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MANAGING THE FARM, EDUCATING THE FARMER *O PIONEERS!* AND THE NEW AGRICULTURE

WILLIAM CONLOGUE

*"If only poor people could learn a little from rich people."*¹

Most studies of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) comment on Alexandra Bergson's mystic relationship with the land and on the land's positive response to her love, on the "perfect harmony in nature" at the novel's center, or on its country versus city elements.² In such interpretations, Alexandra is an ideal farmer, one whose literary roots stretch back to Virgil's *Eclogues*.³ Although these readings work well, they remain incomplete because they ignore a crucial element: the novel's celebration of an agriculture modeled on urban industrialism. Though Cather herself may have had "the dimmest possible view of literature with a social

message," her novel is in fact a demonstration of the early twentieth-century demand for a New Agriculture, a farming rooted in sound business practices, efficient organization, and scientific discoveries.⁴ Advocated by urban agrarians, social scientists, and the US Department of Agriculture, the New Agriculture sought to remake Thomas Jefferson's yeoman into a modern manufacturer, a "New Farmer."⁵

That its main character is a woman first suggests that *O Pioneers!* challenges the dominant nineteenth-century political and intellectual vision of the farmer, Jeffersonian agrarianism. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson famously declared that "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."⁶ But Jefferson's agrarian ideal defines farmers as men, never as women.⁷ Owing its vision of reality more to literary pastoral than to agricultural economics, this agrarianism originally defended the national economy as agricultural, centered on the small family farm's independent husbandman, a man

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who was virtuous, hard-working, and faithful to the republic.⁸ But by 1900, the national economy was rapidly industrializing, and though farmers were “commercialists . . . their methods, ideas, and institutions were pre-industrial.”⁹ To remedy the latter, the New Agriculture defined the successful farm not as the self-sufficient homestead of agrarian myth but as an efficient, profitable business supporting an increasingly consolidating industrial order.

Efforts to redefine the farmer in industrial terms began at least as early as *Farm Journal*'s 1890 assertion: “We farmers are manufacturers, and when we adopt the successful manufacturer's emphatic methods we shall succeed as well as they.” The *Journal* urged readers to discard old farming methods in favor of the “newest and best”; it claimed that farmers will succeed in the new age only by employing “hard thought [to] evolve new plans,” and discovering “shorter, cheaper methods . . . to supersede the older.”¹⁰ By 1907, Kenyon Butterfield, father of rural sociology, was pressing Americans to “eliminate” the farmer who “is dazzled by the romantic halo of the good old times” and to replace him with the “new farmer,” who is characterized by “keenness, business instinct, readiness to adopt new methods . . . he is a successful American citizen who grows corn instead of making steel rails.”¹¹ Redefining the farmer became a “national issue” in 1908 when President Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission to study “the problem of farm life.”¹² The Commission defined “two great classes of farmers: those who make farming a real and active constructive business, as much as the successful manufacturer or merchant makes his effort a business; and those who merely passively live on the land.”¹³ In contrast to those who “refused to become modern,” the new farmer's “business [was] gradually assuming the form of other capitalized industries.”¹⁴

The Country Life Movement was the rural manifestation of the national Progressive Movement.¹⁵ Most Country Life leaders were educators and journalists, many were involved

in the conservation movement, and several had published works advocating agricultural and educational efficiency.¹⁶ Urban agrarians, a vocal subset of Country Lifers, were social thinkers who looked “to the countryside for solutions to urban problems . . . for correctives to urban values. For them, rural America symbolized what America had been and was an antidote for what it was becoming.”¹⁷ Concerned with rural uplift and uneasy about the nation's burgeoning industrial system, these thinkers saw the farmer as a “hard-working small capitalist” whose role was to be a “harmonizer between capital and labor.”¹⁸ Country Lifers firmly believed that the countryside was to supply cities with its best people; in their view, urban leaders ought to be rural men.¹⁹

Although forward-looking in seeking to industrialize agriculture, “urban agrarians were captive of the agrarian myth.”²⁰ For example, Theodore Roosevelt, who had limited contact with farmers, accepted wholeheartedly Jefferson's agrarianism. The progressive president believed that “the farmer . . . represented the best hope that America had of preserving a mighty breed of men”; the farmer was Roosevelt's “last hero as he was Jefferson's first.”²¹ In his introduction to the Country Life Commission's *Report*, the president declared that “the welfare of the whole community depends upon the welfare of the farmer.”²² Like Roosevelt, urban agrarians sincerely believed that Jeffersonian values could be retained as farming industrialized.²³ The Country Life Movement as a whole, in urging the New Agriculture, looked backward and forward; it “sought both to preserve traditional agrarian ideals in the face of industrialism and to adapt agriculture to the modern age.”²⁴

WILLA CATHER, URBAN AGRARIAN

Willa Cather fits the urban agrarian profile, and not simply because several of her works nostalgically imagine rural Nebraska.²⁵ Her early adult life follows the contours of the Progressive Era, 1890-1917; as Guy Reynolds

points out, "as a life it is an almost archetypal progressive success story."²⁶ Raised in rural Nebraska, Cather graduated from the state university in 1895, wrote for several regional newspapers, taught in Pittsburgh high schools beginning in 1901, traveled widely in Europe, and published two books before landing a job in 1906 on the leading progressive journal of the time, *McClure's*.²⁷ As a close observer of her home state and as someone whose *McClure's* work kept her abreast of the major intellectual streams of her day, Cather was surely aware of the transformation of American agriculture. Robert W. Cherny points out that "When Cather returned for her occasional visits [to Nebraska], she could not have missed the outward signs of [farmers'] prosperity. The pioneers' soddies gave way to substantial frame houses and barns."²⁸ In "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Cather recalls the "rapid industrial development of Nebraska, which . . . was arrested in the years 1893-97 by a succession of crop failures and by the financial depression which spread over the whole country. . . . The slack farmer moved on."²⁹

While Cather was managing editor of *McClure's*, the New Agriculture was attracting wide attention in popular national magazines such as *Outlook*, *Independent*, and *World's Work*.³⁰ *Outlook* devoted its 10 April 1909 issue to country life concerns; in describing the future of agriculture, Charles Dillon argues that "Farming in the next generation or so will be more and more scientific. . . . Farmers will live in towns or cities and go to their fields as a business, just as any business man or skilled laborer now goes to his work."³¹ Similarly, in the October 1912 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Roy Holmes declares that "the new farming is of necessity a specialized department of urban life."³² Hinman Holmes defines agriculture as "a form of manufacturing, and its development must be along the lines marked out by the development of manufacturing in the past."³³ Herbert N. Casson asserts, in "The New American Farmer" in the May 1908 *Review of Reviews*, that "the new farmer . . . is a commercialist,—a man of the twentieth cen-

tury. He works as hard as the old farmer did, but in a higher way. He uses the four M's—mind, money, machinery, and muscle; but as little of the latter as possible."³⁴

In its representation of the New Agriculture, *O Pioneers!* argues that a successful agriculture works by the same principles underlying twentieth-century industry: market speculation, a hierarchical division of labor, shrewd management, and the continual deployment of the latest technologies. In social terms the text imagines farming as a business, not a way of life. In political terms the text answers agrarian radical movements, such as populism, which saw farmers as potentially independent and self-sufficient if it were not for monopolistic urban industrial forces. In keeping with the progressive spirit of the age, the text represents the New Agriculture as a firm belief in better days to come, if only farmers applied industrial organization to control the biological processes of farming.³⁵

"UP AND COMING ON THE DIVIDE, EH,
ALEXANDRA?" (106)

Pointing to the rural progressive, agrarian vs. industrial tension it embodies, *O Pioneers!* opens on a harsh, gray day in January, a month for looking back and looking ahead. Suggesting the dire consequences of holding to a preindustrial agriculture, the novel's first section, "The Wild Land," begins by imagining a sense of precariousness: Hanover "was trying not to be blown away. . . . dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves. . . . None of them had any appearance of permanence" (11). To settle the country and to achieve the ordered community of Part 2, "Neighboring Fields," pioneer John Bergson must die, clearing the way for Alexandra, a young woman who looks "into the future" (21). As the first chapter ends, we see her riding home holding a lantern, a beacon "held firmly between her feet, [its] moving point of light . . . going deeper

and deeper into the dark country" (24). At the same time, to make room for progressive farmers, mossbacks must be removed: young Carl Linstrum, who "seemed already to be looking into the past," soon abandons the Divide with a father who "was never meant for a farmer," a man who sells out to Alexandra (21, 52, 65).

The Bergsons advance from struggling immigrants working their own homestead to becoming "rich as barons" by speculating on neighbors' land (105). To be successful, Alexandra knows early that she must adopt the tactics of "the men in town who are buying up other people's land," men who "don't try to farm it," speculators (66). Like these men, she "read[s] the papers and follow[s] the markets" (28). She emulates real estate man Charley Fuller, who is "feathering his nest" by buying land on the Divide; Alexandra allies herself with Fuller's economic sense of things when she comments, "If only poor people could learn a little from rich people!" (58-59). In sixteen years, she does learn; she moves from working one farm to managing several because her speculative business skill separates her from "bad farmers, like poor Mr. Linstrum" (59).³⁶

The text depicts speculation as the breeder of success; playing the market stimulates an economic blossoming that creates an organized landscape. Part 1 ends with Alexandra convincing her brothers to speculate, to take a "big chance" by mortgaging their homestead to buy up other farms (63). At the end of Part 1, Alexandra has a "new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. . . . she felt the future stirring" (68-69); when Part 2 opens, we immediately see that her gamble has paid off. Even the Divide itself is transformed; the former "wild land" (26) is now "squares of wheat and corn" (73). Whereas before "the record of the plow was insignificant" (25), sixteen years later "the brown earth . . . yields itself eagerly to the plow" (74). Marks of technological success fill the Divide: "telephone wires," "gilded weather-vanes," "steel windmills" (73). "Order and fine arrangement [are] manifest all over the great

farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the wind-breaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds" (81).³⁷ (See Figure 1.) Where before, "The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow," now "From the graveyard gate one can count a dozen gayly painted farmhouses" (21, 73). Just as twentieth-century industrialism masks the connection between labor and labor's product, the text masks the Bergsons' work by skipping the sixteen years when their hardest labors are expended. Readers see only the result, the bottom line, a profitable landscape.

O Pioneers! also portrays the new industrial farming's demand for farm labor efficiency in its representation of the Bergsons' specialization of work. Before their father's death, Alexandra and her brothers shared field labor, but as John Bergson lies dying a distinction between house and field takes shape. John initiates this specialization when he tells his sons: "Alexandra must not work in the fields any more" (32). He realizes that she makes more money selling eggs and butter than as a field hand. Following his death, Alexandra works only around the house, tending her chickens, making butter, but more importantly, doing the farm's planning and accounting, while her brothers labor in the fields—under her orders. Labor and management cease to be one and the same, as they had been in the figure of John Bergson. After the family subdues and organizes the landscape, the two brothers marry and the farm is divided among the three. Soon the sole proprietor of several farms, Alexandra makes finer distinctions regarding work by reordering household chores, business management, and farm labor into separate spheres. While she spends her time working with her farms' accounts, serving girls do household chores and hired men do field work. She later promotes herself to a higher management position when she hires Barney Flinn as a "foreman" to manage her farms' laborers—though, like a factory boss, she might be seen "overseeing the branding of the cattle, or the loading of the pigs" (85, 186). This management-labor

1901 Grain '02 Grass '03 Grain '04 Grain '05 Corn '06 Wheat '07 Grass '08 Grass '09 Grain '10 Grain I 20	1901 Grain '02 Corn '03 Wheat '04 Grass '05 Grass '06 Grain '07 Grain '08 Corn '09 Wheat '10 Grass H 20	1901 Grain '02 Grain '03 Corn '04 Wheat '05 Grass '06 Grass '07 Grain '08 Grain '09 Corn '10 Wheat G 20	1901 Corn '02 Wheat '03 Grass '04 Grass '05 Grain '06 Grain '07 Corn '08 Wheat '09 Grass '10 Grass F 20
1901 Wheat '02 Grass '03 Grass '04 Grain '05 Grain '06 Corn '07 Wheat '08 Grass '09 Grass '10 Grain C 20	1901 Grass '02 Grain '03 Grain '04 Corn '05 Wheat '06 Grass '07 Grass '08 Grain '09 Grain '10 Corn B 20	1901 Pasture '02 Roots (Corn Fodder) '03 Grain E 10 1901 Grain '02 Pasture '03 Roots (Corn Fodder) A 10	1901 Roots (Corn Fodder) '02 Grain '03 Pasture D 10 Orchard

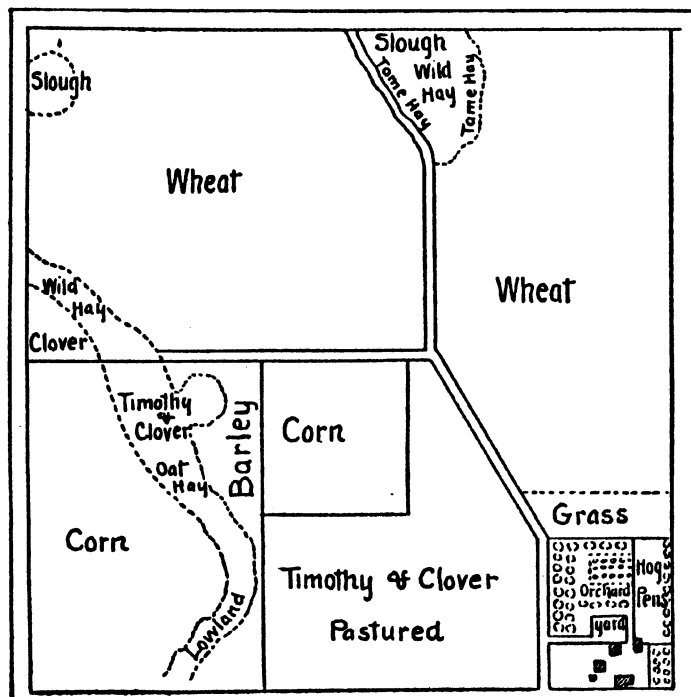


FIG. 1. Farm plan in 1907. From A. M. Teneyck, "Farm Management," in *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture*, ed. L. H. Bailey (New York: Macmillan, 1907), p. 91.

hierarchy allows Alexandra to secure the settlement of the "wild land," ultimately making herself and her brothers "independent land-owners, not struggling farmers" (65).

Reflecting the New Agriculture's view of farming as a business rather than as a way of life, *O Pioneers!* argues that farm work is first white-collar work. The text legitimizes management as work most directly in Alexandra's confrontation with Oscar and Lou over her involvement with Carl. The brothers interrupt her when she is "busy with her account-books" to insist that they have claim to Alexandra's land because they have done the physical labor that has made it prosper (149). Alexandra replies by distinguishing between physical work and mental work (management). Claiming that her work "puts in the crop, and it sometimes keeps the fields for corn to grow in," Alexandra defies her brothers' natural rights logic (153).³⁸ Her reminder that her brothers were always ready to give up their labors and that they always balked at each of her experiments underscores the novel's point that farm success derives mainly from persistent and sound management, not from heavy and consistent labor (153). John Bergson himself realized that his sons had no understanding of farm management: "Lou and Oscar were industrious, but he could never teach them to use their heads about their work" (28).

THE BRAIN-WORKING FARMER

The Bergson family represents a triadic view of the farmer shared by many Country Lifers. Rural sociologist Kenyon Butterfield claims that "There is the 'old' farmer, there is the 'new' farmer, and there is the 'mossback.' . . . The old farmer was in his day a new farmer; he was 'up with the times.' . . . The new farmer is merely the worthy son of a noble sire; he is the modern embodiment of the old farmer's progressiveness. The mossback is the man who tries to use the old methods under the new conditions."³⁹ Alexandra's father, John Bergson, is an old farmer, the intelligent pioneer. As Neil Gustafson argues, John is no

"failed farmer"; in fact, he dies bequeathing "his hard-won land" and he and Alexandra have a "shared dream" of the Divide.⁴⁰ In the view of the New Agriculture, the failures are Oscar and Lou. Oscar is clearly imagined as a mossback: he "liked to begin his corn-planting at the same time every year, whether the season were backward or forward. He seemed to feel that by his own irreproachable regularity he would clear himself of blame and reprove the weather" (56). The brothers are men who "were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break trails in a new country. A steady job, a few holidays, nothing to think about, and they would have been very happy" (49-50).⁴¹

This triadic view of the farmer dovetails with the text's representation of the New Agriculture's emphasis on brain power over physical power. *O Pioneers!* describes a rural society in which farmers employ "methods of farming requiring the highest intelligence"; the "brain-working farmer is the man behind prosperity."⁴² In the early twentieth century, according to historian Mary Neth, "Machinery, technology, and scientific methods changed farming from manual labor to intellectual labor."⁴³ The novel stresses this when Alexandra criticizes "these stupid fellows," those leaving the Divide: "Why are we better fixed than any of our neighbors? Because father had more brains. Our people were better people than these in the old country. We *ought* to do more than they do, and see further ahead" (66-67). The intensity of the text's negative portrait of Oscar underscores how much it values intellectual work over physical labor:

He was a man of powerful body and unusual endurance; the sort of man you could attach to a corn-sheller as you would an engine. . . . His love of routine amounted to a vice. He worked like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same way, regardless of whether it was best or no. He felt that there was a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil, and he rather liked to do things in the hardest way. (56)

The brothers do not share their sister's quality of mind: while Lou is "apt to go off at half-cock" and Oscar is "indolent of mind" (55-56), Alexandra is intelligent "like her grandfather," a successful shipbuilder, a man who "built up a proud little business with no capital but his own skill and foresight" (28-29). In the midst of "The Wild Land," we see Alexandra constantly thinking, planning, gathering information and advice—using, unlike her brothers, her head about her work (28). Like her "powerful" grandfather, she has "the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized [her grandfather] in his better days" (29). Recognizing his daughter's mental superiority over her brothers, John Bergson leaves his farm in Alexandra's "strong" hands (30). At this key transitional moment, intelligent farming is imagined as the act of strength that creates agricultural success, a view shared by proponents of the New Agriculture: "weaker farmers will be unable to sustain themselves; the weaker farmers will be those who direct their labors least wisely; these again will be those who know least."⁴⁴

PRUDENT FERTILITY

As a middle ground between wilderness and mining the soil, Alexandra's farm demonstrates rural progressivism's marrying of agriculture and conservation.⁴³ During the Progressive Era, especially during Roosevelt's administration, "the conservation and country-life movements rest[ed] on the same premise"; for urban agrarians this meant "utilizing the products and forces of the planet wisely."⁴⁶ Alexandra mediates between Crazy Ivar's and her brothers' land uses by establishing a profitable farm in harmony with nature. Ivar "lost his land through mismanagement" because he kept his farm wild (83). Representing a way of dealing with nature at odds with the brothers' exploitation and Alexandra's skillful management, Ivar lives without disturbing the land, a mark of inefficient land use for a New Agriculture stressing "a system of diversified and rotation

farming."⁴⁷ "Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done. . . . He preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod" (39-41). Oscar and Lou, who disdain Ivar since he will never "be able to prove up on his land because he worked it so little," exploit nature (47). As boys, they shoot birds for fun; as self-satisfied adults, they take cherries from Alexandra's orchard because they have no "patience to grow an orchard of their own" (98). In their selfishness, the brothers represent the nineteenth century's "primitive system of land exploitation" which the New Agriculture meant to displace.⁴⁸ Touted as the nation's chief soil conservator, the New Farmer reconciled John Muir's spiritual preservationism and Gifford Pinchot's utilitarianism.⁴⁹

Alexandra accomplishes a twin urban agrarian goal: "both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil" (191). A Country Life success story, Emil grows from a "clumsy" country boy to a university graduate who "can scarcely remember" his sister's struggle with the "old wild country" (12, 76). The son of Swedish immigrants, Emil is "just like an American boy,—he just graduated from the State University in June" (108). His transformation at the university parallels the Divide's transformation following the implementation of university ideas, such as alfalfa. By twenty-one, Emil has become "the best" there is on the Divide, a man full of possibility (271). Through her years of struggle, Alexandra has mothered him to give him "a chance, a whole chance" so that he can "do whatever he wants to" with his life (109). Having lived in Mexico City, the adult Emil stands ready to fulfill the Country Life vision of the farm, supplying "the city and metropolis with fresh blood, clean bodies and clear brains that can endure the strain of modern urban life."⁵⁰ But his promise goes unfulfilled because unlike the patient, prudent,

cost-accounting Alexandra, he lives "at the mercy of storms" and is incapable of intelligently managing his passions (202; see 162). Allowing himself to be "overtaxed by excitement and sorrow" (228) and instead of moving on to Omaha and law school, he returns to the Shabatas' orchard, Marie's "neglected wilderness" (138).

"HER TRAINING HAD ALL BEEN TOWARD THE END OF MAKING HER PROFICIENT IN WHAT SHE HAD UNDERTAKEN TO DO."
(183)

Alexandra's farming abilities are not as innate as many critics suggest; they are acquired and disciplined. In reworking her homestead's wild land, she is guided by land-grant universities, which were created in the mid-nineteenth century to serve as resources for American agriculture. Boosters of the New Agriculture urged farmers to utilize university advances in scientific agriculture, something most farmers were reluctant to do.⁵¹ To combat this hesitancy, the Country Life Commission urged the creation of "a well-developed plan of extension teaching conducted by agricultural colleges, by means of the printed page, face-to-face talks, and demonstration or object lessons."⁵² *O Pioneers!* promotes the Country Life insistence that university experts should guide advances in agriculture; new ideas should no longer be farm-grown as they once had been. Several times the novel points to the positive results of Alexandra's access to the University of Nebraska. For example, she learns about a "new kind of clover hay" (63) from a "young man who had been to the University" (154). The Cornhusker-educated Emil is an intellectual resource for her; it is hinted that Emil, "with his university ideas . . . instigated the silo" (86). Before she visits Frank at the State Penitentiary, Alexandra strolls by the University of Nebraska, feeling a "great tenderness" for the male students who "come running down the flagged walk and dash out into the street as if [they] were rushing to announce some wonder to the world" (256). The

one university student she talks to makes her feel "unreasonably comforted" in her grief over Emil's death (257).⁵³

Although agricultural education is embodied favorably in Emil, its absolute necessity is represented in Oscar and Lou's pathological suspicion of Alexandra's technological experiments—until she demonstrates their feasibility. Her brothers must be shown the viability of land speculation, wheat, alfalfa, and silos before they will adopt them. Understanding that many farmers were like Oscar and Lou, banks and businesses dependent upon farming underwrote demonstration farms to "promote agricultural efficiency and prosperity."⁵⁴ Precursors to the county extension system, these demonstrations were the "best solution available for the problem of adult education in agriculture" because demonstration agents had "the ability to supervise farmers and to follow up on instruction."⁵⁵ Agents taught not only scientific farming but "economy, order, sanitation, patriotism, and a score of other wholesome lessons."⁵⁶ Itself a demonstration of progressive farming, *O Pioneers!* represents for its primarily urban audience the need for "the new generation of scientific farmers" to redefine the nation's agriculture through "redirected education."⁵⁷

Getting farmers to adopt industrial technologies was a key component of the New Agriculture: "the mastery of machinery—the transformation of the farm into a factory . . . gives [the modern farmer] a sense of mental superiority never before found upon the farm."⁵⁸ Farmers who refused to adopt new technology were labeled "'backward.'"⁵⁹ *O Pioneers!* valorizes Alexandra as someone unafraid of new technology. While exploring the river country farms with Emil, she "spent a whole day with one young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay" (63). This hay helps to replace the wild land's "shaggy coat" with a "vast checker-board" of neighboring fields (73). Clover gives way to Alexandra's successful experiment with alfalfa—"the salvation of this country"—a perennial introduced

to Nebraska during the period when "Nebraska agriculture may be said to have come into its own . . . between 1890 and 1908" (154).⁶⁰ In the face of Lou's resistance—"everybody [is] laughing at us"—Alexandra puts in "the first big wheat-planting," a practice her neighbors adopt only after seeing her "three big wheat crops" (154). In addition, she has built the "first silo on the Divide," and, though her hired hands criticize her for it, we know that her experiment will succeed (85).

Adopting new technology is fine, but the progressive farmer needs to know how to use it properly. Alexandra's neighbor Amédée Chevalier runs a highly mechanized farm, too; he operates a steam thresher and a header (215). But unlike Alexandra, he has inexpertly managed his purchases. He is the only one who can run both pieces of equipment, so "he has to be everywhere at once" (215). His precipitous investment—"three thousand dollars' worth of new machinery to manage"—keeps him in the field when he should be in the hospital (218). He is "overheating himself" physically and economically because he has not made Alexandra's split between labor and management (216). Clearly, he is worried about whether his crop will pay for the technical improvements he purchased to harvest it. His "wheat is short" and ready "to shatter" (218), and paying off his investment rests on his wife's "hope that he can rent it out to neighbors, it cost so much" (215). The stress of all this contributes as much to his death as his appendicitis. In his last act in the field, Amédée is waving "to the engineer not to stop the engine" (218).⁶¹

The machine in this novel's garden is a positive, creative force, not the interrupter of a rural pastoral moment.⁶² It is not the machinery that kills the happy Amédée; his mismanagement of it kills him. Across the Divide, positive images of the machine abound: telephone wires "hum," the land "yields itself eagerly to the plow . . . with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" and "the grain . . . bends toward the blade and cuts like velvet" (73-74). These machines make the "order and fine arrange-

ment" of Alexandra's farm (81). Even the rifle, the novel's most insidious machine, serves the New Agriculture's efforts to efficiently control natural processes and spontaneity by killing off the novel's impetuous lovers, Emil and Marie, and by returning ours and the novel's attention to the text's ordered heroine, Alexandra.

"BUT IT GRATIFIED HIM TO FEEL LIKE A
DESPERATE MAN." (234)

To transform rural society, the New Agriculture needed to contain lingering political passions of agrarian radicalism. Populism was anathema to urban agrarians. *O Pioneers!*' vision of a New Agriculture culminates in its dim view of populism, an agrarian extremism that severely critiqued industrial capitalism.⁶³ Ethnographer-anthropologist Deborah Fink notes that "twentieth-century reformers did not like what they actually saw in the countryside—particularly the Populists. They feared rural agitation."⁶⁴ The New Agriculture marked a move away from not only nineteenth-century farming but from its unsettled politics: "Where of old [the farmer] spent long evenings brooding over fancied wrongs and came to believe himself a victim of machinations and of circumstances, now he goes out and helps to manage and is part of the industrial world."⁶⁵ In contrast to the shrewd Alexandra, Lou is a William Jennings Bryan backer, a Populist "political agitator," who mismanages his farm (104, 136). Unable to make as much money as even Oscar, Lou is "tricky. . . he has not a fox's face for nothing. . . he neglects his farm to attend conventions" (93).⁶⁶

While "Prudent Alexandra" invests in technology to improve her farms, Lou spends his money extravagantly; he indulges his wife's preoccupation with "rings and chains and 'beauty pins'" and buys a bathtub that Annie declares is "weakening" him because he stays in it too long (267, 93, 96).⁶⁷ More significantly, Lou is jealous of eastern establishment money: "We gave Wall Street a scare in ninety-six. . .

Silver wasn't the only issue. . . . The West is going to make itself heard. . . . We have a good deal more to say than we had when we were poor. . . . We're getting on to a whole lot of things" (104-5). But his politics are violent. He encourages Carl Linstrum and other "folks in New York" to "march down to Wall Street and blow it up. Dynamite it, I mean" (104-5). Though Lou's populism may menace a capitalist ideology, his threats are futile: the urban Carl recognizes that "the same business would go on in another street. The street doesn't matter" (105). Radicals like Lou, or Frank Shabata, cannot stop the impending marriage of metropolitan New York and rural Nebraska. As if answering Lou's extremism, new farmer Alexandra and gold prospector Carl marry—as friends, in order to be "safe" (273).⁶⁸

Allied to Lou is the jealous Frank, the county's other political agitator and a murderer. Every Sunday he decries the excesses of the Gould family by telling an "inexhaustible stock of stories about their crimes and follies, how they bribed the courts and shot down their butlers with impunity" (136). Marie hates to see the newspapers come because she "had nothing but good will" for the Goulds (135). Frank is as jealous of the Goulds' money as he is of his wife's affections: "If he ever got rich he meant to buy her pretty clothes and take her to California in a Pullman car. . . . in the mean time he wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and as unjust as he felt it" (238). An antipopulist portrait of agrarian extremism, Frank is "a desperate man" whose "unhappy temperament was like a cage," a man who "made his own unhappiness" (234). Murdering Marie and Emil is his most radical and futile gesture at the forces he imagines arrayed against him. If the progressive Alexandra can get him pardoned, the populist Frank will exile himself: he tells her that he will "not trouble dis country no more" (263).⁶⁹

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* presents us with a successful agrarian heroine of almost mythic proportion who models her farming on urban industrialism to transform an unproductive land into a lush breadbasket. In Alexandra

we see the best demonstration of the viability of the New Agriculture, for the application of twentieth-century industrial capitalism to agriculture. Foreshadowing today's agribusiness, the text praises market speculation, technological change, and hierarchical farm-labor divisions. In picturing farm life positively, *O Pioneers!* envisions an agriculture that will sustain the expansion of urban American industrialism with cheap food and displaced labor.

NOTES

I thank Marywood University for release time to complete this essay.

1. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, ed. Susan J. Rosowski and Charles Mignon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 58-59. Further citations to *O Pioneers!* are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Susan Rosowski, Preface to *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather, ed. Susan Rosowski and Charles Mignon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 47. Attention to the novel's pastoral elements include, from John J. Murphy: "Like the generating light God made to govern the day, the sympathy evident in Alexandra's radiant face has made the wild land prolific" ("A Comprehensive View of Cather's *O Pioneers!*" in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John J. Murphy [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984], pp. 116-117); from Susan Rosowski: "[I]n *O Pioneers!* the narrator imaginatively transforms Nebraska into a New World Eden" (*The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986], p. 144); from John H. Randall III: "The land bows to the human will because it is responsive to human love, and the reason Alexandra is able to tame the land is that she is able to feel love for it" (*The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960], p. 67); from Janis P. Stout, Alexandra's "farming methods nevertheless draw on a 'feminine' spirit of cooperation with the land and intuitive understanding of her animals' needs, quite different from her father's method of trying to master or 'tame' his 'wild land'" (*Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990], p. 102). Randall claims that *O Pioneers!* represents "the Garden of Eden . . . as existing in that short interval of time between the passing of the pioneers and the completion of settlement by farmers" (74-75).

3. Rosowski, *ibid.*, p. 46. Wayne E. Fuller points out that many leaders of the national Progressive movement "owed much to rural America for those dominant traits which were so characteristic of them" ("The Rural Roots of The Progressive Leaders." *Agricultural History* 42, no. 1 [1968]: 3).
4. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 188; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 126.
5. Kenyon L. Butterfield, *Chapters in Rural Progress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), p. 53; Herbert N. Casson, "The New American Farmer," *Review of Reviews* 37 (May 1908): 598; see David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), p. 23-50.
6. Thomas Jefferson, "Manufactures," in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 217; see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1955), pp. 24-25.
7. Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 19-21; Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition To Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (1989): 143-44.
8. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 125-26; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 128-29.
9. Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 12.
10. "We, Too, Are Manufacturers," *Farm Journal*, November 1890, 198.
11. Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 43; Butterfield, *Chapters* (note 5 above), pp. 55, 57, 65.
12. Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 98.
13. Commission on Country Life, *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, introduction by Theodore Roosevelt (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1911), p. 85.
14. Neth, *Preserving* (note 12 above), p. 98; Eugene Davenport, "Scientific Farming," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 40 (March 1912): 45-50 (reprint, Millwood, N. Y.: Kraus Reprint Co., 1975), p. 49.
15. Fink, *Agrarian* (note 7 above), p. 24.
16. William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974), pp. 31-33.
17. Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 25.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
19. Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), p. 36.
20. Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 34; Dewey W. Grantham Jr., "The Progressive Era and the Reform Tradition" in *Progressivism: The Critical Issues*, ed. David M. Kennedy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 115.
21. Clayton Ellsworth, "Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission," *Agricultural History* 34 (October 1960): 155. See Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 2.
22. Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), p. 10.
23. Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), pp. 34-35; Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 25.
24. Bowers, *ibid.*, p. 134.
25. Woodress, *Willa Cather* (note 4 above), pp. 243, 249. Cather's choice of paper and type for the original publication of *O Pioneers!* suggests her efforts to manufacture this nostalgia: "The heavy texture and cream color of paper used for *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* . . . created a sense of warmth and invited a childlike play of imagination, as did these books' large dark type and wide margins" (ix). In preparing their scholarly edition of *O Pioneers!*, Susan Rosowski and Charles Mignon "deferred to Cather's declared preference for a warm, cream antique stock" (x).
26. Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 13.
27. Philip Gerber, *Willa Cather* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), pp. 36, 40, 41, 49.
28. Robert W. Cherny, "Nebraska, 1883-1925: Cather's Version and History's," in *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History*, ed. John J. Murphy (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Humanities Publications Center, 1990), p. 235.
29. Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation*, 5 September 1923, 238.
30. Woodress, *Willa Cather* (note 4 above), p. 190; Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 186.
31. Charles Dillon, "Education and Discontent," *Outlook*, 10 April 1909, 831.
32. Roy Hinman Holmes, "The Passing of the Farmer," *Atlantic Monthly*, 110 (October 1912), 523.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 522.
34. Casson, "New" (note 5 above), p. 598.
35. Recently, scholars have been studying Alexandra's business practices to support a variety of arguments. See Reynolds, *Willa Cather* (note 26 above), p. 56; Warren Motley, "The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," *Women's Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 150; Neil Gustafson, "Getting Back to Cather's Text: The Shared Dream in *O Pioneers!*" *Western American Literature*, 30, no. 2 (summer 1995): 152; Joseph R. Urgo, *Willa Cather and the*

Myth of American Migration (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 45; Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 220-21. None has argued that *O Pioneers!* celebrates the New Agriculture.

36. Carl claims that the Bergsons have become so rich that "Morgan himself couldn't touch [them]" (105). Populists damned land speculation in their 1892 Omaha platform: "The land, including all the natural sources of wealth, is the heritage of the people, and should not be monopolized for speculative purposes" (John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961], p. 443).

37. See Figure 1 for an illustration of how the New Agriculture defined "order and fine arrangement." Source: A. M. Teneyck, "Farm Management," in *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture*, ed. L. H. Bailey (New York: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 90-98.

38. Horwitz, *By the Law* (note 35 above), p. 222.

39. Butterfield, *Chapters* (note 5 above), p. 53.

40. Gustafson, "Getting" (note 35 above), pp. 152-53.

41. Davenport in "Scientific Farming" (note 14 above) defines three stages in the development of agriculture in the United States: (1) "primitive agriculture . . . the self-sufficing system"; (2) the "money-making stage . . . at the expense of virgin fertility . . . that generation was exploiting nature at a rate never before attempted"; (3) the "scientific stage of farming . . . the object is not so much the magnitude of production as it is the quality of the product and the economy of its production" (45-46). Casson in "New American Farmer" (note 5 above) defines the old farmer as a "Robinson Crusoe of the soil" and the new farmer as a "suburbanite" whose "business has become so complex and many-sided" (598). But according to Casson, "All American farmers, of course, are not of the new variety. The country, like the city, has its slums" (598).

42. Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), p. 30; Casson, *ibid.*, p. 599; see T. Bayard Collins, *The New Agriculture* (New York: Munn and Company, 1906), pp. 18-19.

43. Neth, *Preserving* (note 12 above), p. 218.

44. Edward F. Adams, *The Modern Farmer in His Business Relations* (San Francisco: N. J. Stone Company, 1899), p. 21.

45. L. H. Bailey, *The Country Life Movement in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 198-200.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 179; Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), p. 38.

47. Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), p. 90.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 84; see Davenport, "Scientific" (note 14 above), pp. 45-46.

49. J. Leonard Bates, *The United States 1898-1928: Progressivism and a Society in Transition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 81; Irwin Unger *These United States*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 647. The Country Life Commission and the Commission on the Conservation of Natural Resources "were created simultaneously in 1908" (Ellsworth, "Theodore" [note 21 above], p. 161).

50. Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), p. 31; Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 25.

51. Danbom, *ibid.*, p. 88; Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), p. 111; Neth, *Preserving* (note 12 above), p. 104.

52. Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), pp. 26-27.

53. The University of Nebraska formed the Department of Agronomy and Farm Management in 1909 (Robert N. Manley, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska*, vol. 1 [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969], p. 202).

54. Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), p. 89.

55. Danbom, *Resisted* (note 5 above), p. 71.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

57. Harold W. Foght, "The Country School," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 60 (March 1912): 149-57 (reprint, Millwood, N. Y.: Kraus Reprint Co., 1975), p. 149; Commission, *Report* (note 13 above), p. 121; Butterfield, *Chapters* (note 5 above), p. 79; Bowers, *Country* (note 16 above), pp. 4-5; Danbom, *ibid.*, pp. 55-56. The extension system was consolidated as the Agricultural and Home Economics Extension System in the 1914 Smith-Lever Act (Bowers, p. 89; see Jellison, *Entitled* [note 21 above], pp. 16-17). For farmers' resistance to rural school curricular reform see Danbom, pp. 77-78, and Fuller, "Rural" (note 3 above), pp. 166-67.

58. Collins, *New* (note 42 above), p. 316.

59. Neth, *Preserving* (note 12 above), p. 97.

60. Robert Platt Crawford, *These Fifty Years: A History of the College of Agriculture of the University of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1925), p. 98.

61. For a photograph of the type of header Amédée is likely using, see Collins, *ibid.*, p. 301.

62. See Marx's *Machine* (note 8 above) for a full discussion of "the machine in opposition to the tranquillity and order located in the landscape" (18).

63. Robert C. McMath Jr., *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Noonday Press, 1993), p. 111.

64. Fink, *Agrarian* (note 7 above), p. 25.

65. Charles Moreau Harger, "The New Life on the Farm," *Outlook* 16 (April 1910): 843.

66. For Cather's unfavorable view of Populists see Robert Cherny, "Willa Cather and the Populists," *Great Plains Quarterly* 3 (fall 1983): 206-18.

67. The story of his grandfather should remind Lou of what happens to those who indulge in "every

sort of extravagance" (29). The old man's "unprincipled wife warped [his] probity" and encouraged him into foolish speculation which caused him to lose his fortune (29).

68. Most Populists supported the free coinage of silver (McMath, *American* [note 63 above], p. 183). Nebraska Populist William Jennings Bryan opposed the gold standard and backed free silver (*ibid.*, p. 201). Wall Street investors and bankers backed the gold standard (Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic*

Promise: The Populist Moment in America [New York: Oxford Press, 1976], p. 12).

69. Antipopulists often portrayed Populists as "the political expression of misfits and failures" (Gene Clanton, "Populism, Progressivism, and Equity: The Kansas Paradigm," *Agricultural History* 51, 3 (1977): 559-581). William Allen White editorialized in 1906 that the "basis of [Populists'] contention was the envy of wealth—the hatred of the rich" (Clanton, p. 579).