CHAPTER 2

Gender and Modernity: The Things Not Named in One of Ours

Breaking the World

Destabilization, violence, and vision have characterized Cather’s 1922 World War I novel One of Ours since its publication. Her famous claim that “[t]he world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” in the introduction to Not Under Forty, her 1936 volume of essays, further links this time period to fragmentation and rupture from its immediate past. In an appreciative essay on Cather, Katherine Anne Porter’s description of the postwar period also uses metaphors of destruction to describe civilian life, noting how the disorientation of battle extended far beyond the trenches, leaving “almost no frontiers unattacked”:

I had had time to grow up, to consider, to look again, to begin finding my way a little through the inordinate clutter and noise of my immediate day, in which very literally everything in the world was being pulled apart, torn up, turned wrong side out and upside down; almost no frontiers left unattacked, governments and currencies falling; even the very sexes seemed to be changing back and forth and multiplying weird and unclassifiable genders. And every day, as in the arts, as in schemes of government and organized crime, there was, there had to be, something New.

Porter attributes innovation to subjectivity itself, noting not just a simple reversal of gender roles but also substantial gender disorientation resulting in new and “unclassifiable” genders, “changing back and forth,” multiple and diverse, always in process. In One of Ours, the character Claude Wheeler...
performs this chaotic period of cultural and gender destabilization, reenacting the painful processes of modernity as they occur. Claude participates in war and pandemic disease, including death in the trenches, without comprehending the dehumanizing brutality of the events he is experiencing; he epitomizes W. B. Yeats's famed observation that “[m]an can embody truth but he cannot know it.” Conversely, his mother Mrs. Wheeler maintains a dual vision, both orthodox and radical, capable of partially filling in the gaps and silences bracketing Claude’s life. The narrative emphasizes her vision at crucial aspects, especially in its final chapter providing the novel’s complicated sense of closure.

While often viewed as a disappointing “problem” novel in Cather’s canon, One of Ours can more profitably be interpreted as a transitional work emphasizing shifting questions of gender and power. The simple narrative construction and naïve characters of One of Ours belie Cather’s sophisticated grasp of the major forces breaking the world apart in 1922 or thereabouts—World War I, the different waves of the 1918 influenza pandemic, and a range of gender possibilities. One of Ours portrays gender roles as fluid, available for selection by characters of either sex instead of being determined by society or biology; indeed, younger characters are more successful when they adopt behaviors and characteristics associated with the opposite gender. While portraying conventional heterosexual marriage negatively, Cather organizes the life of her protagonist Claude Wheeler around the influences of culturally dominant female figures: his mother Mrs. Wheeler, his wife Enid, and the multifaceted symbolic presence of Joan of Arc. Claude finds his ideal emotional relationships in wartime France with both a man (David Gerhardt) and, more briefly, a woman (Mlle. de Courcy). At its conclusion, the novel maintains an ironic distance from Claude’s discredited romantic view of war to focus on his mother and their family servant Mahailey. This female couple provides the novel’s closing vision of Claude, a mourning perspective at once dark and resonant.

Judith Butler has noted Cather’s male protagonists’ often brilliant resistance to gender and sexual coherence:

For the figures of boys and men in Cather retain the residue of that crossing [across gender and sexual conventions], and their often brilliant resistance to gender and sexual coherence results from the impossibility of making that “dangerous crossing”…fully or finally.

Critics have interpreted Claude’s resistance to gender coherence in relation to what Cather famously termed “the thing not named” in her essay “The Novel Demeublé” (literally, “The Unfurnished Novel”) written in 1922, the year One of Ours was published. “The Novel Demeublé” plays a dual role in