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Founded in 1971, *Resources for American Literary Study* soon became a favored venue for archival scholarship and bibliographical analysis in American literature. Recent issues have featured unpublished letters from F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, Bret Harte, Edith Wharton, Alice James, Willa Cather, and Nathanael West; analyses of manuscripts by Thoreau, Hemingway, Eugene O'Neill; checklists of letters by John Cheever; a "Prospects" section with expert recommendations for the future study of authors ranging from Poe to Malamud. Book reviews are also prominent feature in every volume. *RALS* became a clothbound annual with volume 27 and is published by AMS Press. Everything else that has made the journal a force in literary study for the past thirty years is in place.

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ON THE DIVIDE: THE MANY LIVES OF WILLA CATHER. By David Porter. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. xxviii + 372 pp. $50.

Willa Cather (1873–1947) was a consummate artist devoted to the truth; she was at the same time a fierce promoter of her own work. This is the particular divide in Willa Cather that David Porter explores in his study *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather.* Numerous biographers have grappled with the complex personality of this great author. Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) looks specifically into Cather's early years and her developing artistry, gender, and sexuality; Hermione Lee's *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (1989) looks also at the disjointed quality of Cather's life, work, and sexuality; and Janis Stout's *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (2000) explores Cather's Southern inheritance and the uncertainty with which Cather faced a modern world. Porter offers new insight into the human being that was Willa Cather by first discussing four autobiographical vignettes and the dust-jacket copy used for promoting several of her early works, promotional materials we now know Cather had a hand in writing—if she was not wholly responsible for them.

Although Cather is well known for her penchant for exaggeration and, at times, outright lying when it came to the details of her biography, Porter makes clear that his point is "not to impugn her as a liar." Even so, the opening section is rife with accounts of the lies we know Cather made: she (quite famously) altered her birth date from 1873 to 1876; "Her claim that she graduated from the University of Nebraska at age nineteen is not true"; "she exaggerates the length of time she lived on the prairie"; "She also implies . . . that she had no schooling prior to attending high school"; it is "also not true that after finishing university she 'immediately went to Pittsburgh'"; and she did not, as she claimed, "become head of English at Allegheny High School" after leaving her position at the *Leader* (14–15). The list of "facts fudged," as Porter so kindly puts it, goes on. And yet is clear that Cather did seem honestly to depict the emotions and plots behind her novels. When this focus on honesty is added to the numerous not-so-honest moments in Cather's (auto)biography, Porter's central argument that there were two Willa Cathers—the writer and the promoter—begins to take a solid form. As he notes, "[W]hen an author who in both her

essays and her fiction puts such store on truthfulness herself crafts advertising copy that is false, the issue becomes more complicated" (58).

The remainder of *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* is devoted to Porter's attempt to reconcile these two competing sides of Cather by moving deftly and critically through Cather's novels and short stories in a discussion of what Porter calls Cather's "alter egos," which begins with the time Cather spent in Boston while working for *McClure's* on an exposé of Christian Science founder, Mary Baker Eddy. It was during this time in Boston that Cather also became friendly with Sarah Orne Jewett, an author she very much admired and one whom we know was enormously influential on Cather's writing. While Porter's thorough and engaging discussion of how Jewett's advice to "write about that which has long haunted the mind" (300) can be seen throughout Cather's body of work is interesting and informative, his attempt to demonstrate that Mary Baker Eddy served as a model for many, if not all, of Cather's heroines feels like a slight reach in the beginning but builds to a disturbing claim in the end.

Working through Cather's oeuvre, Porter's depiction of how "we feel behind the creation of these novels both the divergent influences of Jewett and Eddy and the deep divisions within Willa Cather herself" is itself divided (101). On the Jewett side, we see Porter illustrating how the author's advice influenced the actual themes and writing style of Cather's work while, on the Eddy side, we see how Cather's struggle to deal with the characteristics she saw both in Eddy and in herself plays itself out in her writing. When discussing the stories of 1916–17, Porter notes: "[T]hese stories show Cather bringing her knowledge of the world to the artistic milieux of New York and Pittsburgh . . . portraying them with a raw truthfulness that is the ultimate tribute to her mentor [Jewett], and continuing to build her stories around female protagonists, as Jewett had encouraged her to do" (150). Indeed, in each instance of Porter's discussion of Jewett's influence on Cather, he writes Jewett as almost ethereal in her sway. We see "Jewett's spirit [being] strongly felt" (200) and Cather's characters invested with qualities "that recall Sarah Orne Jewett: warmth, generosity of spirit, steadfastness, humanity" (106). The very subject matter of Cather's novels is frequently attributed to Jewett's most famous advice to write "the thing that teases the mind" (196). Likewise, the construction of Cather's work is attributed as well to Jewett when Porter

writes of *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) that the novel "owes much to Sarah Orne Jewett—no other novel is . . . 'so tightly yet so lightly built'" (226). Even Cather's writing process is shown as being largely influenced by Jewett, who is cited as telling her, "You must find your own quiet centre of life" (226). Throughout *On the Divide*, Porter acknowledges the well-traveled ground of Jewett's influence on Cather's themes and process. His depictions of Eddy, however, focus heavily on the large impact Porter believes her to have had on the writer as a person.

What is the most speculative part of Porter's study is also highly original and offers a perspective not yet taken in the extant biographies. Looking specifically at Cather's dual roles of artist and promoter, Porter paints Cather's business acumen, her keen sense of advertising, and her desire for success as specifically Eddy-like qualities—qualities that many might consider helpful to an artist. However, in Porter's eyes, these very traits exemplify the "divisions in her own soul" (96) and are, indeed, bleak enough when outlined by him: "Cather too was ambitious, could be heartless, didn't hesitate to use people; she too had aristocratic leanings, placed great emphasis on dressing well and eating well; she too liked people with spirit and disliked whiners; she too could turn in anger on her friends, had a great capacity for hate, and had no hesitation in resorting to subterfuge when it availed her" (304). His attempt to show Cather bridging this divide by writing Eddy into her characters while simultaneously calling on Jewett's advice is ambitious and, though at times overstated, this may be necessary to counter the already large body of work dealing with Jewett in Cather studies and to put forward the possibility of another powerful woman's influence.

The argument that "Eddy's impact . . . is in fact pervasive" is provocative but unconvincing (103). In Porter's first illustration of Eddy's impact on Cather's characters, he looks to Marie Shabata and cites "the women's virtually identical first names" and Cather's depiction of both Marie and Eddy "through vivid colors" as evidence enough of a clear connection between the two (106). In fact, the rest of the chapter effectively deconstructs Porter's own argument, as he goes on to discuss the numerous qualities the two women do not share. Yet in other chapters, Porter's argument seems founded and compelling. After all, who can deny a comparison between Thea in *Song of the Lark* (1915) with a

woman who "would draw . . . men into her service, then suck them dry" (88)? Likewise, in Cather's stories "The Diamond Mine" (1916) and "A Gold Slipper" (1917), we can easily see the comparison between Eddy, a woman who pursued her ends "with perseverance, resourcefulness, and courage," and Cressida Garnet and Kitty Ayrshire, "who keep alive the vital spark when the nastiness of the world would put it out" (150). Porter does a fine job pointing out the numerous and varied characteristics shared by many of Cather's heroines with Eddy. However, he goes perhaps a step too far when he places together Eddy, Cather, and the protagonist of Cather's final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). In an attempt to bridge the divide Porter sees in Cather, in this final chapter, he places the commonalities among other of Cather's characters, such as Thea and Ántonia, and Cather herself alongside what is perhaps her most brilliantly written villain. Again citing Cather's ambition and "capacity for hate," Porter hauntingly compares Cather to a woman who acts as pander to her slave, Nancy Till, actively participating in, even orchestrating, the attempted rape of Nancy. And in what Porter calls a "far more appealing" resemblance to Eddy, he notes Cather's and Sapphira's "common ability to understand others, to get inside another person's skin. . . . One thinks first of the slaves . . . whose souls she yet understands so well" (304). One can assume Porter does not include the soul of young Nancy Till.

David Porter paints a vivid and purely human portrait of a soul at war with itself—at times in meteoric flight to the heavens, at others base, contemptuous, and ugly. If what Porter suggests in *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* is true, then while we acknowledge the highs offered Cather by Jewett, we cannot doubt "that the most traumatic aspect of the Eddy project was that it obliged Cather to confront the many ways in which she herself resembled Eddy" (303).

J. Gabriel Scala

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