

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
Abbreviations	xvii
1 A Starting Point	1
2 Buzzing	21
3 Possession	41
4 The Sounds Become Fury	57
5 Dust Tracks on Some Roads	79
6 Sparring	99
7 Tit for Tat	117
8 Literary Hopscotch	133
9 Crossing the Finish Lines	155
Notes	177
Works Cited	185
Index	191

INTRODUCTION

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK originates in Joseph R. Urgo's assertion that Willa Cather and William Faulkner represent "the horizontal and vertical axes of American literature."¹ According to Urgo, Cather's work conveys horizontal movement in space, over a changing landscape, while Faulkner suggests vertical movement in time, or a historical rootedness, especially movement emerging from, then flowing backward into, past time. Urgo's figure of opposite measuring lines seems to me splendidly helpful as a metaphor. I start by applauding it and end, after our writers show they can play each other's side of the board, by re-assigning it. I believe the two authors eventually and deliberately change not only their positions but their methods, having carefully assessed each other's life and work. That final gesture to the other may have started as a wave of the fingers with the thumb to the nose, but it ended as a salute and bow. Each writer could play the other's game and each proves it by doing so. And each ends a lifetime's work with an homage to the other.

The purpose of this book is to explain that considered, deliberate set of authorial gestures. To accommodate this volume's *design* (a word sacred to both writers and to such shared mentors as Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and Henry James), however, I confess immediately that my title is meant to

embrace other meanings. It includes those axes used by miners to dig into pay dirt, *pickaxes*. Faulkner and Cather both poached on and mined each other's claims, in an aggressively predatory way, each digging into the other's staked-out ground with muscular vigor. Further, I acknowledge here the axes of jousters willing to annihilate opponents, *battle-axes*. By 1932 at the latest, Willa and William seem to be charging at each other, while swinging with hopes of landing haymakers. Eventually, both steadied and surveyed their battleground with apparent satisfaction. I think they grew to be proud of each other, even to depend on each other to "get it." The title even embraces the double ax or labrys of Crete, the divine sign of concomitant private and public power, two blades joined in one symbol of completeness. To tell this story about two-steps and fox-trots, contrapuntal maneuvers, feints, fictions, absorptions, assaults, and salutes requires this book.

This story is about many texts in dialogue, written over two productive lifetimes. It's about the lifelong competition between titanic literary ambitions; and it's about mutual literary influence. We will enter here an intricate labyrinth, holding tight to a thread. It will require closest textual readings, some speculative sleuthing, and a willingness to trust the outcome at least long enough for the plot to thicken. Yet before we trace our reversible patterns in the carpet visible beneath two literary careers, we must establish the verifiable facts about this relationship. The facts are skimpy.

Most students know that school dropout William Faulkner trained himself to become a writer by reading. He explained, "When I was young I was an omnivorous reader with no judgment, no discretion—I read everything" (Fant and Ashley 114). Critic Martin Kreiswirth says of Faulkner's method in his early work, "This fundamental derivativeness, far from being accidental or deceitful, represents an attempt on Faulkner's part to follow through a deliberate program of apprenticeship involving discipleship, imitation, and even a kind of outright duplication

that approaches plagiarism” (4). Judith Sensibar summarizes, “At twenty-two, Faulkner had read the major novelists of the past three centuries, as well as Shakespeare, the Romantics, the Symbolists, Swinburne, the Georgians, Yeats, and finally, Eliot, Aiken, and other Modernists” (8). One of those modernists was Willa Cather.

A less-often-recognized point is that schooled Willa Cather, while having it out with the Nebraska prairie in her formative adolescent years, followed the same procedure as Faulkner did, with many of the same models and same results. A high school teacher of Cather’s once remarked, “She needs to brush up with people who know a lot more than she does” (Kvasnicka 64). Instead, she found most of her superiors in books. So she too practiced omnivorous reading, which included contemporaries, romantics, and eventually modernists.² As an adult in New York, she knew Mark Twain personally, as well as other iconoclasts living around her Bank Street apartment near Washington Square.³ Both of our writers are essentially self-schooled, as geniuses are likely to be; both read everything all the time, as lifelong habits. And both reshaped and recycled in their work what they read and saw. Once they focused on each other, they would read quickly, see penetratingly, and assimilate with confidence.

Faulkner never made any bones about what he did with all those writers he read: “A writer is completely rapacious, he has no morals whatever, he will steal from any source. He’s so busy stealing and using it that he himself probably never knows where he gets what he uses. . . . He is influenced by every word he ever read, I think, every sound he ever heard, every sense he ever experienced: and he is so busy writing that he hasn’t time to stop and say, ‘Now where did I steal this from?’ But he did steal it somewhere” (*Lion* 128). Cather made the same practice sound more polite: “I paid Miss Hall the highest compliment one writer can pay another; I stole from her” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 65). An important point, however, is that both these confessions were

made when the writers were feeling secure about their reputations. Cather's concession that she stole from Gertrude Hall's book on Wagnerian opera also deflected attention to "critical" or musical sources of her allusions. She was silent here about other "creative" writers, though she elsewhere disingenuously dismissed her imitativeness—or allusive propensities—to Henry James and Edith Wharton.⁴ Her preface to Hall's *Wagnerian Romances* was printed first in 1925, by which time she'd long been reiving from both biographical and fictional life stories, as well as from all genres of creative and performing arts. She left the Gertrude Hall preface to be reprinted in her posthumous *On Writing* of 1949, a very premeditated volume.

It remains to establish how often our two writers explicitly acknowledged each other. We may be dealing with the two most secretive writers of the twentieth century here. Cather, of course, tried to mandate that all her letters be burned. They weren't, but they also haven't been collected and published. The best compendium, compromised by Cather's prohibition against direct quotation, and out-of-date as soon as issued because Cather letters destined for archives are now turning up in almost every season, is Janis P. Stout's *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*. It is composed of summaries and contains no references to Faulkner. Cather had a firm rule against commenting publicly on any living writers. That makes very singular the fact that she mentions both Faulkner and D. H. Lawrence in an addendum attached to her essay "148 Charles Street," ostensibly a loving recollection of Annie Fields, which she collected—as I will show later, not at all carelessly with its addendum attached—in *Not Under Forty*. The addendum allows her to stress the publication date of the reference—1936—fourteen years after she published the essay proper. The fact will eventually, I hope, prove arresting.

Faulkner acknowledged Cather at intervals throughout his career, early, middle, and late.⁵ He wrote Anita Loos in a letter he dated "Something Febry 1926": "I am still rather Victorian in my

prejudices regarding the intelligence of women, despite Elinor Wylie and Willa Cather and all the balance of them” (*Selected Letters* 32). When prodded in 1948 to name significant contemporary writers, at the University of Mississippi in the year following her death, Faulkner first put Cather in the top five and then substituted his own name for hers (*Lion* 55). This ambiguous gesture could mean that he considered her his only real rival. In any case, when University of Virginia students asked in 1957 whether he read women writers, he immediately cited Brontë, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow (Gwynn and Blotner 202). By the time the State Department had sent him abroad to Japan as a Nobel-winning cultural ambassador, Faulkner was using Cather as a kind of literary bridge-across-the-waters: “There are some works of several people which are first rate. I can name the ones that I was impressed with and that probably influenced me to an extent that I still like to read—one a woman, Willa Cather—I think she is known in Japan” (*Lion* 167–68). The point for us, then, is that both these startlingly private, elusive, secretive, and evasive writers made a point to salute each other publicly. Each must have been aware of the other, and of the implications of the salute, for a long time.

This fact has been hard on their admirers. The devotees, as the writers, do seem opposite each other in every way. Thus, readers who gravitate eagerly toward one writer sometimes stagger repelled from the other. Each writer has battalions of defenders and supporters, not to mention scholars whose egos can seem to be at stake in questions about how writers are ranked. What I will argue here is that the two writers had their eyes on the prize, and therefore on each other, steadily, after 1921. Each measured the other unblinkingly and found a worthy peer. Both writers were profoundly proud, competitive, and ambitious. Each aspired to be America’s greatest. Not surprisingly, then, they seem to have infuriated each other after a while, and to have made sure the other knew it. That initial back-and-forthing phased into killer

ping-pong before the contest cooled. But add the eventual scores we will tally here however we will, both ended their careers saluting the other, as well as revising the other and one-upping the other, while insistently rewriting the other. By the end they seem almost to have invented the other, if only by constant goading. I think no other literary relationship was ever so surreptitious, so enduring, so intense, or so profoundly productive. We readers are its lucky heirs.