Willa Cather’s French Perspectives

“French culture, coming to it as [Cather] did in her most impressionable years, . . . spoke more directly to her imagination [than English culture], and most definitely influenced her writing.” — Edith Lewis

“A great grey shoulder of land standing up in the pink light of dawn, powerful and strangely still after the distressing instability of the sea, . . . the coast that rose before [Claude] . . . was like a pillar of eternity.” — from One of Ours

“If one approaches Paris from the north the white gleam of Sacré-Coeur is the first thing that strikes the eye, and . . . with the purple city below, looks like the city of St. John’s vision . . . .” — 1902 travel articles

“The Count . . . and his apothecary . . . were thinking of a scene outside the windows . . . but the river was not the St. Lawrence. They were looking out on the Pont-Marie, and the hay-barges tied up at the Port-au-Foin. . . . About this time the bells always rang from the Célestins’ and the church of Saint-Paul.” — from Shadows on the Rock

“Sometimes he thought he would like to drive up in front of Notre Dame, in Paris, again, and see it standing there like the Rock of Ages, with the frail generations breaking about its base.” — from The Professor’s House

Cather “said she wanted to live in the Middle Ages. And we did live in the Middle Ages, so far as was possible. We hardly ever went beyond the Tuileries on the right bank of the Seine . . . . We spent nearly all our time . . . between the Seine and the Luxembourg Gardens, and on the Ile-de-la-Cite and the Ile-St-Louis.” — Edith Lewis

“Auclair watched . . . [Blinker’s] twisted face . . . become altogether strange; it brought to his mind terrible weather-worn stone faces on the churches [in France], — figures of the tormented in scenes of the Last Judgment.” — from Shadows on the Rock

“Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve [in the Panthéon] . . . I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition.” — “On Death Comes for the Archbishop"

While working on Shadows “in the small apartment at the Grosvenor, . . . [Cather] went out and bought some . . . copies of the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries which hang in the Cluny Museum, and had them hung at the foot of her bed, so when she was reading in bed at night she could look up at them . . . .” — Edith Lewis

“As the sun dropped lower, the merriment ceased, the women were tired and grew to look more and more as Millet painted them, warped and bowed and heavy. . . . Storm clouds were piling themselves up about the gorgeous sunset, and we tramped silently back to Barbizon, through the winding street . . . .” — 1902 travel articles

“Over the compote of dried plums they fell to talking of the great yellow ones that grew in the old Latour garden at home [in France]. Their thoughts met in that tilted cobble street, winding down a hill, with the uneven garden walls and tall horse-chestnuts on either side . . . .” — from the Archbishop

“At the north end of [Avignon] there rises an enormous facade of smooth rock three hundred feet above the Rhone . . . crowned by the great palace of the popes. The palace is a huge, rambling Gothic pile, flanked by six square Italian towers, with a beautiful little cathedral in front.” — 1902 travel articles

“‘That hill, Blanchet, is my Cathedral. . . . When I look up at this rock I can almost feel the Rhone behind me.’ ‘Ah, you mean the old Palace of the Popes, at Avignon! Yes, you are right, it is very like. At this hour, it is like this.’” — from the Archbishop

“A day’s riding through red earth and olives and miles of vineyard lands where grape-pickers are busy brought us back to the middle of Provence, the heart of Daudet’s country. . . . It is a high, windy, dusty country, just anchored on the banks of the turbulent Rhone . . . .” — 1902 travel articles

“[The] old Roman amphitheatre [at Arles], built . . . in the first Christian century . . . is one of the most extensive Roman ruins in France, and in a much better state of preservation than the Colosseum at Rome. It is five hundred yards in circumference and contains forty-three tiers of seats.” — 1902 travel articles

“One day, as we wandered through the great chambers of white, almost translucent stone [in the Papal Palace], alone except for a guide, this young fellow suddenly . . . began to sing, with a beautiful voice. It echoed down the corridors and under the arched ceilings like a great bell sounding . . . from some remote past; its vibrations . . . weighted down with . . . cruelties, splendours . . . . I have thought that Willa Cather wished to make her [Avignon] story like that song.” — Edith Lewis
THE 11th INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR
WILLA CATHER: A WRITER’S WORLDS
24 June—1 July 2007
PARISS & PROVENCE, FRANCE

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SETTING AND THEME: Willa Cather was a life-long Francophile, visiting France for long periods from 1902 to the late 1930s. As she developed as an artist, French culture became a touchstone for civilization itself throughout her work. French characters have important roles in O Pioneers!, One of Ours, The Professor’s House, Death Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, and, finally, Hard Punishments, the novel set in Avignon Cather was working on when she died. All of these novels but for the first have scenes or scenes set in France. The theme of the seminar is general and designed to accommodate a variety of approaches and subjects. Its title, “A Writer’s Worlds,” embraces the Nebraskan as well as French aspects of Cather’s fiction, modernism, interest in history and religion, gender roles, social criticism, politics, aesthetics, and other considerations. The program begins with two days in Paris, highlighting Cather-connected sites and art works there, and then relocates to the Avignon area of Provence, Cather’s favorite part of the country and the setting of Hard Punishments. The seminar base in Provence will be Abbey St-Michel-de-Frigolet in Tarascon, from which excursions will be planned to Cather-related sites in the area.

SEMINAR FORMAT: The seminar will begin at the Sorbonne in Paris on Sunday 24 June for a plenary orientation outlining guided visits with commentary on that day and the next to Île-de-la-Cité, Île-St-Louis, and the Marais district (locales featured in Shadows on the Rock), the Paris Cather–Chénetier murals in the Panthéon and the Unicon tapestries at the Cluny Museum that inspired the structural principles of Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows, respectively. An afternoon at the Musée d’Orsay will highlight Impressionist and Realism and Barbizon School paintings Cather used as a resource throughout her fiction. On Tuesday 26 June, seminararies will travel together on the TGV to Avignon and Abbey St-Michel-de-Frigolet, where the plenary and session papers will be scheduled. Excursions are planned to Avignon’s Papal Palace, the building which (in Edith Lewis’s words) “stirred [Cather] as no building in the world had ever done,” to the Roman ruins at Arles Cather wrote about in 1902, and to Les Baux-de-Provence, with its ruins, living village, and prospects of vineyards and olive groves. The return to Paris is scheduled for Sunday 1 July.

KEYNOTES AND STAFF: The keynote speakers are Marc Chénetier (University of Paris 7), translator of Cather novels for the popular Rivages editions, and A.S. Byatt, Booker Prize-winning British novelist and author of introductions for the Virago editions of Cather. One keynote will be presented at the Sorbonne and one at the abbey. The staff and plenary speakers include Cather specialists from North America and Europe who will be available throughout the week for discussion and consultation.

CALL FOR PAPERS: Paper proposals on any of the many aspects of the seminar theme, “A Writer’s Worlds,” are invited for presentation in special sessions. Papers which employ international and interdisciplinary approaches or deal with Cather’s modernism and eclecticism or use of the fine arts are especially welcome. Detailed abstracts of between 300 and 350 words should be submitted between 1 June and 1 October 2006. Since capacity is limited, early submission is strongly recommended, and a deposit of $150 (125 euros) or full payment of the registration fee will be due within a month of acceptance in order to reserve a place.

SEMINAR FEE: The fee of $375 (310 euros) includes the Paris tours and plenaries, TGV round-trip transportation between Paris and Avignon, paper sessions and plenaries at Abbey St-Michel-de-Frigolet, and excursions in Provence.

MEALS AND LODGING: Most meals and lodging from the evening of 26 June to the morning of 1 July will be provided at Abbey St-Michel-de-Frigolet in Tarascon. A meal-lodging package fee will be available at a reasonable price, although its exact cost has not yet been set. Accommodations and meals in Paris must be arranged on your own. A list of Paris hotels and restaurants as well as alternative lodging in the Avignon-Tarascon area will be available early in 2007. Participants who opt for accommodations other than the abbey may purchase separate meal plans.

REGISTRATION: Space is limited, so reserve a place early. Reservations will be accepted in order of receipt of the completed registration form below (or copy) with a $150 (125 euros) deposit (applicable to the seminar fee) or full payment of $375 (310 euros). Make checks payable to St. Lawrence University—Cather Seminar. Each registration will be acknowledged as received. The full registration fee is due on 1 November.

CANCELLATION: There will be a full refund minus a $25 (20 euros) service charge for cancellations received prior to 1 January 2007. If for unforeseen circumstances the seminar is cancelled, registrants will receive a full refund.

TRAVEL: Round trip TGV travel between Paris and Avignon is included in the registration fee, as are excursions by bus to Avignon, Arles, and Les Baux-de-Provence. For those who opt for their own transportation between Paris and Avignon, there will be an adjustment in the registration fee. For those who wish to rent a car in Provence, the major rental car agencies are located at the Avignon TGV station. Paris is served by two major international airports, Roissy-Charles de Gaulle and Orly, which serve all major airlines. Transportation to the city center is available via Air France shuttles, public transport (RATP) buses, RER trains, and taxis. Transportation information will be available to all registrants early in 2007.