith; but, of course, in symbolic terms, her piece suggests that spiritual blindness is the more debilitating affliction. The closing words of the piece reveal the speaker's yearning for a similarly authentic and intuitive sense of faith: "Almost any of us who doubt would give the little we know or hope to know to go down upon our knees among the lowly and experience a great faith or a great conviction." This, Cather suggests, is when organized religion "works" – when ritual is meaningful, and is driven by humility and altruism, rather than self-aggrandizement. Slote notes that Cather "naturally turned to the rituals of chivalry and the church" in her evolving sensibility and examination of religion (45). However, her spirited and complex vignettes illustrate her point that American society was in danger of losing sight of the authentic values that sustained its cultural fibre, and that organized religion, far from interrogating this process, was in danger of becoming a vacuous public spectacle.

Private Spirituality and Art

Cather's journalism on matters of private spirituality explored subjects such as the relationship between art and the self, the significance of religious imagery to conceptions of identity, and depicted moments of inner revelation. The originality of Cather's "literary journalism," with its individualist tenor and narrative prose style, gave her the scope to explore observations and experiences that often ran counter to the rigid formal expression of public religious spectacle. As Downs explains, "Writing for the *Journal*, Cather had the freedom to write on many subjects, and she expressed her modernism and freedom from party control by doing so" (29). The tension between Cather's personal literary journalism, with its insistence on individual voice and distinctive character, and the late nineteenth century's increasingly-commercial newspaper environment (Frus 68) further reflects the dissent inherent in the "deeper

energy evident in much of the journalist-literary figures' writings about religion" (Underwood 242).

As we have seen, Cather's journalism was informed ethically and aesthetically by religious imagery and a sense of spirituality, even when her personal faith was in flux,⁸ from her declarations of atheism during her university years, to her later rapprochement with faith (Underwood 241-42). Her "literary journalism" allowed her to experiment with her writing and test different positions and critical attitudes in defining her own personal voice (Beyer 78), and was apt for exploring matters of private spirituality. Literary journalism "focused on everyday events that bring out hidden patterns of community life [and] reveal the structures and strains of real life" (Sims and Kramer 3). Cather's journalistic prose enabled her to probe "the depth and the subtleties of spiritual life" in newspaper columns, an interest that had "limited outlets" and was rare to see "in an environment where stories are driven by conventional news judgments" (Underwood 245). Thus, she was able to use journalism to discuss "art and writing as the way to measure life's transcendent meaning" (Underwood 242), thereby countering the more materialistically-driven preoccupations, and light-hearted media representations that her culture often favored.

Cather's journalism on the public face of religion was often critical of what she saw as the smug piety and self-serving hypocrisy of the well-to-do. However, her incisive and thoughtful reflections on private aspects of spirituality show a complex response to religion. For in the pieces explored here, Cather demonstrated "a longing for mystical connection and spiritual consolation [and] a fundamental struggle with the tension between art, which can require great egotism to fuel accomplishment, and religion, which can require great humility and a recognition of a power beyond oneself at work in the universe" (Underwood 242). Cather's artistic sensibility was infused with biblical motifs, which became a profound and insistent presence in her journalistic writing (Slote 35). Commenting on the philistinism of her culture, she compared it to "the Hebrews who stoned their prophets and then marveled that the voice of God

was silent" (Slote 387). Her simple yet powerful use of natural imagery to illustrate moments of private spirituality can be seen in an article from 2 November 1895 in the *Courier*, where she muses that, "clouds cover the sun sometimes, and there is darkness upon the face of the deep, and God hides his face from us" (Slote 233). Such imagery alludes to Transcendentalist legacies and encapsulates the private, intimate nature of the relationship between the individual and God. Thus, Cather perceived artistic endeavor as an expression of something elevated in human nature, and art as communicating or evoking these "higher" ideas and principles. She "looked to her art for many of the attributes associated with traditional religion" (Underwood 242). According to Slote, her view was that "the revelation of divine things is through inspiration and the gift of genius; the artist with individual talent gives back 'what God put into him'" (43).

Some of Cather's most cuttngly-poignant journalism scrutinized the relationship between gender, religion, and power in the private sphere. In a 28 September 1895 *Courier* article, she contributed an opinion piece to a symposium debate that the paper had organized, inviting responses to the question, "Does not the Bible teach that God created woman subject to and subordinate to man and is it not a dangerous presumption in her to claim to be his equal?" (Curtin 127). Here, Cather's interrogation of the gender-political assumptions behind the contentious statement relies on wit and humorous subversion to drive the point home. Firstly, she counters the statement with a question of her own: "Does [the Bible] say that she was, is, or ever will be?" (Curtin 127). She then goes on to list examples from scripture of female resistance and subversion (Curtin 127). However, in her weekly column in the *Nebraska State Journal* from September 1894, Cather's prose struck a different note. Insisting that the pure energy of artistic creation should not be compromised by the inclusion of gender political debates, Cather argued that "no man, or woman, is ever justified in making a book to preach a sermon. It is a degradation of art" (Cather, 23 September 1894). Cather further added that "every

great work of art should teach, but never preach" (Cather, 23 September 1894).

Similarly, in her 1898 review in the *Pittsburg Leader of Woman's Bible*, edited by the renowned women's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Cather cautions against what she sees as the infidelities resulting from an overzealous feminist rewriting of scripture. She argues, firstly, that Stanton's rewrite is unrigorous because undertaken "without scholarship, without linguistic attainments, without theological training, not even able to read the Bible in the original tongues" (Curtin 539). Secondly, Cather states that, as a result of this lack of rigor, "they have thrown out parts of the Bible which do not suit them, quite without internal or external evidence to support them" (Curtin 539). The problem with this recasting, in Cather's view, is the reductive narrative of "woman as victim of patriarchal oppression" that it engenders:

The only aim of these ladies seems to have been to take each female character from the Bible, no matter what role she plays, and prove that she was a ministering angel unjustly and cruelly misplaced upon a sphere with shocking men. (Curtin 539)

Of course Cather was aware of the complexities of gender, art, and the world (Lee 49), yet her writing revealed the inconsistencies of her position regarding woman-identification. Although Cather was publicly critical of femininity (Lee 56), in her reflections on private spirituality she sought to transcend the gender issue by considering the figure of "the artist" as an asexual abstraction.

In her reflections on art and religion, Cather emphasized the hardships the artist must face in society, man or woman, and the emotional strength and conviction the artist must possess: "In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of women who are strong enough to take the vows" (Slote 43). In her previously mentioned obituary for the composer Anton Rubinstein (Slote 160), in the *Nebraska State Journal* of 30 June 1895 Cather uses religious imagery to illustrate how, in her view, "every true art-

ist is in the hands of a higher power than himself" (Slote 161). She argues that the artist's compulsion to create must feed on higher emotional and spiritual energies in order to evoke authentic intensity. These private and subjective spiritual experiences fuel the artist's imagination and determination to act for good in the public sphere, Cather suggests, through an "inspiration which is not of man" (Slote 161). Thus, the religious references and echoes in Cather's assessment of the artist's relationship to their calling reveal the spiritual dimensions of her "first principles of art" and a framework "with belief stated allegorically in terms of the Bible" (Slote 43).

In another of her early pieces, from "One Way of Putting It" in the *Nebraska State Journal*, Cather enquires whether the artist's passion and creative impulse are connected to class and educational privilege (Beyer 80). She compares a homeless man to a professor of language who is "the product of long centuries of purity of life and development of intellect on the part of his ancestors" (Cather, 5 November 1893) and concludes that "It is not the great, scholarly mind that does the great work, it is the man who knows a few things and loves them." This sentiment echoes Proverbs 11:2: "with humility comes wisdom." Cather underlines the importance of perspective and humility, and suggests that "salvation" can be found in intensity of feeling, without which artistic activity is worth nothing. Transmitting aesthetic appreciation and a sense of the spiritual significance of art to American youth and the coming generations seemed important to Cather. "He gives a stone and a serpent to those that cry unto him for bread."⁹ In quoting this biblical phrase from Luke 11:11, she echoes the idea from John 6:51-59 that art and spirituality are the "bread of life." Thereby, through an indirect allusion to religious discourse and imagery, Cather seeks to demonstrate that art has a most valuable mission in education and that it provides a vital breathing space for individuals to explore and live out their private spirituality.

An early *Nebraska State Journal* piece sees Cather deliver a meditation on the private spiritual aspects of Christmas. Commenting on these early anecdotal sketches, Stout deems them somewhat dismissively to be

“broadly sentimental” and “amateurish” (Stout 72). However, these vignettes have some distinct qualities, such as Cather’s use of affect and the child image, which afford her the opportunity to weave subtle spiritual connotations into her writing related to the notion of loss. Here, she uses an emotionally-appealing “elegiac tone” that was to be echoed in some later pieces, which like this early piece had “a recurring melancholy, a sense of loss in the sad (but dramatic) ironies of life” (Cather, 17 December 1893). Cather’s rhetoric draws on the affective depths of childhood and projections of self and other. She focuses on the figure of a small girl who has seen a doll in the shop window and wishes the doll was hers. The young girl perceives herself as being different from other children, and her desire for the doll is a reflection of this separate, distinct identity, and her need to give love to others, as she asserts: “I hain’t like some, always wantin’ to be runnin’ around, if I jist had a big doll an’ some place fer to keep its clo’es, I wouldn’t never want to go outside’n de do.” In these images, which echo Jesus’ first commandment to love (Matthew 22:36-40), Cather captures something universal about childhood, namely hope and a sense of wonder: “It has perverted all other truth than that of childhood; it has killed all other faith, but the faith of childhood defies it; it has tainted all other love, but the one of the children is still pure enough to give to God” (Cather, 17 December 1893). Again, the commandment to love is emphasized in the purity of the child’s love, which mirrors the spiritual tenor of Christmas.

The piece has echoes of Matthew 18:2-6: “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Cather ends the short vignette on a ambiguous darker note, however, as she reminds us that society may attempt to give children a meaningful Christmas, but cautions that the illusion of love is inevitably circumscribed by time, and that growing older means growing away from the spontaneous joyfulness of spirituality and becoming hardened and cynical. Cather’s “longing for mystical connection and spiritual consolation” (Underwood 242) is evident in this piece, echoing the utopian wish of

Matthew 18:6 that "whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Slote observes that

Cather joined art and religion, not only in the allegorical kingdom of art but in her primary belief that man's creation shares in some divine power. God in creating the world was the "divine Artist"; the human artist serves and worships, becoming both the priest and the translator of God. (43)

This idea is poignantly expressed in another of Cather's anecdotal meditations, dated December 1893. This moving piece presents the speaker's thoughts and memories at Christmas of a child, a young girl, who has died. Implicit within the sketch is a religious context and frame of reference – the figure of the dead child alludes to Jesus who died for man's sins. The crystallized memory evokes the speaker's own sense of loss, both of the child whom she knew, and of her own childhood dreams, faith, and trust. The dead child comes to represent a lost part of herself, with which the speaker is attempting to reconnect through natural imagery and through a plaintive evocation of an alternative place and time outside patriarchal constraints: "you will dream of other flowers that I gave you in other days down in our own country where we were both happy" (Cather, 17 December 1893). The image of flowers suggests natural beauty and sensuous memories of scent and color, but also serves as a reminder of the fleeting and transient nature of life. The speaker's memory of offering the dead girl flowers echoes ancient courtship rituals, and mourns the loss of their emotional connection; a loss which is felt all the harder at Christmas time: "I do not even know if they keep Christmas in her country, but I must send her something because I am lonely and think of her" (Cather, 17 December 1893).

Yet this anecdote is not merely about the untimely death of a child; it is also about the speaker's loss of innocence. The child is not permitted to return from the dead by a miracle, as in 1 Kings 17:17-23. The speaker mourns the corruption of purity and intense emotion that disappointment and hardening of the self inevitably brings: "I wish in some way to get

near again to the only love I have ever known which was never darkened by pain or misunderstanding” (Cather, 17 December 1893). This piece reminds the reader that Christmas is a time of remembrance, of longing, and a loss that material wealth cannot sate: “The toy shops are filled with people buying things for the children they love” (Cather, 17 December 1893). The theme of mortality alludes to the phrase from the Book of Common Prayer used at burials, “in the midst of life we are in death” (*Book of Common Prayer* 597). Cather’s sensitive use of child imagery in this meditation on the spirit of Christmas, enables her to portray the complex tones and nuances of private affect and grief, and to communicate an intense sense of spirituality through a simple and understated prose style.

Cather’s “One Way of Putting It” column from 12 November 1893 featured another vignette of the personal observation variety, this time presenting a series of snapshots that link experiences of private spirituality with a social and cultural critique. Some of these snapshots are of individual characters and their predicaments – “the human condition” – while others focus specifically on religious matters such as the closing image of a crucifix depicting the suffering of Christ inside a Catholic church (Cather, 12 November 1893). Presenting a series of marginalized or forgotten lives, Cather’s reflective piece considers human suffering and loss and how to explain it. One of the snapshots uses the phrase from Psalm 84:10, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of the wicked,”¹⁰ to underpin the strategy of exploring marginalized lives. The vignette portrays, amongst other things, a woman buying a tombstone for someone who died; an elderly Italian immigrant fruit shop owner who has lost both his youth and his sense of identity and belonging; a young man in prison receiving a visit from his wife and young baby, feeling overcome by regret; and a Swedish immigrant workwoman displaced from home and seeking moments of escape in literature.

The image of the crucifix with the suffering, compassionate Christ figure in the final vignette serves to unite all of the impressionistic

sketches in the piece. The world finds comfort in Jesus' compassion, Cather suggests, adding that "The same glorious compassion that shone there long ago, when the world who had waited for its God for so long, waited until the lamp was gone out and its breast was cold and it was weary, took him to its heart and said, 'you shall be my God, not only because you are great or because you are heaven born, but because I love you'" (Cather, 12 November 1893). Cather's sketches in this article demonstrate sensitivity and a sense of empathy for the outsider and insist on the importance of human fellowship in the face of hardship and suffering. Her pieces also emphasize the deep-seated need for art and spiritually-uplifting moments for all people, regardless of their social status and gender, echoing the sentiment of Proverbs 16: "Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud."

One of Cather's most probing assessments of private and personal spirituality emerges in her discussion of the body of literature treating the figure of Christ, in a piece written for the *Journal* on 1 March 1896. Here, she muses that although such books have achieved recent popularity, they "have all failed more or less, for the Christ ideal is higher than it has yet been given any writer of fiction to reach" (Slote 415). Arguing that nothing can surpass the Bible's depiction, Cather suggests that recent fictional representations risk falling into the trap of mediocrity – resorting to cliché, where they should aim much higher, and exercise much more self-criticism. Cather concludes the piece with a reflection on the biblical narrative of the Israelites setting out for Palestine. She suggests this arduous journey as a metaphor for the artist's driven quest for perfection (Slote 417). However, the reward for this relentless creative endeavour, she proposes, lies ultimately not in heavenly salvation, but in the revelation of artistic creation itself. Material benefits are of no ultimate consequence: "There is no paradise offered for a reward to the faithful" (Slote 417). However, to Cather, art serves to remind us of life's ultimate questions: "only death and the truth" (Slote 417).

These reflections are a measure of how high the bar has been set: art, to Cather, represents a higher truth about human existence, a revela-

tory exaltation in its form and function. Like many other literary journalists of her time, Cather had “a strong interest in spiritual matters and ultimately gave to the world a literary vision that included deep religious dimensions, if not always conventional ones” (Underwood 247). Her writing on the private and personal aspects of religion foregrounds the aesthetic principles and working concepts that informed her journalistic sensibility, and shows her journalism to be suffused by spirituality and grounded in religious reference points. In a wider sense, Cather’s journalism was a product of, and a reflection on, enduring tensions in America between the public face of organized religion and spectacle, and subjective experiences of private spirituality and the role of the artist in mediating and even resisting these tensions.

Conclusion

In an 1895 piece from the *Nebraska State Journal* published on 6 January, Cather states that “in literature and painting there is no such thing as sacrificing art for truth” (Slote 218). This demanding dictum remained at the heart of her journalism, even as she struggled to reconcile her “bread-and-butter” work as a journalist, and the inevitable compromises that it entailed, with her fiercely self-reliant and singular artistic vision. Her attitude toward organized religion was “irreverent” (Stout 51), yet committed to the credo that “the true revelation of the one God was art” (Stout 51). Cather’s vignettes and columns became a place for her to examine the status and significance of religion and art in late nineteenth-century America. Her journalism may have been situated within the “society” pages in the newspapers, in common with many other women journalists of that period (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 17). However, in re-imagining the “society” pages in order to include spiritual and aesthetic debates, Cather showcased her art, but she also contributed to contemporary cultural politics, underlining the increasing significance of journalism in turn-of-the-century American life – “an era marked by strong religious hopes, fears, and tensions” (Ribuffo). Throughout her life Cather felt a degree of unease about her journalism,

particularly its appeal to "middle-brow" readership and sensibility. Acutely sensitive to the dangers of "dumbing down" her art to fit the parameters of popular culture, she resented the feeling of having "sold out." Therefore, her writing remained committed to its "primary substance of Bible and Shakespeare, of epic, allegory, and myth" (Slote 36), and indebted to a classical tradition.

These issues reflected her culture's contradictory notions of "the American artist's status"; whether "the artist [can] be the singer of democracy, the speaker of the real world, if he, or she, also feels himself to be the prisoner of Philistia, a god in exile?" (Lee 56). This imagery of the artist as "a god in exile" also fuelled her journalism and her contribution to late nineteenth-century American women's religious and spiritual discourses. On a personal level, Cather's journalism reflected "a fundamental struggle with the tension between art, which can require great egotism to fuel accomplishment, and religion, which can require great humility and a recognition of a power beyond oneself at work in the universe" (Underwood 242). Rosowski describes this irreconcilable struggle in the following way: "Cather's first premise was the dualism of mind and matter [...] Cather wrote of two worlds – the spiritual world and the physical one, an ideal world and an ordinary one – and of two selves in each person – an immortal soul and a mortal body" (5). This was not a tension that she was able to resolve, Stout argues: "The tie between morality and arts was a conundrum [Cather] pondered without finding an answer" (77). Likewise, Cather was torn between advocating the need for American society to move forward and evolve, and her reluctance to see the country rush headlong into a frenzied modernity. In her "As You Like It" column in the *Nebraska State Journal*, she cautioned: "The planets continue to travel on their appointed courses without assistance, and so would human society if reformers would not attempt to hurry nature and to aid providence" (Cather, 9 December 1984). Her journalism reflects these contradictions, which she shared with other American women at this time, between the social obligation to conform to feminine expectations, and private articulations of dissent and resistance. Cather's evolv-

ing position on religion and art was profoundly individualist; in the words of Thurin, “her early equation of religion and art suggests that she never was very religious in a traditional way” (378). Thus, in her quest for approval and recognition, Cather found consolation in an image that describes the enduring nature of artistic achievement and contains familiar religious allusions: “What matter that one man’s life was miserable, that one man was broken at the wheel? His work lives and his crown is eternal” (Slote 387).

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Notes

¹ All quotes from Cather’s journalism are taken from The Willa Cather Archive, on <http://cather.unl.edu/index.journalism.html>, unless otherwise indicated.

² All references to biblical scripture are taken from The New International Version, accessed on <http://www.biblegateway.com/>, unless otherwise indicated.

³ In 1890 Cather matriculated at Lincoln University in Nebraska, and by 1893 she was a regular contributor to the *Nebraska State Journal*. In 1896 Cather left for Pittsburgh, where she became editor of *Home Monthly*, a position she resigned from in 1900, although she continued to be a regular contributor to journals.

⁴ These unresolved tensions in Cather’s prose echo Transcendentalist ideas articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and others.

⁵ Stout mentions further examples of this (Stout 73).

⁶ As argued by Underwood.

⁷ The reference to Hebrews is pointed out in the footnotes to Cather’s piece, on <http://cather.unl.edu/j00050.html#n00007>.

⁸ As argued by Underwood.

⁹ As the footnote states on <http://cather.unl.edu/j00073.html>, the biblical reference is to Luke 11:11.

¹⁰ The footnote to <http://cather.unl.edu/j00044.html#n00019> provides additional commentary to the piece.

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