claims of the criticism implicitly allied with that art—that language can only refer to itself, that there is no objective reality—are trying to insist that the mind *is* its own place and so, in some sense, safe. . . .

"Yet like echolalia and narcissism, the pathologies it mimics, postmodern logic," Bosworth warns, "can supply only the opposite of what it would advertise: instead of immunity, ignorance; instead of real mastery, the fantasy of triumph that only ignorance allows."

The Eurocentric Error

Michael Lind, a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine* (Feb. 1998), on the sources of post–World War II America's misguided infatuation with European culture:

For a generation of American literary academics, the most influential postwar literary critic was not Edmund Wilson or F. O. Matthiessen, both of whom wrote brilliantly about American literature, but Lionel Trilling. To my mind, it is odd enough that T. S. Eliot, a St. Louis native who had converted himself into a cartoon of an Englishman, and Ezra Pound, an Idaho-born professor who had transformed himself into a Mediterranean fascist, were held up to my classmates and me [at the University of Texas at Austin in the late 1970s]—*in lieu, I suppose, of real Europeans, whose native tongues made them less accessible to American audiences—as the fonts from which all literary wisdom flowed. But Trilling taught a generation to prefer E. M. Forster to Nelson Algren and Matthew Arnold to H. L. Mencken. He offered the children and grandchildren of immigrants to American slums from Dublin, Warsaw, and Salerno the cheap illusion of belonging to the Victorian or Edwardian gentry. He was the Ralph Lauren of American letters.*

O Pioneer?

"The Prosaic Willa Cather" by James Seaton, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1998), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Once put down by modernists as an outdated expression of Victorian genteel culture, the fiction of Willa Cather (1873–1947) is now enjoying a revival. Her chief champions are feminist literary critics, who have been busily reinterpreting her work in terms of her identity as a woman and (putatively) a lesbian.

Though the feminist approach at least has people reading Cather again, it is unlikely, argues Seaton, an English professor at Michigan State University, to long sustain her reputation as the major writer and cultural critic that she is. For Cather's status to be secure, he maintains, "the search for the origins of her opinions must give way to a renewed attempt to understand the significance of the view of the world achieved when those opinions become transmuted into novels, short stories, and essays." Whereas feminists look, for instance, to Cather's supposed lesbianism to explain why romantic love between men and women in her fiction leads to disillusion and death, while friendship nourishes and protects, Seaton sees something else at work, something linked to "her affirmation of organized religion and ordinary family life."

O Pioneers! (1913), a Cather novel set in the Nebraska prairie of the late 19th century, may seem to lend itself to a political reading. Emil Bergson and Marie Tovesky Shabata become lovers, only to be shot a few hours later by her husband, when he finds them asleep together under a white mulberry tree. Yet Seaton says that it is not simply heterosexual attraction that led the lovers astray but an unbridled "spirituality that defies human nature." She, according to the novel, was in search of "perfect love," and he, of "rapture . . . without sin."

"In contrast to such romantic spirituality," writes Seaton, stands organized religion, which, throughout Cather's fiction, figures "as

a rock anchoring the changing aspirations and hopes of individuals to a larger order."

Whether in the 19th-century Southwest of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) or in the 17th-century Quebec of *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), Seaton says, Cather is not trying to satisfy an appetite for the exotic. Instead, the glimpses the novels offer of the religion or the art of a past culture bring home "the continuing importance of everyday life, of the meaningfulness of the constant daily efforts to concentrate upon and order an otherwise chaotic existence." Art and religion in Cather's fiction emerge from daily life "as continuations and deepenings of everyday routine."

In Cather's art, Seaton concludes, one can make out "the hidden connections between grand moral principles and seemingly trivial choices, between everyday life and high art." And, in the end, the high art includes Cather's own.

Farewell, Miss Fremstad

"An American Singer" by Peter G. Davis, in *The Yale Review* (Oct. 1997), Yale Univ., P.O. Box 208243, New Haven, Conn. 06520-8243.

Her career was cut short when she was in her prime, and the 15 recordings she made were disappointing artistically as well as technically, but Olive Fremstad (1871–1951) has never been entirely forgotten by opera aficionados. The first homegrown American opera singer of "true incandescence," she had "a vocal and physical presence of such charismatic witchery as to drive audiences wild," writes Davis, author of *The American Opera Singer* (forthcoming).

The daughter of a Norwegian physician and preacher and his Swedish wife, the singer was born in Stockholm and emigrated with her family to Minnesota about a decade later. A proficient pianist by the age of 12, she served as her father's musical assistant as he traveled up and down the state in a horse-drawn wagon with a portable organ to conduct prairie revival meetings. Decades later, notes Davis, some of the Scandinavian settlers who had attended those services still "recalled the vivid effect of Fremstad's voice" when she sang hymns. Venturing to New York when she was 19, Fremstad studied and saved enough money for the essential trip to study in Europe. She made her debut at the Cologne Opera in 1895, and at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1903.

Fremstad was the Met's first Salome (in Richard Strauss's opera of that name), and "her graphic portrayal of the biblical teenager's sensual lust scandalized more than one Met patron," writes Davis. The opera was withdrawn after the first performance. Fremstad's commitment to realistic detail was so great that she visited a morgue to use an actual human

Olive Fremstad gave "color and passion and personality" to Wagnerian heroines such as Brünnhilde, wrote Willa Cather.