A Falling Out With Love: My Mortal Enemy

Harry B. Eichorn
For the

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of

Willa S. Cather

Born

Gore, Virginia

December 7, 1873

An inherent aristocrat in an equalitarian order... an agrarian writer in an industrial order... a defender of the spiritual graces... in a materialistic culture.

MAXWELL GEISMAR

The precision of a scholar... the penetration of a critic... the warm intellectuality of a creative artist.

HENRY S. CANBY

An indigenous and finished craftsman... native, and in her own way so complete, that she restored confidence to the novel in America.

ALFRED KAZIN
Does love conquer all? In the mid-twenties Miss Cather seemed to think that much of the conventional wisdom about love was wishful thinking. She was more aware of the limitations of love than of its power. In *The Professor's House* she brought her protagonist to the conclusion that falling out of love is the saddest experience in life, and in *My Mortal Enemy*, her grimmest novel, she re-examined this idea. There are obvious similarities between *The Professor's House* and the story of Myra Driscoll Henshawe, the heiress who rejects her fortune and her religion to marry for love, only to end her life by rejecting her husband and returning to the faith of her childhood. Both Godfrey St. Peter and Myra turn against their marriage partners and sacrifice human ties in their attempts to recapture the past. In both stories money plays a significant role in precipitating the characters' problems. Both characters turn, in their discovery of human limitations, to thoughts of death and thoughts of religion. These similarities, however, only emphasize the more significant differences. The two characters are hardly alike in their temperaments. Godfrey is generous, fastidious, and restrained, while Myra is selfish, flamboyant, and violent. If sudden wealth brings on many of Godfrey's problems, Myra blames her unhappiness on poverty. Finally, the religion which enables Myra to resolve her problems is not available to Godfrey.

Neither is it available to Nellie Birdseye, the narrator of *My Mortal Enemy*. Nellie, a teacher who, like Myra, grew up in the town of Parthia in southern Illinois, reveals nothing about herself except the part that Myra has played in her life,
but the impact of Myra on Nellie has been devastating. From her earliest years, Nellie had idealized the story of Myra’s elopement as a romantic legend of love on the grand scale, but her first meeting with the real Myra started a process of disenchantment that deepened with further acquaintance. Seeing Myra finally reject her husband as her mortal enemy, Nellie has come to distrust human love itself. At the same time, Myra’s religious conversion has an inhuman ferocity that makes it unappealing to Nellie. The novel is thus the account of a double disillusionment, in which the story of Myra Henshawe leaves Nellie Birdseye with an emotional poverty as severe as Myra’s financial poverty. Nellie’s experience suggests that, after all, there may be something sadder than falling out of love—falling out with love before one has ever fallen in.

Nellie’s distrust of romance colors her manner of narrating the story. Looking back at the events many years after they have occurred, she seems to take a wry pleasure in recalling her youthful illusions, and she records only the details that have impressed her by their glamor or their drabness. Her consistency in doing this invests many of the early descriptive passages with an ironic tone that seems to have escaped the notice of many readers. It also makes Nellie a perfect vehicle for Miss Cather’s theory of the “unfurnished” novel, according to which an artist is to present scenes by suggesting details rather than by enumerating them. Nellie does not describe her home town at all, except for the Driscoll estate. She dismisses the rest of the town as a place where nothing interesting ever happened. Her attitude toward her home town suggests, in an indirect and unemphatic way, that a sensitive young person from the country is especially susceptible to the glittering appeal of a big city and to violent disillusionment.

Nellie’s reactions to people and events are not the only ones that the novel conveys (her Aunt Lydia is often a foil, as extreme in the caustic tone of her matter-of-fact comments on Myra as the young Nellie is in her enthusiasm), but her consciousness is the source of all the information the reader receives. Miss Cather has so arranged the story that Nellie can plausibly be present at all the scenes which reveal the personality of Myra Henshawe.

The first of these scenes is Myra’s visit to Aunt Lydia around
the turn of the century, some twenty-five years after her wedding. Nellie recalls Myra’s disappointing plumpness and her own feeling of awkwardness at this first meeting. Myra puzzles Nellie by her emotional warmth in greeting her husband and by her high-handedness in telling him that she has given his six new shirts to the son of their janitor in New York. Oswald Henshawe, in fact, is more attractive to the fifteen-year-old Nellie; he is close to her conception of a romantic hero, with his “military air,” his eyes, “dark and soft, curious in shape—exactly like half-moons,” and his apparent nobility of character: “There was something about him that suggested personal bravery, magnanimity, and a fine, generous way of doing things.”

The appearance of Myra twenty-five years after “that winter night when Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate” (25) is a disappointment to the young Nellie Birdseye. Contrasting the diminished scale of Myra’s life with the “pomp and dramatic splendour” of her great-uncle’s funeral, Nellie feels, after that first meeting, that “John Driscoll and his niece had suddenly changed places in my mind, and he had got, after all, the more romantic part” (27). Myra’s grand gesture seemed to deserve more than a commonplace life, but she and Oswald have been only “as happy as most people,” according to Aunt Lydia, while for Nellie “the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people” (25).

Myra feels this disappointment, too, as Nellie learns when she and Aunt Lydia visit the Henshawes in New York during the Christmas holidays. The qualities that Nellie has already seen in Myra become sharper, and more bewildering. The Henshawes’ apartment on Madison Square is the last word in luxury and taste to Nellie, and she cannot understand Myra’s craving for more wealth and prestige. At the same time, Myra’s generosity to her friends makes Nellie feel that “her chief extravagance was in caring for so many people, and in caring for them so much” (54). She promotes her young friends’ love affairs with enthusiasm but also with guilt, because, as she says, “love itself draws on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world” (38). In this bitterness and self-pity Myra can

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turn not only against love but also against her husband, in a
violent quarrel which leaves Nellie feeling “a conviction that I
should never like Mrs. Myra so well again” (66).
Nellie’s liking for Myra revives, though, at their next meeting
ten years later on the west coast. Nellie is now a college
teacher; the Henshawes have fallen into poverty, partly because
of Myra’s ambitions for Oswald, and Myra herself is mortally
ill. Illness, rather than taking away the forcefulness of her
personality, has only increased it: “She looked strong and
broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather wicked old
woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its
absurdities” (80).
In her illness and poverty Myra becomes more conscious
than ever of the fortune she threw away to marry Oswald. Her
illness makes her “acutely sensitive to sound and light” (86),
and the most painful circumstance of her life in a run-down
hotel is the noise of her neighbors overhead. She tells Nellie,
“Oh, that’s the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy
of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one
quiet, and some sort of dignity” (83). Many years before,
when her uncle was threatening to disinherit her, he warned her
of the importance of money: “It’s better to be a stray dog in
this world than a man without money. I’ve tried both ways, and
I know. A poor man stinks, and God hates him” (22). Now
Myra feels that old John Driscoll was right. She complains that
her marriage has brought her only unhappiness. When Oswald
tries to remind her that they were happy at least in their
younger years, she denies even this: “We were never really
happy. I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success
and a place in the world” (91).
Since her marriage took away her chance of wealth, Myra
blames Oswald for her unhappiness. She reproaches him for
not getting her away from their noisy neighbors. She locks him
out of her room. The more demands she makes on him in her
illness, the more resentful of him she becomes. She tries to
explain her increasing hostility toward Oswald in a conversa-
tion with Nellie. “People,” she says, “can be lovers and en-
emies at the same time, you know. . . . A man and woman
draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have
done to each other. Perhaps I can’t forgive him for the harm
I did him. Perhaps that’s it. When there are children, that feeling goes through natural changes. But when it remains so personal . . . something gives way in one. In age we lose everything; even the power to love” (105).

With no love for the present, Myra turns away from human relations and finds comfort in thoughts of death, the past, and religion. Her favorite retreat from the noisy apartment is a lonely cliff overlooking the Pacific, where she can lean against a cedar tree and look off to sea. For her the cliff is “like the cliff in Lear, Gloucester’s cliff” (87), and she tells Nellie she would like to see it at dawn, because “that is always such a forgiving time” (89). In her aversion to her husband, she begins remembering her uncle. She speaks admiringly of his “violent prejudices” (97) and of his ability to get what he wanted, whether in helping his friends or in crushing his enemies. When her illness worsens and the thoughts of her dead friends crowd in upon her, she returns to the Catholicism of her childhood. In her last recorded words she talks about religion, and asks, “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (113). She receives the Sacrament and makes a final escape to her cliff, where, as Nellie says, “there was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn” (118).

Perhaps the first question that a brief sketch of Myra Henshawe raises is: How could Nellie’s liking of her survive their very first meeting? Myra’s unpleasant qualities—her vanity, avarice, self-pity, and willfulness—are so obvious that it seems beside the point to emphasize them as if Miss Cather were not aware of them. Miss Cather seems to have realized that a woman like Myra could still have a personal magnetism about her. She has shown Myra’s shortcomings with rigorous objectivity and yet made them parts of a complex and consistent personality, almost incredibly complex for such a brief story. And she has made Myra, both in her own career and in her effect on Nellie, suggest things larger and deeper than herself.

In nearly every episode of Myra’s life there are conditions which, if emphasized, might have made her more likable. Conversely, in her more likable moments there are personal flaws that reduce her appeal. For instance, the account of the elopement hints strongly that religious bigotry is the only basis of John Driscoll’s opposition to the marriage, but there is no
attempt to draw sympathy toward Myra by suggesting that her marriage was a triumph of principles over prejudice. The emphasis, instead, is on Myra's headstrong recklessness. On the other hand, Myra's unmistakable avarice appears to be not a purely selfish craving for money but the wish to be a Lady Bountiful to her friends. If there is vanity in her dispensing of gifts and hospitality, there is also a genuine warmth in her solicitude for her friends' needs, and she can be as intense in her friendships as she is in her hates. Furthermore, the account of Myra's jealous suspicions about her husband is not without the suggestion that Oswald may have given her cause by duplicity and perhaps by infidelity, though the story does not reveal more than Nellie could have known about the topaz sleeve-buttons given to Oswald by a girl "from a breezy Western city, where a rich girl can give a present whenever she wants to and nobody questions it" (43). Oswald is still wearing the sleeve-buttons ten years after the quarrel with Myra, and it is significant that Nellie notices them in a scene describing Oswald's friendship with a girl who works on a newspaper, a scene immediately following Myra's locking of her bedroom door. Finally, Myra's return to her religion is such a mixture of heroism and self-indulgence, of repentance and vanity, that it makes the end of her life at once admirable and repellent. The effect of all these shadings of motivation and responsibility is to make Myra a vividly realized character whose actions are always consistent but whose essence eludes easy formulation.

Myra is a vain woman. She needs at all times to think well of herself. One expression of her vanity is her self-dramatization. Nellie's Aunt Lydia speaks once, not completely invidiously, of "Myra's dramatics" (68). It is through "Myra's dramatics" that Miss Cather has attempted to explain her significance by suggesting similarities and differences between Myra and other characters in literature, specifically and appropriately the literature of the theatre. Her method is light-touched and elusive; the suggestions come from brief references to characters and from echoes of phrases in plays. It is a method more suitable for poetry than for prose fiction, perhaps, but Miss Cather thought of it as the mark of excellence in any art. A brief investigation of some of the more readily identi-
fiable allusions will serve to illustrate one of Miss Cather’s ways of giving an overtone and an emotional aura to the story of Myra Henshawe.

Myra has what Marcus Klein, in his introduction to the Vintage Edition of *My Mortal Enemy*, has called a taste for greatness. She describes her head as one that “would have graced one of the wickedest of the Roman emperors” (77). One of her friends is Helena Modjeska, whom Nellie remembers for her portrayal of tragic queens. It is altogether appropriate, then, that the story of Myra should contain some specific allusions to several plays of Shakespeare, each of which deals with royalty.

The first of these allusions, already noted, is to *King Lear*. There are several correspondences between incidents in *My Mortal Enemy* and such details of the play as Lear’s unreasonable disinheriting of Cordelia, Gloucester’s hasty rejection of Edgar, and the wholesale violations of natural human relationships that occur throughout *King Lear*. Miss Cather’s specific reference, however, is to “Gloucester’s cliff.” In the play, as in the novel, the cliff has an association with death. At the beginning of Act IV, Gloucester has just had his eyes plucked out by Cornwall, and he realizes that he has been blind all along to the real attitudes of his two sons. Now in despair, he asks Edgar, who is disguised as a mad beggar, to lead him to one of the cliffs at Dover, where he intends to kill himself:

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There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep:
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I’ll repair the misery thou dost bear
With something rich about me: from that place
I shall no leading need. (IV, i. 76-81)
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Edgar, of course, does not carry out this request but deceives his father in order to save him. When Gloucester thinks that he is at the edge of the cliff, he gives Edgar a purse containing a jewel. Then, bidding Edgar leave him, he jumps. Edgar convinces the old man that a miracle has saved his life, whereupon Gloucester recovers from his despair and resolves to suffer with patience.

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There is certainly an echo of *King Lear* in the description of Myra's death. She hires a Negro cabman to drive her to the cliff, gives him a ten-dollar gold piece, and tells him to leave her there. There are also differences, which show that Miss Cather has not merely tried to give stature to Myra by linking her with Gloucester. On the contrary, she has emphasized the contrast between the two characters more than the parallel. Myra, for instance, cares about no one's misery but her own, and there is "something rich" about her in her manner of dying even more than in her gold piece. She could easily paraphrase Gloucester's words to describe her own death: "And I'll repair the misery I must bear with something rich about me." Unlike Gloucester, Myra actually does choose her way of dying, and though she has suicidal thoughts like him, she does not try to kill herself. The time she spends on the cliff arouses thoughts of reconciliation and relief, and she dies peacefully on the cliff, clutching a crucifix.

Perhaps the key to Miss Cather's alteration of Shakespeare lies in her emphasis on the details of the cliff itself. Shakespeare, interested primarily in the human drama, stresses only the fearful height which makes the cliff serve Gloucester's thoughts of self-destruction. Miss Cather has emphasized the panoramic view of the sea, the color of the sunlight at different times of the day, the bareness of the land, and above all, the lone tree growing out of the rocky ground. Unlike Shakespeare, she has the romantic's sense of the cliff as landscape.

In the chapter following Myra's discovery of Gloucester's cliff, there is a brief reference to two other plays of Shakespeare in Nellie's description of Myra's reading habits: "Myra's eyes tired quickly, and she used to shut a new book and lie back and repeat the old ones she knew by heart, the long declamations from *Richard II* or *King John*. As I passed her door I would hear her murmuring at the very bottom of her rich Irish voice: *Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lan-cas-ter*" (99).

The significance of Myra's quotation of the opening line of *Richard II* depends on the context of the passage in the novel. Myra has just been talking about her uncle. John of Gaunt, of course, is King Richard's uncle, and Miss Cather seems to be suggesting an ironic contrast between Myra and King Richard.
in their relations with their uncles. John of Gaunt dies telling Richard that his irresponsible rule will bring trouble to England. Richard immediately seizes all of his dead uncle's property in order to finance his Irish wars, but by this action he brings his own downfall by giving Bolingbroke a pretext for leading his successful rebellion. Myra Henshawe comes to blame her misfortunes on her rejection of John Driscoll's advice, but, unlike King Richard, she is not able to get possession of her uncle's property.

Myra is also like King Richard in many ways—in her vanity, in her prodigality, and especially in her eloquent expression of self-pity after she has fallen into poverty. The second half of My Mortal Enemy contains many passages that seem to echo lines in Richard II. When Myra is recalling her youth, she says: "Ah, we wouldn't be hiding in the shadow, if we were five-and-twenty! We were throwing off sparks like a pair of shooting stars, weren't we, Oswald?" (79). In Richard II the Earl of Salisbury says, in contemplation of King Richard's defeat:

Ah, Richard, with the eyes of heavy mind  
I see thy glory like a shooting star  
Fall to the base earth from the firmament. (II, iv, 18-20)

In the final days of Myra's illness, when she begins to attribute the noise of her neighbors to Oswald, she says, rather strangely: "He'll wear me down in the end. Oh, let me be buried in the king's highway!" (109-110). Her words seem to recall the words of King Richard when Bolingbroke's forces are in front of Flint Castle:

Or I'll be buried in the king's highway,  
Some way of common trade, where subjects' feet  
May hourly trample on their sovereign's head;  
For on my heart they tread now whilst I live;  
And buried once, why not upon my head? (III, iii, 155-59)

Myra's final desperate act of self-assertion in choosing the place of her death may well reflect the words that Shakespeare has given King Richard:

Our lands, our lives and all are Bolingbroke's,  
And nothing can we call our own but death. (III, ii, 151-52)
If Myra identifies herself with King Richard, she probably identifies John Driscoll with the hero of *King John*, the other play she likes. King John is the uncle of *three* characters in the play, and his various dealings with them lead to consequences which provide a humorous contrast to the fate of John Driscoll. King John has a niece, Blanch of Spain. Whereas John Driscoll phrases his opposition to Myra’s marriage as “a cold, business proposition” (22), King John tries to promote a marriage, for purely political reasons, between Blanch and Lewis, the Dauphin. Nothing could be more unlike the romantic adventure of Myra’s elopement than the cool compliance of Blanch in her words to Lewis:

My uncle's will in this respect is mine:  
If he sees aught in you that makes him like,  
That any thing he sees, which moves his liking,  
I can with ease translate it to my will;  
Or if you will, to speak more properly,  
I will enforce it easily to my love.  
Further I will not flatter you, my lord,  
Than this: that nothing do I see in you,  
Though churlish thoughts themselves should be your judge,  
That I can find should merit any hate. (II, i, 510-20)

More like Myra is the Bastard Faulconbridge, son of Richard Coeur-de-Lion and thus nephew of King John. The Bastard comes before King John to dispute his dispossession by Sir Robert Faulconbridge, and when the king decides in favor of the Bastard, young Robert Faulconbridge protests. King John then satisfies both of them by giving Robert the disputed land and knighting the Bastard, who henceforth becomes the king’s most loyal defender. The Bastard pleases King John by his earthy wit and by his good looks. John Driscoll likes Myra for the same reasons: “Myra’s good looks and high spirits gratified the old man’s pride. Her wit was of the kind that he could understand, native and racy, and none too squeamish” (19-20). King John’s other nephew, Arthur, is the claimant to his throne. The king’s resistance to Arthur’s claim leads to war and eventually to the deaths of both of them. In his conduct of the war, King John arouses the wrath of the Church by plundering monasteries. His action is in contrast to that
of John Driscoll, who enriches the Church with his own money.

It is not by accident, then, that Myra spends her days repeating speeches from *King John*, for she can find in the play a reminder of her own youthful years with John Driscoll. Myra is like Blanch in that her uncle tries to influence her marriage, like the Bastard in that she pleases her uncle by her humor and good looks, and like Arthur in that she unsuccessfully challenges her uncle's authority; but she is unlike Blanch in that she defies her uncle's wishes even though he tries to prevent her marriage rather than to promote it, unlike the Bastard in that her disinheritance marks the end of her friendship with her uncle rather than its beginning, and unlike Arthur in that her uncle's method of resisting her challenge improves rather than impairs his relations with the Church.

Though the allusions to *King John* and *Richard II* are less emphatic than the allusion to *King Lear*, Miss Cather has used all three plays for the same purpose: to let the reader know more about Myra than Nellie can tell him. The most intelligent observer in the world cannot be a mind reader, and Miss Cather has carefully permitted Nellie to reveal only what she can see and hear. When Myra is silent, Nellie can only wonder about her thoughts, as she herself remarks at one point. “During those nights and days when she talked so little, one felt that Myra's mind was busy all the while—that it was even abnormally active, and occasionally one got a clue to what occupied it” (111). Miss Cather has given the reader more of these clues to Myra's thoughts during the months of her illness. Just as the story of Gloucester's attempted suicide shows Myra's thoughts about her death, the echoes of *Richard II* in her speech show her thoughts about her decline, and the relationships in *King John* show her thoughts about her youth. After all, a woman capable of using the words of King Richard II to complain about her noisy neighbors is entirely capable of fancying herself the niece of King John.

The unobtrusiveness of the allusions does not make Myra's awareness of their relevance to herself implausible. It suggests, rather, that this relevance is not apparent to Nellie. If, as Nellie says, Myra knows long declamations from these plays by heart, her relating of them to herself is altogether consistent.
with her personality as revealed throughout the novel. Her awareness of the parallels is within the range of her vanity, and her awareness of the contrasts is fuel for her self-pity.

By her use of Shakespeare, Miss Cather has, without violating the consistency of her narrative method, given the reader an opportunity to bypass Nellie and to see into the mind of Myra Henshawe herself. If Nellie is not aware of Myra's Shakespearean vision of herself, it is because she thinks of Myra in different terms. For Nellie, Myra suggests not the characters from Shakespeare's plays but the tragic heroine of an Italian opera. Just as Miss Cather has used Shakespeare to define her heroine's character, she has suggested the significance of Myra's story by her use of Bellini's Norma.

The allusion to Norma, unlike those to Shakespeare, is anything but brief and inconspicuous. It covers nearly two full pages and forms the climax of one of the most memorable scenes in the novel. At the end of Myra's New Year's Eve party, Helena Modjeska turns from looking at Madison Square in the moonlight and asks her friend Emilia to sing something from Norma. Oswald turns off the lights, and Madame Modjeska sits by the window in the moonlight as Emilia sings the "Casta Diva" aria. "It was," Nellie recalls, "the first air on our old music-box at home, but I had never heard it sung—and I have never heard it sung so beautifully since" (60). Then Nellie describes her thoughts about the scene: "For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music, thought of that aria as being mysterious connected to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow. When I wanted to recall powerfully that hidden richness in her, I had only to close my eyes and sing to myself: Casta diva, casta diva!" (60-61).

Though this passage is emphatic and prominent, its implications are not transparent. As one might guess from Miss Cather's handling of Shakespeare, the relevance of the "Casta Diva" aria to the story of Myra Henshawe includes more than the author has explicitly told the reader. It depends on the context of the aria in the opera and on the context of Nellie's
words in the novel.

The aria itself is a lyrical prayer for peace. The heroine, standing in the sacred grove of the Druids with moonlight shining upon her face, asks the moon goddess to calm the savage hearts of her countrymen, to temper their bold zeal, and to spread upon the earth the peace that reigns in heaven. Though this prayer is, to be precise, only the first part of the aria, it is probably all that Nellie hears on this occasion. Indeed, Emilia could not sing the rest of the aria without the aid of a mixed chorus. It is this prayer for peace that Nellie says she associated with Myra for many years.

Nellie admires primarily the beauty of the music, but Miss Cather has so described the whole scene as to associate the aria with Nellie's early romanticized conception of Myra. The emphasis on moonlight throughout the passage connects the aria to the New Year's Eve party, at which Myra reaches the peak of her glamor. In the early pages of the story Miss Cather has consistently used the imagery of moonlight to suggest Nellie's illusions: in her fascination with Oswald's "half-moon eyes" (47); in her first misty-eyed glimpse of New York, where "the dull gold dome of the World building emerged like a ruddy autumn moon at twilight" (32); and in her fascination with Saint Gaudens' Diana in Madison Square during the reverie which leads Myra to call her "moon-struck" (35). This linking of the aria with Nellie's illusions suggests further that Nellie, at the party, does not realize how deceptive the aria itself. A person who knows the music as merely "the first air on our music-box at home" and has never heard it sung before is not likely to recognize how incongruous this prayer for peace is with Norma's position as high priestess of the god of war. Nor is she likely to know that the real reason for Norma's sudden pacifism is her love for the enemy leader, whom she has secretly married in violation of her vows as a priestess.

Nellie presumably knows more about Norma by the time she is telling the story, since she compares Emilia's rendition favorably with others that she has heard. The "many years" during which she associates Myra with the aria continue until the scene in which Myra calls Oswald her mortal enemy. The descriptive details of this scene connect it with the "Casta Diva" scene. It occurs in Myra's room, and the time is again
the early hours after midnight. The room is darkened again, and Nellie notes the stillness of the city just as Madame Modjeska does in the earlier scene. One detail is different, and it changes the atmosphere completely: there is no moonlight. In this room Myra's candles are the only source of light. The scene is the climax of Nellie's loss of her illusions about Myra. Her discoveries show—though Nellie does not point it out—that just as there is a relationship between the aria and her first impressions of Myra, there is also a resemblance between the real Myra and Norma herself.

The resemblance is in the conflict of loyalties that both women find between religion and romantic love. It is only a partial resemblance, with differences in the personalities of their lovers, but the most important difference is in the final resolution of the conflict in the two stories.

Norma's love for Pollione raises the issue more intensely at the outset than Myra's love for Oswald. Pollione, as the Roman proconsul, is the commander of the forces that hold the Gauls in subjection. Besides, he openly despises the Druidic religion, in which Norma's father, Oroveso, is Arch-Druid. John Driscoll's hatred of Oswald seems, on the contrary, to be a one-way affair. Norma is aware that her love for Pollione has brought her into conflict with both her religion and her country. She says at one point that Pollione's heart would be, for her, a substitute for life, fatherland, and heaven.

Though Norma is very much in love herself, she is beginning to have doubts about Pollione's constancy. She has good reason, because Pollione has grown tired of her and has fallen in love with a young virgin of the war god's temple. Norma soon discovers his infidelity, and her immediate reaction is furious jealousy. She turns on him with insults and threats of vengeance if he leaves her. When she sees that she cannot move him by love, by insults, or by threats, her fury gives way to despair. She feels that she has lost the man for whom she broke her vows. Her feeling of loss intensifies her guilt, and she decides to end her life. But as long as there is any hope of recovering Pollione, she is willing to have him back at any cost. She submits even to letting her rival try to send him back to her. In spite of her threats of vengeance, when Pollione finally defies her by invading the priestesses' quarters in the
In sacrificing her life, Norma is able to resolve the conflict between religion and human love, but Bellini permits her only a tragic resolution of the problem. She cannot keep her lover and her life, and she must first lose her lover and despair of recovering him before she comes to the point of acknowledging her love publicly. Her very acknowledgment is a desperate show of force rather than a manifestation of love. The cause of her desperation is jealousy, and her self-denunciation removes the cause of jealousy by bringing her lover to a new admiration for her.

If jealousy is the driving force in Bellini's heroine, it is a quality that Myra shares with her. Just as Pollione fears Norma's jealous wrath, Oswald tries to prevent the outbreaks of Myra's jealousy, and after her death, he remembers her jealousy as the cause of all her bitterness toward him. He tells Nellie: "Of course, she was absolutely unreasonable when she was jealous. Her suspicions were sometimes—almost fantastic" (121).

Myra has the same jealousy as Norma, but she is in a less flattering situation. The intensity of Norma's passion makes her an undoubtedly impressive heroine, and her personality retains its stature in spite of Bellini's insistence on her superiority to everyone around her. Miss Cather has given Myra the same personality as Norma but has looked at her more objectively. Myra's emotions are just as violent as Norma's but her experiences are not so spectacular and her conflicts are not so one-sided. She does not have to face such drastic punishment for her marriage; she does not have a husband who is so overtly dis-
honorable or a rival who is so guileless and accommodating. Her personality involves her in the same problems, but because of her situation the problems are more complex, and the resolution of them is more severe.

Myra is not a priestess married to a proconsul but merely an heiress married to a clerk. Her marriage has been a bold gesture of defiance, but the conflict between religion and human love in her life is of her own making: she need not have broken with the Church to marry Oswald, but this break was merely part of her break with everything else. To her, the most important consequence of her marriage is her disinheritance. Like Norma, after several years of marriage she feels dissatisfaction, but she is not able to find so obvious a cause of that dissatisfaction as her husband’s desertion. Oswald is quite content with the arrangement of his life, whatever that might be. If Myra does not have the righteous position of a deserted wife, neither does she have the anomalous task of trying to reclaim the love of a man she scorns. Her jealousy can feed only upon suspicions. Unable to find a simple reason for her dissatisfaction, Myra connects her unhappiness to human love itself, and she tries to find happiness by turning against her husband.

Myra shares Norma’s need to dominate her husband and her surroundings. The thwarting of this need by any feeling of helplessness drives her to more and more desperate acts of self-assertion. Her lack of wealth makes her haughty toward the rich. When she is unable to learn Oswald’s secrets, she leaves him. When her illness makes her dependent on Oswald, she resents his nursing and tries to withdraw from him in any way she can. The most dramatic way is by returning to her religion. Just as Norma begins to feel remorse for the violation of her vows only when she has lost her power over Pollione, Myra’s preoccupation with thoughts of death, guilt, and religion begins on the same day that she declares that love has destroyed her.

In her return to her religion, Myra retains her jealousy in her hoarding of money “for unearthly purposes” (102) and in her choice of the place of her death. Her death has nothing in it of Norma’s voluntary sacrifice of her life. Myra can only “meet the inevitable in the way she chose” (117). She sacri-
flies not her life but her husband. For Norma, on the contrary, there is no question of sacrificing Pollione: he has already rejected her. Myra’s reconciliation with her religion does not reconcile her with her husband. For her, there is no resolution of the conflict between religion and human love except in having one at the expense of the other. If Norma cannot have both her lover and her life, Myra’s return to her religion leaves her with neither.

The end of Myra’s story shows how completely the “Casta Diva” aria is “mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw” (60). It is Nellie who thinks of Myra in terms of the aria, and the variations between the outcomes of Myra’s romance and Norma’s are the measure of Nellie’s disillusionment. Just as Miss Cather has used Shakespeare to suggest the life that Myra wishes she could have lived, she has used Bellini to suggest the life that Nellie would have preferred for her. By the device of these allusions, she has filled the story with characters whose hovering presence in the background serves to define the personality and the fate of Myra Henshawe. If this is a technique usually associated with poetry, Miss Cather may have been providing a clue to it by making Nellie an admirer of the modern poets.

While Miss Cather has resolved the conflict between religion and human love more severely for Myra than Bellini has for Norma, she has brought Nellie Birdseye’s experiences to an even more severe conclusion. Myra’s return to her religion gives her something that enables her to face death confidently, but Nellie has lost the ability to face life confidently. She ends her story by saying that the memory of Myra’s last words has made her doubt that any love story can end happily. Her observation of Myra has destroyed her faith in human love, but she cannot adopt Myra’s religious faith. She finds such a faith not only inaccessible but repulsive. Nellie does not explicitly describe her reactions to Myra’s conversion, but since she is a teacher of literature, her values are presumably humanistic. Though she is willing to believe that Myra finds peace and satisfaction, she is clearly appalled by a religious enthusiasm that carries otherworldliness to the point of rejecting human relationships and human responsibilities altogether. “Religion,” Myra says near the end of her life, “is different from every-
thing else” (111). It is so different, in fact, that it is irrelevant for Nellie, whose disillusionment leaves her hopeless.

Is Nellie’s hopeless conclusion also Miss Cather’s? The novel offers no grounds for thinking otherwise. The compactness and starkness of My Mortal Enemy suggest that Miss Cather had full confidence in the accuracy of this conclusion and in her talents as a writer. Some may find it ironic that the book in which she gained the surest control of her art expresses her most despairing vision of life, but is it really? She was soon to make a journey to New Mexico and to discoveries that would brighten her spirits and give a new serenity to her later novels. Is it not, rather, entirely consistent with her devotion to her art that, when life seemed to fail her, her art saved her?

WILLA CATHER’S MY MORTAL ENEMY:
THE CONCISE PRESENTATION OF
SCENE, CHARACTER, AND THEME

By Theodore S. Adams

In several ways, My Mortal Enemy (1926) is unique among Willa Cather’s novels. It is her shortest novel,1 so short that she feared that her publisher might refuse to print it as a separate book. It is her last and most extreme example of tightly restricted form. It uses a single narrator, the least obtrusive of her narrators and window-characters, with unbroken consistency and unparalleled skill. Its cast of characters is small and its focus almost exclusively on the heroine, all other characters being sharply subordinated.

A kind of pendant to The Professor’s House (1923), My Mortal Enemy embodies within a single character themes very close to those of the earlier novel. The two novels are unusually clear examples of the démeublé technique, a technique perhaps best defined by Cather herself in her essay, “The Novel

1 The 1961 Vintage paperback edition with introduction by Marcus Klein is 196 pages long. The first, Knopf, edition is 122 pages long. Numbers in parentheses in the body of my remarks refer to the paperback edition. Except in minor matters of punctuation, the Vintage paperback is identical with the final version in the Library and Autograph editions.