

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 21 (2008)

Artikel: Medial effects : the singer and her voice in Willa Cather's The song of the lark
Autor: Straumann, Barbara
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-130650>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 05.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Medial Effects: The Singer and Her Voice in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

Barbara Straumann

How does narrative literature as a medium map the representational elusiveness of the voice? What are the typical narratives revolving around the singer? Does her performance of scores and libretti turn her into the medium of voices other than her own? Or does she transform the operatic stage into a vehicle of self-expression? My discussion of *The Song of the Lark* focuses on the ways in which Willa Cather's *Künstlerroman* uses the voice as a trope of self-discovery. The singing of its exceptional protagonist, Thea Kronborg, appears to emanate from her unique self, her distinct "voice." While the novel thus emphasizes, and in fact valorizes, her self-sufficiency, it can simultaneously be seen to foreground the notion that the voice always mediates between the individual and the collective. Thea Kronborg emerges not only as the textual effect of a multiplicity of "voices," namely the myriad descriptions offered both by the narrator and other focalizing figures, her voice also absorbs American landscapes and dreams so as to expand into a song that has both individual and universal resonances.

In 1913, just two years before the publication of *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather wrote a magazine article entitled "Three American Singers." Her textual portrait of Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar and Olive Fremstad is illustrated by a number of photographs showing the opera stars both on and off-stage. Thus, for example, we encounter an image of the Swedish soprano Fremstad on board an ocean liner sailing to Europe after the end of the New York opera season juxtaposed with a picture of her stage performance as Wagner's Sieglinde on the opposite page. The entire series of images can be seen to raise questions concerning the status of the singer, her performance and the concept of 'voice.' A case in point is the illustration that dominates and literally stands out from the first page of the article. Let us take a closer look at the full-length portrait of the statuesque figure, from which all back-

ground has been cropped and which represents Olive Fremstad as Wagner's Isolde. The singer occupies a commanding presence reinforced by the top part of her dress which evokes an armored breastplate. Crowned by a diadem, her head is slightly tilted backward so as to accentuate a prominent chin in profile, while her extended right arm forms a straight horizontal line reaching into the other half of the page just as the folds of her long costume extend into the left-hand column of Cather's text. But what or whom do we actually see? What does the image perform?

We cannot be certain what exactly is being enacted. Is the singer reaching out to Isolde's hallucination of her dead Tristan risen again in the final *Liebestod* aria? Or do her heroic gesture and regal posture point to no scene in particular, underlining instead the general grandeur of the singer and/or her operatic part? Even more importantly, the image poses fundamental questions to do with issues of performance, especially, who or what acts as a medium for what? Does the singer lend her voice and body to the score and libretto, thus turning into the composer's or conductor's medium, while she effaces herself as an individual? Or do the opera and, more specifically, her role serve as the performer's medium through which she constitutes herself as an individual "voice" so as to speak for herself and to make herself heard by others? Moreover, if we turn to the introductory paragraph of the text, is it not remarkable that Cather should portray the three singers as explicitly American voices? Note that she describes their "supremely individual success" as "one of the most interesting stories in the history of American achievement" (Cather, *Three Singers* 33). Each of the singers is, thus, seen to stand for a radical individualism *and*, at the same time, to exemplify a national narrative. My core concern in what follows is precisely this: the relation between the singer's voice as the key signature of her unique individuality and its simultaneous transformation into a universal song.

While Cather wrote numerous texts, both fictional and non-fictional, attesting to her great interest in the theater and performance in general and her strong investment in the figure of the singer in particular, I should like to focus on her treatment of the singer's voice in *The Song of the Lark* (1915).¹ Not only does Cather's *Künstlerroman* represent her

¹ As a journalist, Cather wrote a great number of music and theater reviews. Many of her stories featuring singers are collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), while her novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) turns around the fated admiration and love of the eponymous

most detailed and extended engagement with the singer and her song, but it also invokes the voice as the vehicle for what is rare enough, namely a portrait of the artist as a successful young woman. The novel is modeled on the artistic biographies of both Cather and Fremstad and picks up on the former's life-long attachment to the landscapes and the pioneer past of the American West as well as the latter's Scandinavian background and heroic energy. More concretely, it traces the struggles and strivings associated with the discovery and development of the extraordinary voice of Thea Kronborg – from her Swedish family home in the Midwestern town of Moonstone, Colorado, and her studies in Chicago, up to her fame as a Wagnerian soprano of international renown.²

As part of my work on a larger project on the vocal effects of female performer voices in the Anglo-American tradition, my interest in the literary treatment of the singer's voice concerns both medial and thematic issues. What are the typical narratives evolving around the singer and her song? By what medial transferences is her voice – in its unique presence and, therefore, in its representational elusiveness – performed by the literary text? And what does it mean for the individual singer to embody the collective texts, images and poses of the scripts and scores she enacts? As I will argue in my reading of Cather's novel, her protagonist is far from serving as a medium for the art of others. Rather, it is their music and the cultural imaginary at large which serve as vehicles for her voice and self-discovery. Instead of being appropriated by a "voice" other than her own, Thea Kronborg's song is anchored in a depth and an innerness that are both corporeal and psychological, thus authenticating her voice as the privileged organ of individual expression, as the locus where her singular self can resound. My article will explore three key aspects: it will offer a discussion of the singer's voice and its mediality in general, as well as the literary devices and medial means by which Cather's text evokes the voice of her protagonist in particular, before I examine the ways in which her protagonist emerges as a voice of the American Dream.

heroine, a young music student, for the older, charismatic singer Clement Sebastian. For a general discussion of Cather's interest in performance and the performing arts, see Janis P. Stout.

² For a more detailed account of the elements of Cather's and Fremstad's biographies incorporated in the author's "most personal and revealing novel," see Hermione Lee (119-123, 120).

How does *The Song of the Lark* conceive of the singer's voice? Let me, as an entry point, isolate three descriptions which occur at different junctures of the novel but which invoke remarkably similar notions. Throughout the text, Cather uses her heroine's voice as a trope for her unique individuality, which sets her apart – and, to some degree, alienates her – from others, from her family, from the conformity of the Moonstone townspeople, as well as the affected artificiality of other singers. With her first earnings as a teenage piano teacher, Thea furnishes a room of her own in an attic space far away from the noise and turmoil of ordinary family life: “The clamor about her drowned the voice within herself. In the end of the wing, separated from the other upstairs sleeping-rooms by a long, cold, unfinished lumber room, her mind worked better” (Cather, *Song* 53). The passage puts emphasis on “voice” as Thea's inner self and, reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson's “voices” of self-reliance “which we hear in solitude” but which “grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world” (212), she evidently needs to be alone to “hear” herself.

That Thea's voice is coterminous with her self is further emphasized in the scene in which Andor Harsanyi, her piano teacher in Chicago, discovers her vocal potential. Coming from her innermost depths, her singing bespeaks – or rather sings of – her intimate innerness. “She sang from the bottom of herself. Her breath came from down where her laugh came from. . . . The voice did not thin as it went up; the upper tones were as full and rich as the lower, produced in the same way and as unconsciously, only with deeper breath” (Cather, *Song* 164). In almost identical fashion, the third passage describes Thea's voice as literally resonating with her inner being. “Her voice . . . seemed to come from somewhere deep within her, there were such strong vibrations in it” (Cather, *Song* 388). As one of the novel's very last descriptions, the passage, moreover, suggests that having established herself as a professional opera singer, Thea and her voice continue to be authentic, that it is precisely through her song that she has become not only a successful singer, but also a distinct individual self.³ While invoking the voice of its heroine as the means of her gradual self-discovery and self-expression, Cather's novel is, however, not without its paradoxes. As I will show, it

³ See the following statement of one of the characters which, also occurring towards the end of the novel, refers to Thea's superlative selfhood in almost paradoxical fashion: “It's the same voice only more so. . . . She's all there, only there's a great deal more of her” (Cather, *Song* 336-37).

textually performs Thea's "very individual" voice as an effect or texture mediated by a myriad of other voices, echoes and resonances (Cather, *Song* 176).

Any singer's voice inevitably modulates both individual and collective dimensions so that her song transforms itself into a site of various transfers and translations. By performing preexisting musical scripts, the singer offers her body, voice and unique timbre to musical scores and libretti, and can thus potentially turn into an instrument or allegory – of the composer's creativity, of the medial system of opera and the narratives it produces. Accordingly, the singer qua medium has frequently been theorized as making something present but becoming herself absent in the process. Her individual self, so the argument goes, fades as the singer subjects herself to the fantasies she enacts for her audience, or as her singing transforms into a pure voice-object abstracted from all subjectivity and affording a sublime experience of transcendence. This figurative demise of the performer's self is reinforced by the libretti of nineteenth-century opera, which more often than not have their female protagonists die on stage. At the same time, opera presents us with a paradox: while female singers cannot but continually perform characters who go unheard and ultimately fall silent, the soprano is – from a musical standpoint – the most valued voice in nineteenth-century opera. As such, the female singer is given not only the greatest arias together with considerable vocal presence, but potentially also a stage for her empowering self-transformations.⁴

What, then, does it mean to sing? What do the mutual exchanges between opera and singer look like? Is singing fatal to the self? What does the singer give voice to? Is the individual singer subsumed by her

⁴ Catherine Clément's classic study demonstrates a systematic undoing of women in operatic plots, but almost entirely neglects musical aspects and hence the sound and presence of voices. Similar to Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of the interlinkings of performance and death, Carolyn Abbate emphasizes the dialectics at stake in performance between ephemerality and immortality as well as a potential transformation of the human voice into a mechanical instrument. Stanley Cavell, finally, embeds his reflections on the autonomy and the death of the operatic feminine voice in a philosophical argument turning on a fundamental destruction of the world in the Western tradition of skepticism and thus, as he writes, on the wish of men to both hear and not hear the woman's voice, "to know and not to know what she desires" (*A Pitch* 132). Empowering readings of the diva and her song can be found in Rupert Christiansen's brief introduction to his history of the prima donna (9-12) and in Susan J. Leonardi's early article "To Have a Voice: The Politics of the Diva," which is partly reworked in *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*, Leonardi's later study co-authored with Rebecca A. Pope.

song, or does she come into being precisely through the mediation of the operatic system and its public stage, on which her voice finds resonance and expression? Put differently, whose voice is it that we hear? Who has a claim on the singing of the singer – the singer as the source of her unique timbre, the composer as the “authoring” voice of the opus, the conductor as the orchestrator and/or the listeners as the consumers of a particular performance?

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of *The Song of the Lark*, I would like to invoke another narrative text that puts a female singer’s voice center stage and, in doing so, raises the question of who possesses a voice, whether or not the singer has a voice while singing. George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894) is a far cry from, but also a useful foil for, Cather’s far more optimistic text. Indeed, the enormously popular late Victorian novel epitomizes nineteenth-century figurations of the feminine voice, notably a fascination for and simultaneous ambivalence towards its public and artistic articulation. A young woman with a rich, full voice, Trilby is initially tone-deaf. But while literally hypnotized by the mesmeric powers of the at once ingenious and demonic musician Svengali, Trilby transforms into an acclaimed diva. During her superlative performances, “La Svengali” has perfect pitch, while as an individual Trilby ceases to exist. She remains unconscious not only of her vocal transformation and presence, but also of the fact that her voice comes to serve as the instrument for Svengali’s art and thus as a medium of a “voice” other than her own. Clearly this scenario can be read against the grain. As Nina Auerbach points out, Trilby is able, under hypnosis, to improvise infinite variations on familiar tunes, which implies a creative power of endless transformation and a perpetual renewal of the world around her (286). Furthermore, by having her gigantic figure tower not just over her audience but also Svengali, Du Maurier’s original illustrations suggest that, though ventriloquized by him, the performer may well exceed and elude the power and possession of her master, who, having no voice of his own, can only “sing” through her.

Nevertheless, by separating the voice from the self, Du Maurier’s impersonal performer stands in sharp contrast to the intimate relation which Cather establishes between the singer and her singing. While the performances of “La Svengali” alienate Trilby from herself (the perfect voice of the mechanical diva is not only detached from, but also drains and depletes the individual), Thea Kronborg clearly speaks and sings for herself. Not only this, but Cather’s empowered figuration of the singer

treats the voice as a metonym of her artistic agency and individual self-assertion in what is both a *Künstlerroman* and a humanistic novel of development. In contrast to the uncannily impersonal voice circulating and echoing through Du Maurier's text, Thea unites self and voice, individual growth and artistic expression.

Cather deploys the singer's voice as a trope for the development and self-discovery of her exceptional heroine. Put another way, Thea's art results directly from her unique self, her distinct "voice." Even before any of the characters conceives of Thea as a professional singer, the novel foregrounds her singularity and connects it to her voice. Her first piano teacher Wunsch, for example, notices that while reading verse, her voice is not just different from ordinary Moonstone speech, but in fact "a nature-voice, . . . breathed from the creature and apart from language, like the sound of the wind in the trees or the murmur of water" (Cather, *Song* 70). Given Thea's characterization as a natural voice, it is hardly surprising that the training required by any artistic singer should be largely bypassed. Indeed, what matters to Cather is not an acquired skill, but the inner voice of Thea's unique self that has always already been in existence. Accordingly, the novel posits her voice as a concealed inner-ness, a "second self" which awaits her discovery because it cannot yet be fully known by Thea (Cather, *Song* 187). After her childhood spent in Moonstone, the narrative follows her to Chicago, where she studies the piano single-mindedly only to awaken, after a considerable while, to the recognition that singing is her actual vocation and her voice the vehicle through which her uniqueness finds expression.⁵ That the text should then elide an entire decade during which Cather's protagonist studies voice and celebrates her first artistic successes in Germany is, again, no coincidence, but only reinforces her self-sufficing status. In the process of her continual becoming, Thea always relies and centers on her inherent "nature." Or, to pick up on the language of the novel, it is in and

⁵ As Cather emphasizes in her 1932 preface, the title of the novel refers not to "the vocal accomplishments of the heroine," but to a "rather second-rate" painting of the same title by Jules Breton in The Art Institute of Chicago (Cather, *Song* 416). It becomes the favorite piece of Cather's heroine, who takes a considerable while to discover the museum (just like her voice) but who then comes to recognize herself in the girl standing on a flat plane of fields, listening and, as it seems, "awakening" to the song of a lark high up in the early morning sky (Cather, *Song* 171).

through her voice that she “finds” and “emerges” as herself, that she gives birth to herself as an artist.⁶

At the same time, Cather’s figuration of Thea as a radically individual and almost entirely self-absorbed voice harbors an aporia. What *seems* to be obscured by Cather’s plot of self-discovery and self-determination is the fact that the autonomy of voices can never be total, that they cannot echo themselves alone, but need the other – whether in the form of an audience or cultural texts – with and through which they can resonate. If, however, we shift our focus from the text’s narrative thrust to its aesthetic representation or performance of Thea’s song, we notice that her voice is indeed an effect of mediation. One of the ways in which the novel evokes the voice of its protagonist is to quote text fragments of the songs and arias that she sings and which allow at least musically informed readers to mentally hear her sound. As moments in which the narrative flow seems temporarily arrested in an immediate “here and now,” the isolated English and German lines can be seen as a vocal effect gesturing towards the way in which the texts, set to tunes by music, may be interpreted by the singing voice.

Cather deploys another, more effective technique in order to evoke Thea’s voice in all its metaphorical associations above and beyond her literal singing. While any direct narratorial characterization would fall short of the presence and uniqueness of her extraordinary voice, the novel – instead of restricting focalization to the narrator and/or the protagonist – deploys multiple narrator- and character-focalizers together with a great amount of direct character speech. These other “voices” mediate Thea’s voice by incessantly studying and discussing her together with the effects and affects she triggers in them. As a result, her voice comes to be literally invoked and produced by these other “voices.”

⁶ Harsanyi’s comments, in particular, appear to encapsulate the concept of the artist endorsed by the text and also adopted by Thea. Not only does he direct her to her actual vocation – “I believe that the strongest need of your nature is to find yourself, to emerge *as* yourself. Until I heard you sing I wondered how you were to do this, but it has grown clearer to me every day” (Cather, *Song* 181) – but he also refers to the artist’s self-birth – “Every artist makes himself [sic] born” (Cather, *Song* 153), a notion which is later repeated by Thea herself: “‘Harsanyi said once,’ she remarked thoughtfully, ‘that if one became an artist one had to be born again, and that one owed nothing to anybody’” (Cather, *Song* 320).

The paradox consists, therefore, of a highly individual voice which emerges in and through the mediation of other figures and focalizers. That Thea Kronborg is evoked by the ways in which others read her is evident from the very beginning. In the first chapter, a scene of rebirth, in which the family doctor Howard Archie literally restores her breath by saving her from pneumonia, he looks at her intently, searching for signs to support his belief in her unique singularity and distinction from her siblings (Cather, *Song* 13). Similarly, Mrs. Kronborg watches her daughter, asking herself why she finds her “more interesting than her other children” (Cather, *Song* 60).

At the same time, Thea’s focalization through others casts her as a figure of the imaginary. Her piano teacher Wunsch does justice to his name “Wunsch” when he explains to her that it is desire alone that matters as it enables extraordinary individuals to achieve greatness (Cather, *Song* 69). Likewise Dr. Archie advises her not to settle down but to “forge ahead” and to “do something with that fine voice of yours” – “We all like people who do things, even if we only see their faces on a cigar-box lid” (Cather, *Song* 123). However, it is important to note that Thea cannot be subsumed by the fantasies others entertain for and about her. Rather than serve as the medium or image of their fantasies and desires, the growth of Thea’s voice instrumentalizes and absorbs the other characters, who furnish her with dream material.⁷

In her individual pursuit, Thea does, however, realize a collective narrative: it is her enactment of the American Dream that allows her to invent herself as a radically independent and individual “voice.” Her career harks back to the three singers and their “supremely individual success” which Cather portrays in her magazine article, and she also reminds us of the pioneer figures in other Cather texts such as *O Pio-*

⁷ I disagree here with Mary Titus, who argues in her comparative reading of *Trilby* and *The Song of the Lark* that the two female singers serve as figures or “vessels” onto whom male mentors and admirers project their readings and desires, thus turning them into the stakes of their homosocial bonds. Cather, I would argue, goes to great lengths to map Thea’s voice as the medium or trope of an unfathomable and inalienable dimension of the self. A case in point is her admirer Ray Kennedy, who tells her pioneer stories he has collected as a freight train conductor and former drifter and, dreaming of a shared future, plans to propose to her once he has made a fortune. Importantly enough, however, he neither fully understands nor misunderstands her. “Yes,” Thea is said to reflect not without a certain degree of triumph, “with Ray she was safe; by him she never would be discovered!” (Cather, *Song* 97). To an even greater degree than the other figures, Ray serves as a function of Thea rather than forming a fully developed character in his own right. It is with the money he bequeaths to her that she can study music in Chicago.

neers! (1913) or *My Ántonia* (1918) – only here the protagonist does not have to cultivate the natural wilderness of the great Midwestern plains, but instead follows the urge and ambition to discover her individual voice. As a result, the text maps the relation between singer and voice in such a way as to bring into play the trajectory of continual rebirth and reinvention so typical of the American imaginary. Not only does Thea's self-realization as a voice of the American Dream hinge on a series of literal departures and new beginnings, her development and self-discovery also appear to be driven by her voice as the secret dimension in her which renders her different from others, which, as it seems, cannot be verbalized but vocalized in and through her song – a song that ultimately becomes larger than herself. While referring to her voice as a trope of her self, the novel also invokes notions of agency as “having a voice in your own history.”⁸ After all, the voice is something that an individual produces in a way in which he or she does not produce other attributes so that its projection has both self- and world-creating effects (see Connor 3-4). Not only does the former small-town girl Thea eventually move into a glamorous world of opera, but she also projects spaces with and for her voice in a larger sense. While producing herself as an artist, her song simultaneously carries the performative power to create new worlds that testify first and foremost to the existence and autonomy of her “voice,” but also speak to others.

That Thea creates herself as a distinctly American voice is first suggested by her recollection of the deep overgrown wagon trails which she once saw running between east and west on a wide open plain, a space of overt expansion. Windswept and inhabited by eagles, the sight still represents to her “the spirit of human courage” (Cather, *Song* 51). As if inspired by her memory of the plains and their over-individual associations, Thea herself turns into an expanding figure in the course of the narrative. Her lover Fred Ottenburg focalizes her spatial emanation in the following way:

Thea was one of those people who emerge, unexpectedly, larger than we are accustomed to see them. Even at this distance one got the impression of muscular energy and audacity, – a kind of brilliancy of motion, – of a personality that carried across big spaces and expanded among big things. (Cather, *Song* 271)

⁸ I am indebted here, as elsewhere in the article, to Stanley Cavell's discussion of “voice,” especially in his reading of George Cukor's 1944 melodrama *Gaslight* (*A Pitch* 134-36, *Contesting* 58).

Significantly enough, “her whole augmented self,” expressing itself in her free movement and her deep breath, comes to claim more space than that actually occupied by her body (Cather, *Song* 314).

The site most explicitly aligned with the expansion of Thea and her voice is Panther Canyon, an ancient settlement of Native American cliff dwellers, where she retreats to regenerate after her exhausting studies. During her dreams at night and her early morning walks towards the ruins, she conceives of the canyon as “a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally” (Cather, *Song* 256). By no means distant, this voice of the past comes to blend with the singer. While lying in the sun and bathing in the river, she appears to give rebirth both to herself and the history of the canyon as she physically absorbs the surroundings and dreams of its former inhabitants “as if they had once been part of herself” (Cather, *Song* 255). The proximity of the ancient people and their empty houses “haunted by certain fears and desires” is so immediate that Cather’s protagonist believes she receives non-verbal suggestions which transform themselves directly into her bodily sensations (Cather, *Song* 257).⁹ What is remarkable about the Panther Canyon passage and its direct conversation with the dead is the way in which it merges the woman with the country. Indeed one is tempted to read Thea as an allegory of America, its landscapes and populations, its narratives and dreams.¹⁰ Yet at the same time, I wish to contend, there is a significant reversal at stake: it is not so much Thea who allegorically represents the country as a disembodied sign, but America that gives body to Thea and her voice.

All of this suggests that Cather’s novel maps a self-empowered figuration of the singer, which departs from the ventriloquized feminine voice as found, for instance, in *Trilby*. Instead the text draws on a humanistic notion of the voice as the individual’s key signature, its inalienable marker of selfhood. Not only this, but in performing Thea Kron-

⁹ “It seemed to Thea that a certain understanding of those old people came up to her out of the rock shelf on which she lay; that certain feelings were transmitted to her, suggestions that were simple, insistent and monotonous, like the beating of Indian drums. They were not expressible in words, but seemed rather to translate themselves into attitudes of the body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation . . .” (Cather, *Song* 257).

¹⁰ Note Joseph R. Urgo’s reading of Thea as a “textual personification of empire” and thus as an allegory of America’s restless energy, its continuous movement and expansion (44). In a similar vein, Christine Dunn Henderson reads Thea Kronborg as a figure who realizes the promise of American democracy, while simultaneously falling prey to the dangers located by Tocqueville in radical individualism and independence.

borg's radical individualism through various transfers and exchanges – with the other character voices evoking her, with the collective dreams nourishing her self-invention – the novel refers to an almost megalomaniac dimension in her voice. At a crucial moment in the Panther Canyon passage, Thea compares her breath and singing to the making of a vessel to transport water, the element of life *par excellence* (Cather, *Song* 258). Importantly enough, however, she does not figure as a receptacle or medium that is inspired by others, but rather absorbs and subsumes her surroundings for her art, voice and being.

Thea continues to converse implicitly with the voices of the dead cliff dwellers and the Mexicans, with whom she sang despite the prejudice of the white Moonstone majority. She fondly remembers the landscape of her childhood, which she felt compelled to leave, just like her mother, to whose deathbed she did not return as she was taking advantage of a career opportunity, but whose memory she resurrects in one of her Wagner performances. Yet, even as Thea's voice resonates with a myriad of sources, the novel almost immediately dissolves the tension between the citational and the authentic that subtends every voice, the sense that even in our most intimate articulations we are spoken by other voices, by cultural texts and fragments. Engaging with the question of what an American voice would sound like, how a voice discovers and invents itself in the New World, Cather's novel presents us with a heroine who sings of individualism and independence from the very start. She does so because she is able to transform everything – whether European opera or the landscape and past of the American West – into herself. Just like the musical scores and roles which she appropriates as hers, the people and landscapes surrounding her all come to represent her, granting her a form of omnipresence as she turns them into vehicles for her voice and vitality.

Yet even while the novel affirms the energetic expansion of its protagonist, allegory cannot entirely be staved off – precisely because her voice is so successful. I should like to conclude, therefore, with the ambivalent side-effects which the success of Cather's heroine creates towards the end. The final part of the novel is simply entitled "Kronborg" as if to signal the singer's triumphant arrival and achievement in the operatic system. Indeed, the ending culminates in a performance of Wagner's Sieglinde in which Thea Kronborg has come into "full possession" of her body and voice (Cather, *Song* 403-404). At the same time, the last part of the novel makes reference to "something a little cold and

empty,” a professional restlessness that exists besides the “entirely illuminated” and “wholly present” moments of the perfected diva Kronborg (Cather, *Song* 373). When her early friend and mentor, Dr. Archie, witnesses her performance of Elsa in *Lohengrin*, he first feels estranged from her other-worldly presence that bears only a faint memory trace of the Thea he once knew. Then he lets himself be carried away by her power of radical transformation, her emanation into another world, which he compares to an experience both “exalting and impersonal”: “Something old died in one, and out of it something new was born” (Cather, *Song* 350). Yet, as he discovers when he goes to see her afterwards, the persona who thus opens a world of transcendence is left depleted and emptied by her art. Together with her remoteness and her isolation from others, I take this scene to suggest that the artist has moved into a realm out of touch with the ordinarily human. Once the protagonist has successfully fashioned herself as a mythical icon and thus implicitly sings about herself as a successful example of the American Dream, she shifts from her individual particularity to a song of universality.

Viewed in this way, it is only consistent that the epilogue of the novel should turn away from the protagonist so as to revisit the last Kronborg family member in Moonstone: Aunt Tillie, Thea’s earliest fan and admirer, who still lives for and through the voice of her niece, looks at her photographs, listens to her recordings, collects newspaper articles and, most important of all, by keeping Thea the talk of the town, provides people with food for conversation. This shift away from the heroine towards ever more refracted accounts and echoes of her voice is significant. It suggests that Thea’s singing continues to inspire dreams and stories which open a new world to others. Remaining on everybody’s lips, she is preserved by the Moonstone voices – as a legend, a myth, a dream that supersedes her particular ‘voice.’ Ultimately, it is the move towards universal significance that represents both the loss and gain of her successful song.

References

- Abbate, Carolyn. *In Search of Opera*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Auerbach, Nina. "Magi and Maidens: The Romance of the Victorian Freud." *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): 281-300.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. "'Lasciatemi morir': Representations of the Diva's Swan Song." *Modern Language Quarterly* 5.4 (1992): 427-48.
- Cather, Willa. *Lucy Gayheart*. 1935. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *My Ántonia*. 1918. London: Virago, 1980.
- . *O Pioneers!* 1913. London: Virago, 1983.
- . *The Song of the Lark*. 1915. Ed. Janet Sharistanian. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . "Three American Singers." *McClure's Magazine* 42.2 (1913): 33-48.
- . *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. 1920. *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1992. 353-529.
- Cavell, Stanley. *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- . *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Christiansen, Rupert. *Prima Donna: A History*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- Clément, Catherine. *Die Frau in der Oper: Besiegt, verraten und verkauft*. 1979. Trans. Annette Holoch. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992.
- Connor, Steven. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Du Maurier, George. *Trilby*. 1894. Ed. Elaine Showalter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dunn Henderson, Christine. "Singing an American Song: Tocquevillian Reflections on Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*." *Seers and Judges: American Literature as Political Philosophy*. Ed. Christine Dunn Henderson. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002. 73-86.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." 1841. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. Ed. Lawrence Buell. New York: Modern Library, 2006. 208-31.
- Lee, Hermione. *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*. 1989. London: Virago, 1997.

- Leonardi, Susan J. "To Have a Voice: The Politics of the Diva." *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 13 (1987): 65-72.
- and Rebecca A. Pope. *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Stout, Janis P. "Willa Cather and the Performing Arts." *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Ed. Marilee Lindemann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 101-115.
- Titus, Mary. "Cather's Creative Women and Du Maurier's Cozy Men: *The Song of the Lark* and *Trilby*." *Modern Language Studies* 24.2 (1994): 27-37.
- Urgo, Joseph R. "The Cather Thesis: The American Empire of Migration." *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Ed. Marilee Lindemann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 35-50.
-

