Willa Cather: Double Lives by Hermione Lee (review)

Joan Wylie Hall

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Willa Cather: Double Lives. By Hermione Lee. (London: Virago Press, 1989; New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. 410 pages, $29.95.)

The third major literary biography on Cather to appear within three years, Hermione Lee's *Willa Cather: Double Lives* joins James Woodress's *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (1987) and Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) as essential reading for students of Cather's life and particularly for students of her work. Lee charts the Cather family tree, reproduces several photographs, and makes extensive use of Cather's uncollected letters, but her main concern is "what happens in her language" once Cather starts writing novels (17). Lee claims that Cather is "the only woman of her time to have appropriated a 'great tradition' of male American writing" (5), the epic pastoral. "The western frontier was a man's world, subjected to masculine pioneering and male speech" (5), says Lee, and Cather's appropriation "had everything to do with her sexual alienation from conventional femininity" (10).

But this doubleness is one of many splits that Lee detects, and she qualifies O'Brien's emphasis on Cather's troubled sexuality. Drawing its energy from oppositions, Cather's art is also pulled between romance and realism, religion and fatalism, nature and art, the native and the European, democracy and elitism, primitivism and culture. Of central interest to Lee is the paradox that the act of writing presents for Cather. Fascinated with linguistic processes (translation and signs, for example), Cather nevertheless strives to create an invisible, transparent fictional language that can communicate the incommunicable, making a new version of "the old American desire to master the 'undiscovered continent' [Emily Dickinson's phrase]" (17).

For Lee, Cather finds her "true tone" in 1909 in "The Enchanted Bluff." She discusses at length several of the short stories and all of Cather's novels. Some of her best treatments are of *O Pioneers!*, where "Cather is writing a hitherto unwritten woman's pioneer novel" (108); *My Ántonia*, whose moments of "tough Western humor" deflate the romance of "Jim's heroic sunsets" (151); and *The Professor's House*, "an epitome of all Cather's writing, in which she divides herself between two 'writers': Tom as the instinctual explorer and the Professor as the conscious reviser" (255).

A senior lecturer at the University of York, Lee remarks that Cather has not been widely read or studied in the United Kingdom. This may help to explain her many comparisons between Cather and writers who are more familiar to British audiences—from Whitman, Twain, and Henry James, through Frost, Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence—but American readers, too, will learn from Lee's contextualizing.

Analogies between Cather and the modernists are especially stimulating, though finally, as Lee asserts: "She evades identification, and resembles no one else" (4).

JOAN WYLIE HALL *University of Mississippi*