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► **To cite this version:**

Florent Dubois. Interpretation or ‘the Thing Itself:’ the Art of Performance in Lucy Gayheart. 15th International Willa Cather Seminar: “Fragments of Desire”: Cather and the Arts, The Willa Cather Foundation; University of Nebraska, Jun 2015, Red Cloud and Lincoln, Nebraska, United States. hal-01541657

HAL Id: hal-01541657

<https://hal.science/hal-01541657>

Submitted on 19 Jun 2017

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Paper given at the 15th International Willa Cather Seminar (Red Cloud and Lincoln, Nebraska, June 5-11, 2015)

Interpretation or “the Thing Itself”? The Art of Performance in *Lucy Gayheart*¹

With *Lucy Gayheart* Willa Cather returned to the genre of the *Künstlerroman* she had first explored in *The Song of the Lark*. Interestingly, while there was one artist in the 1915 novel, there are two in *Lucy Gayheart* and both meet a tragic death, giving this coming-of-age story a markedly different resonance. Whereas *The Song of the Lark* depicted Thea Kronborg’s ascent to stardom, *Lucy Gayheart* tells the story of a moderately ambitious piano student who is cut off in her prime before she can prove her worth. In this later novel, Cather seems to display the same aesthetic ideals as in her early works. And yet, as a brief look at the synopsis of both novels quickly shows, it would be quite hasty to regard *Lucy Gayheart* as a mere rewriting of *The Song of the Lark*. Although many expressions and turns of phrase regarding music are very reminiscent of Cather’s previous novels and stories, it is hard to ignore the much gloomier atmosphere that pervades the novel, which according to Susan Rosowski even carries Gothic undertones (219-231). One other major difference between the two novels is the perspective from which art is described in each : whereas *The Song of the Lark* takes us to the heart of the creative process by showing us how someone becomes a great artist, in *Lucy Gayheart* the protagonist most of the time is not the object of study. On the contrary, she is in the position of the spectator who looks up to the great artist (Clement Sebastian but also the soprano the Gayhearts admire in a performance of *The Bohemian Girl* in Haverford [bk. 2, ch. 7]) and tries to understand where his or her mysterious power comes from. This change of perspective is not merely a ploy to make yet another novel about a subject that Cather had already dealt with many times in her fiction. In the twenty years that separate the two novels I would argue that Cather’s views on life and the arts have shifted from optimism to skepticism. At the beginning of her writing career, when she was still mostly a journalist, she stated that the hardest thing for an artist was to “express” his or her ideas and perceptions. However “perilous” that “voyage” from the brain to the instrument of one’s art, she did not doubt that a few managed to journey safely to “the truth.”² Nineteen years later, the virtual apotheosis of Thea as Sieglinde³ seems to be proof that Cather still maintained a rather optimistic view of the powers of the artist. However, *The Song of the Lark* is probably her most teleological piece of fiction and following novels such as *The Professor’s House* or *Death Comes for the Archbishop* show much more circumspection toward the possibility of delineating any straightforward voyage, be it in life

¹ I would like to thank Sherrill Harbison and the late David Porter for their very kind, constructive feedback on the first version of this paper.

² “To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, [...] to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand [...], that is what art means [...]. And that is the voyage perilous, and between those two ports more has been lost than all the yawning caverns of the sea have ever swallowed. [...] In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of woman who are strong enough to take the vows. There is no paradise offered for a reward to the faithful, no celestial bowers, no houris, no scented wines; only death and the truth.” (“A Mighty Craft” 417)

³ *The Song of the Lark* 478; pt. 6 ch. 11.

or in art. At sixty one Cather offers a much more problematic account of artistic success. Describing *Lucy Gayheart* as “Cather’s most fashionable text in its self-deconstruction” (260, note 5), Blanche Gelfant shows how Cather’s novel constantly betrays her anxieties regarding the power of words and her own ability to make the reader feel what is not directly there on the page. Following a similar line of argument, I will examine how she very subtly conveys her views on the art of performance, in a way that confirms how much of a master in concision she was at the end of her career, while letting a persistent skepticism creep into any statement the narrator or the characters seem to make, revealing her gnawing doubts about the meaning and purpose of any artistic endeavor. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that the musical scenes in *Lucy Gayheart*—and indeed the whole novel—need to be approached as original statements in their own right rather than mere rewritings of previous scenes from Cather’s fiction.

The second time Lucy goes to hear Clement Sebastian in recital, Cather describes Lucy’s reaction to *Die Winterreise*.

She had never heard *Die Winterreise* sung straight through as an integral work. For her it was being sung the first time, something newly created, and she attributed to the artist much that belonged to the composer. She kept feeling that this was not an interpretation, this was the thing itself, with one man and one nature behind every song. The singing was not dramatic, in any way she knew. Sebastian did not identify himself with this melancholy youth; he presented him as if he were a memory, not to be brought too near into the present. One felt a long distance between the singer and the scenes he was recalling, a long perspective. (38; bk. 1 ch. 5)

Parallels have been drawn between the “long perspective” Lucy notices here and the distance that separates the narrative and the events described in *Lucy Gayheart*, a story that is presented from the start as a memory (“In Haverford on the Platte the townspeople still talk of Lucy Gayheart” [3; bk. 1 ch. 1]).⁴ Not much thought has been given, however, to the blurring of the distinction between composer and singer which Cather describes. Obviously it is a compliment to the singer and it is something Cather seems to value as the hardest thing to achieve in art. In an essay on Sarah Orne Jewett she writes that the “sketches” in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* “melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself.” (849) Using a similar formula about a minor story of Jewett’s, she writes, “It simply *is the look*—shy, kind, a little wistful—which shines out at one from good country faces on remote farms; it is the look itself” (Cather’s italics). She calls this accomplishment “a little miracle,” adding, “To have got it down upon the printed page is like bringing the tenderest of early spring flowers from the deep wood into the hot light of noon without bruising its petals.” (851) Yet although Cather assigns a similar goal to literature and music—to be the “thing itself”—we must not forget that literature and music use completely different media. While the reader has a first-hand knowledge of the text of the novel the listener needs the mediation of the musicians to get access to the piece. The novel *is* its text while the musical piece exists only in performance, the score being but a convenient way of keeping a tangible trace of it and preserving its unity through its various performances. The role of the performer is therefore essential because he is as necessary to the existence of the musical piece as the composer is. With this in mind, the fusion of performer and composer Lucy experiences can

⁴ See Comeau and Chown.

literally mean that the spectators forget that there is an intermediary between Schubert and themselves, as if Sebastian were the composer. In other words, the performance has a certain immediacy which makes the listener forget that the singer is following a score written a hundred years or so before.

Yet Cather does not talk of a feeling of improvisation either, which would be the contrary of following a score. She—or rather Lucy—attributes this impression to the sense of unity that the whole song cycle displays, “with one man and one nature behind every song.” This means that if there is a distance between Sebastian and the “melancholy youth” it is only a distance in time. The singer truly seems to *have been* this youth: the situations depicted in the songs have been experienced and are now remembered (“the scenes he was recalling”). The idea that “this was not an interpretation,” therefore, must come not from a sense of improvisation or freedom on the part of the singer but from his deep involvement in the words and notes he has to sing. And although Sebastian does not “identify himself with this melancholy youth” (38), that is with the speaker of the poems, Lucy cannot help identifying him with the music he sings. The first time Lucy hears him in recital Cather writes,

After this invocation came five more Schubert songs, all melancholy. They made Lucy feel that there was something profoundly tragic about this man. (30; bk. 1 ch. 4)

For Lucy there is no distinction between the emotion conveyed by the music and the emotion the singer must feel. Sebastian’s life must be as tragic as the songs he sings. In other words, the successful rendering of the score becomes very much a question of acting rather than musical craftsmanship. Sebastian presents the speaker of the poems “*as if* he were a memory.” Similarly, the tenor in *Lohengrin* is good because “he believes in it” as Lucy tells Harry Gordon (104; bk. 1 ch. 16). This reminds us of the very similar words used to describe Thea Kronborg’s art in *The Song of the Lark*. Fred Ottenburg says, “Every phrase she sang was basic. She simply was the idea of the Rhine music.” (396; pt. 6 ch. 2) When listening to Thea, the spectator does not have the sensation he is hearing some very sophisticated interpretation, in which every phrase has been very meticulously planned in advance. What matters is that the identification of the singer with the meaning of the piece is simply complete. However, to say that Thea was “the idea of the Rhine music” is not merely saying that she was a good actress. It supposes an intimate understanding of the spirit animating the music, the vital force that is not written in it but is at its origin and shapes it. In *The Song of the Lark* and for Lucy as well, artistry relies on the ability to convey something that is not in the music but is at the same time its *raison d’être*. This principle of unity can only be found if the artist both has an excellent knowledge of the piece he or she performs⁵ and has an ability to put things into a larger perspective. Here Lucy attributes this “long perspective” to Sebastian’s age. His age is supposed to give him a certain wisdom that Lucy calls “simplicity” (“He had a simplicity that must come from having lived a great deal and mastered a great deal” [46; bk. 1 ch. 6]). As for Thea, she also gains a “long perspective” when she spends several months in Panther Canyon, where she discovers she is able to have intuitions about the lives of the Pueblo people.

⁵ It usually takes several weeks’ work for Thea to find the idea that will inform her interpretation. Landry tells Ottenburg, “When she begins with a part she’s hard to work with: so slow you’d think she was stupid if you didn’t know her. [...] All at once, she got her line—it usually comes suddenly, after stretches of not getting anywhere at all—and after that it kept changing and clearing.” (448; pt. 6 ch. 8)

On the first day that Thea climbed the water trail she began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path, and who had spent so great a part of their lives going up and down it. [...] 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 body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation; [...]. (302-303; pt. 4 ch. 3)

Through these bodily sensations, Thea travels the very long distance separating the Pueblo people from her own time. These intuitions are “simple, insistent, and monotonous” just as there are certain truths about life that are so “simple, insistent, and monotonous” that they may have become clichés but remain nonetheless true. As Carl says in *O Pioneers!*, “there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before” (119; pt. 2 ch. 4). Thus, for Cather simplicity in no way means banality. It means the artist has done his or her job, which consists in “select[ing] the eternal material of art,” because “the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (“*Novel Dèmeublé*” 836). The ability of the singer to simplify leads to a performance in which everything seems natural because everything is subordinated to one higher goal, as composition assigns every element of a painting its place so as to create a coherent whole. While listening Lucy is not assailed by a profusion of images; instead, she progressively composes one picture corresponding to the mood of the performance. When Sebastian sings “*Der Doppelgänger*,” she sees “moonlight pouring down on the narrow street of an old German town” and then she progressively adds elements to the picture (“old human houses,” “a lonely black cloud”) without these additions ever breaking the unity of the whole. Indeed, these are not additions but the deepening of one vision (“with every phrase that picture deepened” [30; bk. 1 ch. 4]). In the same manner, Thea’s successful performance as Sieglinde at the end of *The Song of the Lark* is only possible because of the complete submission of her body to her conception of the role⁶, with everything she does subordinated to a unique principle, like the branches and flowers of “a tree bursting into bloom” (478; pt. 6 ch. 11).

Whether it is an “idea” or “one nature” presiding over the whole piece, this principle of unity can of course be identified with what Cather famously called “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, [...] the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed” (“*Novel Dèmeublé*” 837). Lucy, in one of the numerous passages of the novel in free indirect style, uses a similar image to describe Sebastian.

He had a simplicity that must come from having lived a great deal and mastered a great deal. If you brushed against his life ever so lightly it was like tapping on a deep bell; you felt all that you could not hear. (46; bk. 1 ch. 6)

The image of the bell is an excellent rephrasing of the “thing not named” as its very rich sound produces so many harmonics—or overtones—that it is often possible to hear other notes quite clearly besides its fundamental note. Moreover, an attentive reader of Cather’s works might remember how, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the bell has other ways of suggesting much more than the eye can see. When hearing the angelus in Santa Fe, Bishop Latour first thinks he is in Rome and then Jerusalem, “though he had never been there” (42; bk. 1 ch. 4), a sort of

⁶ “While she was on the stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea.” (478; pt. 6 ch. 11)

hallucination which he explains by the presence of silver in the bell, a metal the Spaniards learned to work from the Moors (45). Thus, the sound of the bell is able to suggest faraway places and summarize the history of civilizations.

A great artist, therefore, is someone that makes you feel what is not there. During the first recital Lucy attends, she is transported outside the concert hall to imaginary places. She sees “the narrow street of an old German town” (30; bk. 1 ch. 4). So real is the illusion that she no longer sees what is truly happening in front of her and misses Sebastian’s exit from the stage.

The moon was gone, and the silent street.—And Sebastian was gone, though Lucy had not been aware of his exit. The black cloud that had passed over the moon and the song had obliterated him, too. (30; bk. 1 ch. 4)

The dash underlines the moment when Lucy is brutally brought back to reality. The last sentence shows how the fictional world evoked by the song is, as it were, superimposed on reality in Lucy’s mind: the cloud has passed both over the fictional moon mentioned in Heine’s poem and over the song itself. Moreover, the presence of the “red-haired accompanist, a lame boy, who dragged one foot as he went across the stage” (30; bk. 1 ch. 4) adds to the violence of this sudden confrontation to a much more prosaic reality.

Lucy’s growing dislike of Mockford also indicates how much vision matters during a performance, even when it consists only of songs and not of operatic excerpts. Although Lucy realizes that “it was contemptible to hold a man’s infirmity against him” (39; bk. 1 ch. 5), she cannot help noticing how his attitude and his whole body spoil a part of her pleasure.

She admired him, but she didn’t like him. Was she jealous, already? No, something in his physical personality set her on edge a little. He was picturesque—too picturesque. (38; bk. 1 ch. 5)

By contrast, Sebastian immediately makes a good impression when he steps on the stage.

Sebastian’s personality had aroused her, even before he began to sing, the moment he came upon the stage. [...] She said to herself immediately: “Yes, a great artist should look like that.” (28-29; bk. 1 ch. 4)

Thus, elements entirely foreign to the musical interpretation proper can have a significant impact on the way the spectator perceives the piece. Vision, however, seems to matter only if it has an emotional impact: Mockford “set[s] [Lucy] on edge” and “Sebastian’s personality ha[s] aroused her.” As we saw, Cather also describes the “thing not named” as an “emotional aura.” I would argue that it is precisely emotion which brings the “thing not named” into existence. Emotion opens a new world to the listener, a world that is not in itself in the musical piece but rather is the product of the encounter between the piece and the listener. In the impressionable Lucy the “emotional aura” of the Schubert songs Sebastian and Mockford interpret is so strong that it upsets her deeply, turning her conception of the world upside down.

It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now. (31; bk. 1 ch. 4)

Like Thea’s intuitions, Lucy’s emotions have both a physical and an intellectual meaning. She discovers new emotions she had never felt before (“love as a tragic force,” “passion that drowns like black water”) and it also changes the way she understands the world (it is a “discovery about life, a revelation”). The “thing itself,” therefore, is not only the musical piece given intelligently with a sense of coherence but the result of a physical and emotional transaction between artists and listeners. The piece becomes a “thing” because the listener is deeply moved. Even though Lucy is able to understand German and does not “miss a word” (29; bk. 1 ch. 4), words in themselves are not what causes such an intense feeling. When the narrator—or Lucy in free indirect speech—quotes a few words from a song, it is not so much to convey to the reader the atmosphere of the songs as to insist on the perfect adequacy of their musical setting.

In your light I stand without fear, O august stars! I salute your eternity. That was the feeling. Lucy had never heard anything sung with such elevation of style. In its calmness and serenity there was a kind of large enlightenment, like daybreak. (29-30; bk. 1 ch. 4)

Lucy is amazed at the capacity of the music to make one feel the exact emotions suggested by the words. The “calmness” and “serenity” of the voice have the power to communicate the exact emotion of the mariner saluting the stars.

The successful interpretation, therefore, is the one that manages to breathe life into the piece. It must enact the emotional content of the music and convey all the while the sense of coherence and simplicity we talked about. In other words, the performer is constantly torn between, on the one hand, a desire to create a living thing that can encompass the infinite diversity of human experience and, on the other, the respect he owes to the score, a dead object composed of dead signs that break up the infinitely varied world of sound into a finite set of discreet unities. The need for the singer to remain simple is a direct result of the desire to remain close to the score. It explains, for instance, why the emotional involvement of the artist cannot be manifested through extremely passionate singing. Immediately after noting how well the feeling is expressed by Sebastian, Cather adds, “Lucy had never heard anything sung with such elevation of style.” (29-30; bk. 1 ch. 4) Indeed, I would argue, simplicity implies “elevation of style.” If we tried to define simplicity in singing, we would probably think of it as the elimination of personal trademarks or quirks so as to privilege the pure musical line and the perfect enunciation of the text without unnecessary emphasis on particular syllables or words. On a purely musical level, excessive emotional involvement usually leads to breaks from the musical line: sobs and glottal attacks—both characteristic of *verismo* singing, for instance—but also inaccuracies of pitch.⁷ If they want to preserve the integrity of the musical line—and thus stay close to the score—singers must therefore find other devices than these showy effects. They will most probably use the technique of coloring, altering the timbre of the voice (its color) on certain vowels in order to create certain effects. This technique leaves the musical line intact and can even participate in making the text more understandable, as the words are no longer just a pretext for writing beautiful music. With coloring, words are invested with meaning; the way the singer colors each syllable is extremely suggestive and can radically alter the signification of a word (if he sings it with a smile or a smirk, for instance). As a matter of fact, Sebastian’s diction is the first thing Lucy notices (29; bk. 1 ch. 4). Lilli Lehmann, Olive

⁷ A recent study showed that singers who studied acting tend to show more inaccuracies of pitch than classically trained singers. It only confirms something that music lovers already knew: sometimes a slightly wrong note can be more moving than the perfectly executed one (Livingstone, Choi, and Russo).

Fremstad’s and Thea’s teacher in Germany, was a stern stylist and a great advocate of coloring. In her book on singing she explains,

Every vowel, every word, every tone, can be colored as by magic in all sorts of ways by the well-controlled play of the lips; can, as it were, be imbued with life, as the lips open or close more or less in different positions. (212)

In a surprisingly Catherian way she also writes,⁸

A word is an idea; and not only the idea, but how that idea in color and connection is related to the whole, must be expressed. (264)

“Word,” “idea,” “color,” and relation to “the whole” are the cornerstones of classical singing. It is a subtle art which, when successfully done, seems so natural that it is hard to tell exactly what the singer does that makes him superior to the others, as Lucy quickly notices.

The dark beauty of the songs seemed to her a quality in the voice itself, as kindness can be in the touch of a hand. It was as simple as that—like light changing on the water. (30; bk. 1 ch. 4)

The credibility of the interpretation relies on a particular “quality” in the singer’s voice, something again “not expressible in words” and yet perceptible, like the intention behind a gesture. The image of “light changing on the water” adequately expresses the technique of coloring: the musical line remains untouched, like the smooth waters of a lake, while only its color changes just as the lake takes on various hues depending on the weather and the time of day.

Thus, Cather manages to suggest a very elaborate interpretation technique without ever being technical. She uses comparisons (“as if he were a memory,” “like light changing on the water”) or simple notions (“distance,” “he believes in it”) to convey the impact of the type of singing she favors. What changed since *The Song of the Lark*, which was also far more loquacious concerning musical performance, is that Cather’s musical scenes are now intricately woven into the larger pattern of the novel. As we are going to see, the scenes of musical performance are both undermined by and in part responsible for the atmosphere of uncertainty that pervades the whole novel.

The complex structure of the novel and the difficulty of locating its narrator compel us to view every statement with caution. For instance, it would be hasty to consider that Cather thinks Sebastian’s art superior because he manages to express “the thing itself.” First, the words are attributed to Lucy (“she *kept feeling that* this was not an interpretation” [the emphasis is mine]). Then it is obvious that the narrator considers Lucy’s opinion naive: “she attributed to the artist much that belonged to the composer.”⁹ In this sort of conflict, of course, the narrator usually has

⁸ As Sherrill Harbison remarked to me (personal communication), it might just be the other way round (Cather being influenced by Lehmann) as many critics have underlined that Cather’s article on “Three American Singers” reveals how much Cather made Fremstad’s (and thereby Lehmann’s) views on art her own. See, for instance, David Porter’s “Historical Essay” (268-270).

⁹ The narrator’s comment reflects Cather’s more mature point of view. Now 60, she finds it difficult to identify herself with a young girl. In a letter to Zoë Akins dated August 1933 she writes, “I’m working on a book about a silly young girl, and I lose patience with her. Perhaps I am too old for that sort of thing.” (*Selected Letters* 488-489)

the upper hand, but the reader, who cannot help identifying himself or herself with the protagonist, may—consciously or unconsciously—ignore this patronizing voice. It is even characteristic of this novel that it is impossible for the reader to find a reassuring omniscient authority presiding over the narrative. In an article published in the second issue of *Cather Studies*, Linda Chown shows that all of Lucy’s story can be seen as an embedded narrative whose narrator—a “persona narrator” as she prefers to call it—is Harry Gordon. Such a reading would necessarily lead us to consider the narrator’s statements with caution. Whether or not we accept this interpretation, it remains undeniable that Cather keeps emphasizing the difficulty of assigning identity in *Lucy Gayheart*. Whereas identities were clearly defined in *The Song of the Lark* through a set of Manichaeic oppositions (between Thea’s Friends, the musical Mexicans or Ray Kennedy on the one hand, and “Thea’s natural enemies” [59] on the other, the “stupid faces” that give its name to the third part of the novel), nothing is as definite here. There is another, hidden side to everything and everyone. The image of the lake used to describe Sebastian’s voice, for instance, finds a troubling echo a few chapters later in a description of Lake Michigan.

There was very little ice in the water that January, and the blue floor of the Lake, wrinkled with gold, seemed to be *the day itself*, stretching before her unspent and beautiful. (47; bk. 1 ch. 7 [my emphasis])

Lucy projects her personal mood onto the surface of the Lake, to the point that the Lake seems to become her own prospects for the day and embody them. The lake is both a lake and something more. But although Lucy tends to choose feelings and imagination over facts—her “city of feeling” is “beautiful because the rest was blotted out” (24; bk. 1 ch. 3)—the knowing reader will not fail to notice how ominous the image is, the dual nature of Lake Michigan foreshadowing two other, grimmer duplicities. Firstly, it is on the deceptively calm waters of another beautiful lake, Lake Como, a famous tourist attraction, that Sebastian and Mockford will die because of an unexpected, “sudden storm” (137; bk. 1 ch. 21). Secondly, the “ice in the water” necessarily reminds us of the Platte River, which is the place of joyful, carefree skating at the beginning of the novel, but which eventually proves treacherous, when the ice hides the true course of the river at the end of book 2.

Nothing is ever only what it first seems to be in *Lucy Gayheart*: there is always another possible reading, always another layer under appearances, and the musical scenes are no exception to the rule. When Sebastian sings “Vision fugitive,” an aria from Massenet’s opera *Hérodiade*, the title reflects Lucy’s awakening to the beauties of true art. After his death, she realizes that “Clement Sebastian had made the fugitive gleam an actual possession. With him she had learned that those flashes of promise could come true, that they could be the important things in one’s life.” (183-184; bk. 2 ch. 8) However, Lucy will never truly possess the ability to create this “gleam” because she will never become a professional pianist and this dream remains an unfulfilled “promise” and a truly “fugitive” vision. She dies a tragic death, profoundly unjust because utterly arbitrary, like Sebastian’s. It is hard, therefore, to overlook the central theme of the novel: death eventually conquers all, from great artists to humble watchmakers, and no artistic beauty, however otherworldly it may seem, can save us from the unexpected twists of fate. The overarching pessimistic mood of the novel is constantly counterbalancing the enthusiasm of the naïve Lucy for the redeeming power of art.

More radically, the selection of songs mentioned in the novel also points to another central theme that is at odds with the supposed capacity of art to become the “thing itself”: the omnipresence of masks, which makes the definition of the “thing itself” problematic. The whole novel is haunted by the disquieting presence of “doubles,” to take up the word Hermione Lee uses

to describe the “split personalities” of many characters in the novel (345), and the songs Sebastian sings develop this theme. Schubert’s “Doppelgänger” echoes the dual nature that most characters conceal in the novel. Harry Gordon not only wears the “jocular masks” of the successful country businessman—which he takes off only with Lucy, “show[ing] her a naked man who had perhaps never been exposed to any eye before” (109-110; bk. 1 ch. 16)—but he also represses feelings that he cannot accept (“underneath his resentment and his determination to punish, there was a contrary conviction lying very deep, so deep that he held no communication with it” [216-217; bk. 3 ch. 3]). Sebastian has a similar persona that he adopts with people he is not intimate with, “a manner so perfected that it could go on representing him when he himself was either lethargic or altogether absent.” (49; bk. 1 ch. 7) It is as if there were two different Sebastians with the same body, like the twins Castor and Pollux in one Schubert song (29; bk. 1 ch. 4). In the same way, the person Lucy’s sister, Pauline, shows to the people of Haverford is only a “mannikin” (168; bk. 2 ch. 4) and she hides her jealousy for Lucy so well that Lucy does not even suspect it (“Lucy had never been aware of these hidden feelings in her sister.” [171]). This omnipresence of doubles in daily life and in the songs Cather chooses to mention necessarily casts doubt on the possibility of ever reaching the “thing itself,” in life as in art.

To conclude, *Lucy Gayheart* shows the extraordinary coherence of Cather’s aesthetic conceptions, from the beginning up to the end of her career. And yet, without altering them in anything, she seems to look upon these beliefs from an almost ironic distance. Now a mature writer, Cather depicts how the illusions of youth are shattered by tragedies and the final acceptance of death as an inevitable part of life. For Cather as for Lucy, these illusions concern first and foremost the redeeming power of art, its capacity to create “an invisible, inviolable world” (*Lucy Gayheart* 104; bk. 1 ch. 16). In *Lucy Gayheart* there is no “inviolable world.” Meaning is constantly shifting and the characters are fragmented into various masks and memories which forever preclude the possibility of a direct knowledge or perception of anything and anyone. The artist, then, cannot naively hope to “express” the truth of something in words, as the young Cather used to advocate.¹⁰ Even the truth of such a supposedly powerful thing as the “thing not named” is questioned in the novel. Lucy’s footsteps in the concrete do suggest her presence, but it is a thirteen-year-old Lucy they conjure up (226; bk. 3 ch. 4) and she is “running away” (231; bk. 3 ch. 4). Art, therefore, is as elusive as life is and *Lucy Gayheart*, with its entire narration presented as a memory composed of memories, mirrors that constantly failing pursuit of life. To the melancholy of the Schubert songs answers the melancholy tone of the novel, arising in both cases from a tragic subject as well as from metaphysical doubt. The characters are constantly facing doubles and constantly missing the events they live; consequently, their lives are a constellation of fading memories rather than an addition of truly lived experiences.¹¹ In *Lucy Gayheart* one feels the anxiety Cather expressed in “Light on Adobe Walls,” her last, unfinished essay: what if art were a mere “game of make-believe,” (976), a word Lucy also uses to describe her relationship with Sebastian?¹² Although it remains, she tells us, “very exciting and delightful to people who have an ear for it or an eye for it”

¹⁰ “Art is not thought or emotions, but expression, expression, always expression.” (“A Mighty Craft” 417)

¹¹ Lucy is so excited when she is in Sebastian’s presence that she enjoys the time she spends with him better in memory: “It was at night, when she was quiet and alone, that she got the greatest happiness out of each day—after it had passed!” (93; bk. 1 ch. 13)

¹² “Her playing for him was nothing but make-believe; and his friendliness was make-believe, perhaps.” (61; bk 1 ch. 8)

(976-977), it will never beat life at its own game and, eventually, to enjoy life proves much more important than art. While art could become someone’s life in *The Song of the Lark* to the point that for Thea “the story of her life is the story of her achievement” (479; pt. 6 ch. 11), Mrs. Ramsay tells Lucy that “accomplishments are the ornaments of life, they come second” and advises her to have “plenty of fun” aside her work (165; bk. 2 ch. 3).¹³ In “Light on Adobe Walls” Cather ventures that “art is too terribly human to be very ‘great,’ perhaps.” (977) In a way that reminds us of *Lucy Gayheart*’s constant ambiguities, she refuses to make any absolute statement, eventually settling for the ambivalent adverb “perhaps.”

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¹³ “‘You must have been enjoying your work, or you wouldn’t have stayed. And I hope you had plenty of fun along with it. I don’t like to see young people with talent take it too seriously. Life is short; gather roses while you may. I’m sure you gathered a few.’ / Lucy smiled indulgently. ‘A few.’ / ‘Make it as many as you can, Lucy. Nothing really matters but living. Get all you can out of it. I’m an old woman, and I know. Accomplishments are the ornaments of life, they come second. Sometimes people disappoint us, and sometimes we disappoint ourselves; but the thing is, to go right on living.’” (165; bk. 2 ch. 3)

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