Willa Cather’s Memory Writing

LI Li
Sichuan University

Life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember. This is the motto of Willa Cather in both life and art. As one of the greatest writers in 20th century America, she painted in her work a fantastic world of memory with her rich soul and great artistic power. During nearly 40 years of writing, Cather published 20 novels, 3 collections of short stories, 2 collections of poetry, numerous essays and drama reviews. She achieved many literary medals and honorary degrees. Willa Cather was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her accomplishment in “best presenting the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood”. [1]

Memory is the core and essence of Cather’s art. The settings, characters and plots in her work are largely drawn from the writer’s own life, especially her childhood
experience. That heavy trace of memory has become the birthmark of her writing. For Cather, to write is to remember, and to remember is to create. In 1922, Willa Cather emphasized in one open letter that memory is a major resource for literary creation, and it comes from both life and reading. Writing to a large degree is a process in which a writer dives into the ocean of memory to dig out shining pearls of past events. If we acknowledge a writer’s authority over his own work, memory is the key to unlock Willa Cather’s kingdom of art.

Memory is much more than a recurrent or pervasive theme in Willa Cather’s fiction; remembrance is the very essence of Cather’s writing—the inexorable principle of her characterizations, the vital foundation of her settings, the impelling force within her novels. Her narratives exemplify, above all else, a certain style of remembrance, a mode of memory that one can neither overlook nor penetrate, that is both extensive and elusive, a fabric spun from unyielding cords and spectral fibers. “In response to this complexity and vitality, Cather’s readers have interpreted this representation of memory in a variety of insightful and provocative ways. The very breadth and diversity of critical interpretations suggest that memory has multiple and changing functions in Cather’s work—suggest, in fact, that reading Willa Cather is perhaps most of all an act whereby one can discover and imagine an almost endless number of ways in which memory inspires and terrifies, comforts and haunts, sustains and shocks not only individuals but also communities, cultures and nations. For if it is true that remembrance sketches the details of Cather’s characters, draws the settings they inhabit, and colors their actions, fears, and longings, then it is also true that the shades and tinctures of remembrance seep out to Cather’s readers as well, making us profoundly aware of how deeply we are inscribed by the past that we have forgotten, as well as by the one we sometimes tenuously remember.”

Man’s knowledge of memory can be dated far back, but theoretical study of memory came much later. Since the invention of psychoanalytic technology, insight about how we remember, forget, and explain the past has been woven into the texture of everyday life, seeped into literary, artistic, and historical writings. In their faith to tradition and belief, literature and memory form a solid alliance. However, the former Cather studies are in lack of comprehensive, systematic analysis of memory. Among piles of critical works on Cather, memory is merely a means of narration, but not its purpose and goal. Viewing memory from one-sided and isolated perspective, these readings discuss such specific forms of memory as ritual...
conducting, cooking culture, story telling but fail to see that Cather’s whole body of writing has constructed a grand system of memory. The writer’s personal memory in life interwove with that of her characters’ in artistic world, and two kinds of memory together frame up a multidimensional space of narration and imagination.

Memory study provides an effective way to interpret Willa Cather’s textual world. On the one hand, by following the memory of the writer, we can search into her inner mentality; on the other hand, memory is the key to unlock the protagonists’ inner soul, and a meaningful code for us to understand the writer’s magical artistic skill. Memory study adds a new angle to the present limited Cather studies, pushes forward to a certain degree its width and depth, builds up a new bridge across the textual world and the real world.

Memory never takes place in void. “It is in society that man acquires his memory. And it is also in society that he is able to remember, identify, and categorize his memory.” This social framework is a precondition to analyze any memory. For Willa Cather, she was born in the South just ten years after the Civil War, grew up in the West cast by the sunset of a legendary heroic pioneer era, wrote in the eastern metropolitan city of New York. Such a colorful biographical spectra decides that the writer’s memory, personal and textual, was unfolded on three dimensions: suppressed memory of Southern Virginia, passing Pioneer Age, America under social transition.

Willa Cather’s first two pioneer novels respond to man’s longing for childhood, in both biological and metaphorical sense. Memory is a construction of past events, a rebuilding of childhood upon chosen materials. Certain experiences stay in memory and shed light on the significance of living. Childhood memory helps develop our worldview and prepares full-fledged wings for our youthful struggle. Through frequent and conscious recalling of childhood, Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronberg link their own childhood with a much older childhood of the nation and get into one with the fate of man as a race and with the spiritual world of the ancestors, thus fulfill their self value and cultural, national identity.

Whatever the focus of memory is (e.g., childhood or youth), the one who remembers consciously is always an adult. Both My Antonia and A Lost Lady, two of Cather’s masterpieces, have a middle-aged man as narrator. They are recalling in detail another woman, who played an important part in their childhood, influencing significantly their mind and emotion. In the dull, boring life of Mid-western town in early 20th century, these pretty, graceful women were a beam of light shining against
dark background. In the eyes of the male narrators, they were noble goddess and pure angel, symbolizing the essence of pioneer spirit. However, while self-willingly constructing and reproducing the ideal image of woman consistent to their imagination and expectation, Jim Burden and Niel Herbert deny rudely their “goddess” right to be a profane woman, deprive them of freedom to choose, ignore their struggles and misfortunes. Through subjective and prejudiced memory, these male adults find a way to return to their nostalgic past, at the same time, they imprison women into the inferior social role of “second sex” through such specific strategies as “gaze”, “discourse” and “imagination”. Yet, this is just part of the story. As a woman writer, Willa Cather makes full use of her authorship to resist the threatening memory of man, and gives her female protagonists enough space to develop independent cultural identity, helps them rise up from “other” to “I”.

If memory between different sex is distorted or incomplete, how is memory within the same sex? A close reading of Cather’s work will undoubtedly give us insight. Memory sets a platform for true friendship within the same sex, but female friendship tends to represent more inheritance across generations with or without genetic connection; man, by seeking in the friend his other half, achieves not only temporary and illusory contentment of subjectivity but also a power to resist and co-exist with consumer society.

Alice Walker celebrates in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” African-American women’s love for and memory of their mothers. “Our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.”[4] Like Alice Walker and her black sisters, Willa Cather and her female characters find power and inspiration in their mothers’ blooming garden. Frontier women in pioneer era and African-American women shared basically the same fate. These rough-faced, silent mothers and grandmothers toiled like mules, but they were also artists and creators, passion for a life with beauty forever pounding in their heart. “Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms.”[5] Mothers tell family stories and impart home-making skills to preserve memory; daughters understand keenly the art of life in keeping mothers’ habits, everyday articles and in memorizing mothers. “Garden” is the most important symbol in Cather’s work. It stands for hope, inspiration and vitality. By creative inheritance of mothers’ spiritual legacy and mutual support among sisters, female protagonists grow from individual
“I” into strong “we”.

The function of memory between two men is vividly explored in Cather’s two novels with war background—*One of Ours* and *The Professor’s House*. Claude Wheeler and St. Peter are both spiritual vagrants of consumer society. Though trapped in the jungle of material and desire, they seek for essential value of life and a higher humane freedom. They establish sincere friendship with another man, and find in him another self of them which is unfulfilled or lost already. This friendship is an important event in their life, as it compensates to a certain degree the protagonists’ deficiency in personality and experiences, helps them heal the psychic trauma and realize self value. War smashes young people’s life mercilessly, but friendship is far from over, it is flourishing in the survival’s memory.

Childhood memory, man’s memory of woman, memory within the same sex, are all presented in Cather’s work. To a philosophical sense, all these memories are attempts to reconstruct the past. Cather’s later novels secure a way to an ideal past by a lovingly portrait of various rituals. Ritual is the most essential way to organize a group or community. There is no alternative to it in an individual’s successful socialization. Northern American Indian’s religious dances, ceremonial songs, Father Joseph’s onion soup, holiday celebrations in common homes and, orderly everyday life, are all effective ways to reconstruct the past. Among these, reflection and recalling of native people’s primitive life comes first as they stand for the purity and simplicity of the race of man in its childhood. “Writing destroys memory; those who use it, Plato has Socrates argue, will become forgetful, relying on an external source for what they lack in internal resources. Writing weakens the mind.” [6] Northern American Indians memorize past not in words but with their body. They perform and transform memory in varieties of religious and daily rituals. These true artists refine art from life and illuminate life with art. They carry out a poetic living between heaven and earth.

Cather’s immigrant women are artists too. They keep alive their memory of history and tradition in repeated housework and trifle family duties. In her kingdom of art, everyday life is common people’s specific and realistic way to understand the world. Efficient housekeeping, warm kitchen, and delicious food together build up a philosophy of everyday life. Willa Cather convinces her readers that “even housekeeping, if carried out as a meaningful ritual emphasizing quality and order, can be a construction of the beautiful.” [7] Kitchen plays an important role in Cather’s realistic and literary home. It is a physical site of family happiness,
stability, and morality. What’s more, kitchen is the place where cooking is conducted and meals are prepared. “Indeed, cooking is the primary creative experience of humankind… a meal can be considered a text: it represents the larger domestic life, which is, in turn, indicative of many aspects of culture and of history.”[8] Well-cooked food is the result of a constantly refined tradition. “In a way, all food is soul food… It can be a link with a time past or a future prayed for.”[9] By running a smooth and orderly everyday life, Willa Cather’s immigrant women and housewives provide a powerful way to look back to the past, as well as to look forward to the future.

For memory, the most important space is home—the greatest power to combine man’s thought, memory and dream. Cather’s protagonists are all striving for an ideal home. In her later novels, solitary, self-fulfilled artists give way to active social participants. They accomplish a transformation from self-centered to community-centered, achieve a sublimation from construction of perfect individual spiritual world to construction of harmonious communal society. Taking memory and imagination as two wings, they transcend the limitation of daily existence, fly successfully to the summit of spiritual world by beautification of everyday life.

Memory is an undercurrent in all words. Willa Cather’s texts write and convey memory, in turn, memory enriches and deepens her narration. Through an all-round review of diverse memories, she presents to her countrymen once again such sensitive issues as the social welfare of Native Indians and foreign immigrants, cultural diversity, and religious tolerance as well. Cather’s writing, by a profound exploration of memory upon different levels, wakes up people’s awareness of history, urges them to reflect upon the value of past traditions in everyday life and cultural construction. What should we remember, and how should we remember? That is the question for all of us.

We memorize past for the sake of future. The power of memory “does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or a feeling that actually existed, but in the constitutive act of the mind.”[10] Willa Cather is not only telling her personal memory of Nebraska and Southwest of America, she is, in fact, representing and preserving this precious memory in literary form for a wider public, and hoping it to be enlarged and enriched by readers of different times and places. Wagner once said in his most beautiful opera that art is but a way to remember youth. The older we are, the dearer those memories are to us, and the more vividly we can present our memories. Wagner’s opera is flowing memory, while Cather’s
work is written memory. In *The Professor's House*, Cather writes about the professor in this way: to him, the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories. This is undoubtedly the best description of her own writing. Cather’s art is a blend of heart, mind, soul, and body. By tracing back to personal memory, everyday memory and family memory, Cather evokes and enlivens a community’s collective memory, cultural memory and national memory; Based upon memory of the past, Cather and her protagonists create a new history of themselves.

With the quick development of disciplinary construction and unflagging research of culture study, memory has been attracting unprecedented academic attention all over the world. Memory study, especially study of cultural memory, involving ethnics, philology, religion, and literature, represents a new direction for 21st century cross-disciplinary research. However, cultural memory, collective memory and national memory all emphasize collectivity, publicity and systematicness. These grand memories are basically objective, public, non-emotional. Memory in Cather’s text is quite different. It is private, daily, emotional and humane. Taking such memory as main source, Cather cooked a feast of culture over decades of hard work. It embraces not only a thousand years of history, but also fragrance of past friendship and dazzling light of early memory.

Notes:

[1] L. Brent Bohlke Ed., *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches & Letters* [M]. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, 57.

[2] Lisa Marie, Lucenti. “Willa Cather's My Antonia: Haunting the Houses of Memory”, in *Twentieth Century Literature* [J], Summer, 2000, 193.

[3] Maurice Halbwach, *On Collective Memory* [M], Tr. Bi Ran, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2002, 68-69.

[4] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* [M], Harcourt Brace & Company, 240.

[5] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* [M], Harcourt Brace & Company, 241.

[6] Wojciech H. Kaliaka, Tadeusz Rachwat eds., *Memory-Remembering-Forgetting* [M], Europaischer Verlag der Wissenschaften: Peter Lang, 1999, 34.

[7] Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* [M], University Press of Virginia, 2000, 256.

[8] Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: dinner in the fiction of early twentieth-century women writers* [M], University of Toronto Press, 2001, 4, 12.

[9] Linda K. Welsch, *Cather’s Kitchens: Foodways in Literature and Life* [M], Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, 2.
LI Li (1974– ) currently teaching in the College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Ph.D. candidate in the School of Literature and Journalism of Sichuan University. Major academic interest covers comparative literature, American literature and culture study. The author has published several essays on Willa Cather in a few academic journals. Her book *On Willa Cather's Memory Writing* is soon to be published by Sichuan University Press.