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Rural Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Imperialism in Willa Cather's *One of Ours*

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INTRODUCTION

Among Americans familiar with the novelist Willa Cather (1873–1947), she is best remembered for her depictions of the Great Plains and the pioneers who settled that vast expanse of territory between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, her writing has been both celebrated and dismissed as local color. Even a laudatory biographical sketch from the Willa Cather Archive describes Cather as bringing “American regions to life through her loving portrayals of individuals within local cultures.”¹ Yet it is a mistake to view her writing in isolation from global concerns. Cather is a modern writer whose fiction, even when set in the past, addresses pressing international affairs such as World War I (1914–18) and the events leading up to America’s delayed entrance into that struggle.

Unlike Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, whose writing careers were spawned by World War I, Willa Cather came to maturity as a writer in the decades preceding it, at the crest of America’s colonial ambitions. She began her career as a journalist in 1893—the same year that Frederick Jackson Turner announced his “frontier thesis” and American plantation interests illegally enlisted US Marines to depose the Hawaiian monarch, Queen Liliuokalani. By the time Hawai’i was formally annexed as a US

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protectorate in 1898, Cather was employed as telegraph editor for the *Pittsburgh Leader* and was busily compressing world affairs into headlines,² a task that grew in scope and impact when the United States declared war on Spain in April 1898. This journalistic apprenticeship left a mark on Cather's fiction. Her knowledge of affairs preceding World War I and her attempt to address their impact on American identity by returning to the period of the United States' emergence as a world power distinguishes her from novelists working to establish an international and cosmopolitan brand of modernism strictly bound to European tradition and situated between the world wars. Cather's interest in America's international involvements and her nation's cosmopolitan identity remained strong and manifested itself in her depictions of the rural American West. *One of Ours* (1922), Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about World War I and its legacy, illustrates this tendency.³ Scholarship has largely focused on Cather's representation of the Great War in the final book of *One of Ours*, but the Nebraska chapters (books 1, 2, and 3) of the novel portray the key struggle: the battle for rural America's identity in a global age.

FROM THE GREAT PLAINS TO THE GREAT WAR

In the final year of the Great War Willa Cather published *My Ántonia* (1918).⁴ That conflict had been raging the entire time she wrote this novel set on the Great Plains, yet nowhere is it explicitly mentioned in the text. Even though events in the narrative are conspicuously confined to Nebraska around the turn of the century, a preoccupation with America's relation to the rest of the world is reflected in the story. Through referencing figures such as the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vásquez de Coronado (ca. 1510–54) and by comparing Nebraskan corn yields to the wheat crop of Russia, Cather invokes the long history of European conquest in the New World and celebrates the global economic importance of the American West, hinting specifically at the pivotal role American agronomy played during the war.⁵ Four years later, in her next prairie novel, *One of Ours*, Cather addresses the Great War explicitly. In contrast to the triumphant tone of *My Ántonia*, however, *One of Ours* strikes a solemn note. The first two-thirds of this novel portray events occurring before US troops reach the trenches in Europe. In these chapters, Cather highlights the conflicted ethnic loyalties preventing Americans from forming a unified interpretation of the war in Europe. At the same time, she infuses these prewar episodes with a sense of the cynicism and schism debilitating the United States in the war's

aftermath.

The conflicting allegiances to European powers are reflected in the name Cather gives the farming community in *One of Ours*. By calling this pioneer settlement on the Great Plains “Frankfort,” Cather hints at the convoluted history of Franco-German relations. Its pronunciation and spelling resemble that of Frankfurt am Main, the German city on the fringe of the coal-rich Saar Basin—a highly strategic zone during World War I but demilitarized, as stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles (1919), at the time Cather was writing *One of Ours*.⁶ “Frankfurt” literally denotes the spot where the Franks forded the Main River in order to conquer the Gauls after the Romans pulled out of Germania in the fifth century CE.

Cather was not content to simply appropriate the name of the historic German city; she felt compelled to modify the spelling before dropping it on her fictional map. The change in spelling from “furt” to “fort” is subtle but significant. By switching a single vowel, she alters the meaning in German from “the crossing of the Franks” to “the fort/defense of the Franks,” a phrase particularly appropriate considering the precarious situation of the contested territory along the border between France and Germany. Until 1871, the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were governed by France. The greater parts of both provinces were conceded to the German Empire after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, but this concession did not sit well with French citizens. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson make special note of the French military response to its embarrassing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War: “In the years immediately following 1871 and in the aftermath of military disaster, French army planners had thought defensively. They had constructed great fortresses on the border with Germany to fling back the invader.”⁷ After reluctantly ceding Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in the 1871 Treaty of Frankfurt, these defenses became key elements in France’s strategy to reacquire the lost provinces, territory that would change nationalities four times between 1870 and 1945. In the first summer of the Great War, the French initiated “Plan 17,” an ambitious attempt to liberate “Alsace-Lorraine and advance to the Rhine,” but the Germans repulsed the invasion and inflicted over three hundred thousand casualties on the French in the two-week campaign.⁸

A devoted student of French history, Cather was acutely aware of the repeated contests for this territory. By christening her fictional farming community “Frankfort,” she alludes to one of the most recognizable and painful symbols of the Franco-German conflict and projects the anguish associated with it on the American heartland.⁹ Cather accentuates the tension

in the story through characterization. The novel's protagonists, Claude Wheeler and his wife Enid Royce Wheeler, embody the conflicted domestic and foreign policies of the United States during the Progressive Era. Whereas Claude exemplifies a Eurocentric cultural allegiance formed through ideological apparatuses, Enid epitomizes cultural imperialism associated with American exploitation of Asian markets.

Cather weds Claude's perspective to prewar idealism and links his individual identity to an affinity for European culture and the past. His desire to study medieval French history, his enlistment in the American Expeditionary Forces, and his eventual deployment in France reflect his sympathy for European civilization as well as the United States' prewar self-concept as a de facto European power obligated to help resolve the conflict in Europe. Claude has desires and dreams, but he lacks the guidance and experience necessary to turn his vague ideas into concrete action. His romantic sensibilities, intellect, passions, and interests belong to a previous age. Even his most insignificant actions are subtly compared to "the heroes of old."¹⁰ Like heroes of the past, Claude is depicted sculpturally, frozen in time like a bronze statue: "fists clenched in an attitude of arrested action . . . his tense figure copper-coloured in the oblique rays."¹¹

Enid, on the other hand, is anything but inert. To capture her essence artistically, sculpture would have to be abandoned in favor of more dynamic media such as the audio recording or moving picture technologies pioneered by Thomas Edison in the late nineteenth century. Enid is the personification of America's geopolitical interests outside Europe. Militantly devoted to converting others to her socioreligious views, she doggedly pursues her intentions. Her missionary ambitions mirror America's twentieth-century program of cultural imperialism—its imposition of trade, culture, and religion—in other parts of the globe (especially Asia and Latin America), while her dedication to the temperance movement foreshadows the nation's obsession with domestic concerns after 1919.

Like Claude, Enid is dissatisfied with life in Frankfort and desires something more. While he wishes to "be good for something," she hopes to "be of use"—preferably outside Frankfort.¹² Although their escapist fantasies would seem to complement each other, their sympathies and ultimate desires lie, quite literally, in opposite directions (and times): Enid escapes Frankfort to proselytize in China, and Claude, the would-be medieval European historian, meets his fate in France with the American Expeditionary Forces during the Great War.

SEEKING REFUGE FROM THE PRESENT

Cather portrays Claude Wheeler as a technophobe distrustful of mechanical contrivances and innovations. Among the men in his family, he is clearly an exception. His father, Nat Wheeler, is a successful farmer who never questions purchasing "a new thrasher or a new automobile,"¹³ and his older brother, Bayliss, runs a successful farm implement business. Claude particularly resents the appliances and equipment his younger brother, Ralph, imposes on the Wheeler household. The gadgets Ralph expects will improve the family's quality of life have negligible impact, and most are ultimately relegated to storage. All who venture into the Wheeler cellar are confronted by the hidden record of Ralph's purchases and the failed promise of technology: "Mysterious objects stood about . . . in the grey twilight; electric batteries, old bicycles and typewriters, a machine for making cement fence-posts, a vulcanizer, a stereopticon with a broken lens. The mechanical toys Ralph could not operate successfully, as well as those he had got tired of, were stored away here."¹⁴ Claude has little of Ralph's faith in technology's capacity to reduce labor and is disgusted by the profligacy that the cellar rubbish represents.

Claude's chief complaint about the machinery his family purchases is not its absurdity or superfluity but the cultural sacrifices his family makes in the pretense of successful farming. "Machines," as he recognizes, "could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do. They could not make agreeable people, either. In so far as he could see, the latter were made by judicious indulgence in almost everything he had been taught to shun."¹⁵ Nat Wheeler gladly spends money on expensive items for the house or farm, but, on the recommendation of Bayliss, he refuses to support Claude, who wishes to attend the state university.¹⁶ Secular culture, art, and cosmopolitanism have no place in the Wheeler family. They have been supplanted by crass materialism and fundamentalist Christian values.

Considering the amount of property owned by the Wheeler patriarch, his willingness to spend money on farm machinery, and an eldest son who runs a farm implement business, it is significant that Cather never depicts Claude operating any state-of-the-art farm equipment such as a tractor, the most recognizable of farm machines. In the second decade of the twentieth century, steam-driven tractors were rapidly being replaced by smaller gasoline-powered models with multicylinder engines, such as the Twin City model "25" (fig. 1).

In 1916, when the Pazandak tractor photograph was taken, more compact



Figure 1. F. A. Pazandak. *Breaking Sod with Plow and Twin City "25" Tractor.* Courtesy of the Institute for Regional Studies, Fred Hulstrand and F. A. Pazandak Photograph Collections, North Dakota State University.

and powerful tractors had become commonplace in the grain-growing areas of the Plains.¹⁷ Nevertheless, not a single tractor of any kind appears on the Wheeler farm. The absence of this technology is suggestive. Cather based the character of Claude on her cousin, Grosvenor (G. P.) Cather, who died in France while serving with the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I, and G. P. is known to have operated a tractor on his family farm before going to war. In fact, the Nebraska State Historical Society possesses a photograph of Cather's cousin on a Reeves Steam traction engine, an image Janis Stout reproduces in *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*.¹⁸

Rather than depicting Claude commanding heavy machinery commonly employed on farms across the Central Great Plains before the war, Cather heightens her hero's discomfort by having him perform farm labor manually or by antiquated means. Among the heavy farming tasks Claude completes on his father's farm in the months before the Great War erupts, none involve any power implements. He replaces fifty acres of corn with winter wheat, gathers corn by hand in the fall, shovels snow and builds a makeshift shelter for rescued hogs after an early spring blizzard, and works with a "team of mules and a heavy plough" in the summer.¹⁹

Shortly after Cather began working on the manuscript for *One of Ours*, the American intellectual Henry Adams was posthumously awarded the

1919 Pulitzer Prize for his memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*. Cather admired the brilliance and sarcastic wit of Adams, a polymath who taught medieval history at Harvard until 1877, produced a respected multivolume history of the United States, and published two novels. In *The Education*, Adams famously confesses that “what he valued most was Motion, and that what attracted his mind was Change.”²⁰ Cather gives her protagonist aspirations to study the subject once taught by Adams, but she fails to endow Claude with anything resembling Adams’s intellect, sophistication, or desire to understand the changes taking place around him. The gulf between Claude and Adams is best illustrated by their antithetical reactions to the machine age. On encountering the forty-foot dynamos in the Gallery of Machines at the Paris Exposition of 1900, Adams immediately ascertained the changes they would bring about for mankind: “To Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity.”²¹ In science and engineering, Adams recognized an emotive capacity to inspire humanity and change the course of history—a force matched historically only by the power of the goddess figure.²² The machinery confronting Claude in *One of Ours*, however, contains nothing of the dynamo’s imaginative allure for Henry Adams. Claude shares none of the reverence for the machine age that Adams expresses in *The Education*.

For Adams, the study of history is the study of change. He actively seeks out transformational events, experiences, ideas, and texts in order to understand their significance. But Claude views the discipline of history too reductively and statically. His desire to study European history at the state university in Lincoln, Nebraska, must be examined with his escapist tendencies in mind. Pursuing an education in European history is attractive to him because he believes it will help distance him from his present surroundings. With a focus on Europe, it diverts his attention from life in the American Midwest; as a class offered at the state university, moreover, it is associated with the secular rather than the rigid Baptist beliefs of his mother, Evangeline Wheeler, and the Bible college where he was grudgingly enrolled.

Claude finds life in rural Nebraska stifling, particularly because of the exalted role religion plays in his community and home: “He felt condemned, but he did not want to renounce a world he as yet knew nothing of. He would like to go into life with all his vigour, with all his faculties free. He didn’t want to be like the young men who said in prayer-meeting that they leaned on their Saviour. He hated their way of meekly accepting permitted pleasures.”²³ Claude expects that “something splendid” awaits beyond

Nebraska.²⁴ Yet there is a risk in adhering to such thought. By seeking “something splendid” abroad or in the past, Claude remains blind to “the little things” in his immediate sphere capable of enriching his life or teaching him a lesson.²⁵

More problematic than Claude’s blindness to “the little things” is his complacency, his refusal to take action to improve the sociocultural situation in Frankfort. He disagrees, for example, with the temperance movement his wife and elder brother industriously promote, but he takes no steps to protest their activities; he just “shrugged his shoulders” and dismisses the issue.²⁶ In failing to act, Claude yields power to the close-minded and intolerant factions in his community. Indeed, William Butler Yeats’s lines from “The Second Coming” (1920) apply as much to Frankfort, Nebraska, as to the Irish poet’s own homeland: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”²⁷ There are people in Frankfort “who had imagination and generous impulses, but they were all . . . inefficient failures.”²⁸ Claude proves no exception. Rather than working to improve the cultural climate of his hometown, he retreats into the past and refuses to confront the parochialism he detests. Instead of standing up for the “liberal principles” he once avowed,²⁹ or for tolerance in general, Claude seeks refuge from the uncompromising Protestant faith and capitalist enterprise practiced by his family.

For Claude, medieval French history represents both a sanctuary from the narrow-mindedness of residents living on the American Plains and an identity to fill the historical and cultural vacuum facing Anglo-Americans living in the Midwest. Claude’s historical ignorance is actually part and parcel of conquest, produced and promoted by “the rhetorical strategy of negation.”³⁰ As defined by David Spurr, negation is the process “by which Western [European] writing conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death.”³¹ Negation works principally in two ways: it rejects “the ambiguous object for which language and experience provide no adequate framework for interpretation” and “acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination.”³² Although Spurr discusses negation in relation to overseas colonialism, this rhetorical strategy has long been employed to legitimize westward expansion, as three centuries of myths imagining precontact North America as a vast untamed wilderness attest. In twentieth-century American literature there may be no better example than the prairie landscape Cather describes in her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), as a place where the “record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric

racés, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings.”³³ By reducing the record of Plains Indians to “feeble scratches,” Cather relegates Native Americans to a savage “prehistory” and actually diminishes American history, especially for English speakers living west of the Mississippi, who have no records preceding the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. For Nebraskans like the Wheelers, who dismiss the impact indigenous people have had on the Plains, history is exceedingly brief. In Claude’s case it begins a generation earlier with his father, Nat Wheeler, who migrated west from Maine:

He had come to this part of Nebraska when the Indians and buffalo were still about, remembered the grasshopper year and the big cyclone, had watched the farms emerge one by one from the great rolling page where once only the wind wrote its story. He had encouraged new settlers to take up homesteads, urged on courtships, lent young fellows the money to marry on, seen families grow and prosper; until he felt a little as if all this were his own enterprise.³⁴

Despite being barely a generation removed from the “Indians and the buffalo,” Claude has little knowledge of either. Because Eurocentric American thought devalued the culture of the native inhabitants of North America, the misunderstood contribution of the indigenous Americans was negated—systematically erased from Nebraskan history—allowing Cather reductively to describe the Plains as a blank “page where once only the wind wrote its story.” Raised in a historical vacuum, Claude is compelled to study about and identify with the lengthy history of Europe, which stands in stark contrast to the seemingly “empty” history of the American Plains.

Somewhat paradoxically, Claude first feels a sense of vitality while studying medieval European history. “Claude usually came out from these lectures with the feeling that the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was fortunate to be alive. . . . His reading that autumn actually made the future look brighter to him; seemed to promise him something.”³⁵ To him, history was far from a dead discipline.

To be fair to Claude, history was a relatively new subject of university study in the early part of the twentieth century. According to Benedict Anderson, the “first academic chairs” in history appeared “in 1810 at the University of Berlin and in 1812 at Napoléon’s Sorbonne.”³⁶ It is no accident that history emerged as a distinct university discipline in Prussia

and France, the two most aggressive nation-states in continental Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The emergence of the Teutonic and Gallic empires necessitated ideological state apparatuses to validate new boundaries and offices, and the institutionalization of history departments in French and German universities met the requirement. Nor is it coincidental that one hundred years later Cather created a hero fascinated with a field so thoroughly linked to the principal powers involved in World War I. In addition to the long history of conflict between these powers, Germany and France have contributed much to North American culture, and Cather wanted to draw on America's divided loyalties to these civilizations.

LUMINOUS VISIONS

For a final project in European history, Claude's professor "assigned him" a report on Joan of Arc, a topic "he felt sure that Wheeler would not dismiss" lightly.³⁷ He does not. Nevertheless, Claude fails to elucidate much about the life of Joan through research. Despite "conscientious study," he realizes that he "knew very little more about the Maid of Orleans than when he first heard of her from his mother."³⁸ Claude has trouble using history to uncover Joan's humanity. He cannot move beyond viewing her as a symbol of chivalry and sacrifice: "a picture, a word, a phrase" that "could renew itself in every generation."³⁹

At the time Claude would have been conducting his research into Joan of Arc, she was not yet a saint. (She was canonized by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.) Having been declared beatified by Pope Pius X in 1909, however, she was already venerated by millions of Roman Catholics. During World War I, Joan of Arc inspired France and its allies in their war efforts. Claude describes her as the "Maid of Orleans." This sobriquet was bestowed on Joan for her role in defending Orléans from the English in 1429. Joan actually hailed from Domrémy, a village in the Lorraine region of France, and her birthplace is significant in the context of German-French relations and military history.⁴⁰ By the beginning of World War I, Lorraine had long been contested terrain. In 1871, France ceded a portion of Lorraine (Domrémy-la-Pucelle was not included) to Germany as part of the Treaty of Frankfurt ending the Franco-Prussian War. When Germany invaded Belgium on 3 August 1914, much of Lorraine was German-held territory, which France intended to reclaim.⁴¹

Cather closely allies Joan of Arc to Claude's interpretation of and participation in the war. First mentioned in relation to his university history

course a year before war breaks out in Europe, Joan is never far from his thoughts, nor would she have been far from any American's thoughts after 1914. Her inspiring image was part of US propaganda efforts to instill hostility toward the German and Austrian states, to which many Americans in the summer of 1914 still felt cultural allegiances. Claude is no exception: "He had always been taught that the German people were pre-eminent in the virtues Americans most admire. . . . The invasion of Belgium was contradictory to the German character as he knew it in his friends and neighbours."⁴² Defending Belgium, Luxembourg, and France from Germany and Austria will mean killing Czechs, Poles, Serbs, Slavs, and other conquered people forcibly conscripted into the armed forces of the German and Austrian empires. This reality made American participation in the war unpopular with many immigrant families.⁴³

To combat the resistance to supporting the Allies in the conflict, the United States initiated a vigorous agenda to promote Gallic sympathies. Joseph Urgo points out that the United States was forced to manufacture a case for war: "The war effort of the Wilson administration was not confined to simple reactions to events in Europe, but included as well an impressive, successful domestic campaign aimed at the American populace. The German threat to France was as tangible as soldiers at the door, but the German threat to the United States was a matter of ideological construction."⁴⁴ Governmental agencies were even formed for this purpose. To promote anti-German sentiment, the National Board for Historical Service was established to educate Americans, especially students, about "German blame for the war."⁴⁵ Although Urgo does not discuss Joan of Arc, her legend was a critical element of the American propaganda campaign. Five hundred years after being burned at the stake at Rouen in Normandy, Joan was resurrected in paint, print, drama, and song to inspire American interest and sense of duty in the war to end all wars (fig. 2).

Cather's allusions to Saint Joan—from Claude's university report to his stay in Rouen, the city where Joan was convicted of heresy and burned at the stake—point to the transatlantic ubiquity of this sacred icon during World War I. Steven Trout notes how the "heroic legend of Joan of Arc" was mobilized in France during the war; her defiant form was reproduced "armored . . . on innumerable propaganda posters."⁴⁶ For centuries after her execution during the Hundred Years' War, Joan was a symbol of antagonism between England and France, but by World War I the memory of "la Pucelle" (the Maid) united the Allies in battle against the Central Powers.

In the war's terrible wake, Joan also comforted the Allies for their tremendous troop loss, over 4.5 million dead.⁴⁷ Trout recognizes her importance in the pantheon of the "iconography of remembrance," a term he defines as "a pattern of images" used to memorialize World War I.⁴⁸ Joan of Arc numbered among the most pervasive of these cultural texts: "Joan of Arc is an icon whose significance extends far beyond Claude's individual history and the parameters of Cather's text. In fact, the Maid of Orleans played a significant role in the way that grieving Americans looked back on the Great War, embodying both the spirit of France for which the doughboys fought and in many cases sacrificed themselves."⁴⁹ While Trout focuses on the role Joan's image played in assuaging grief and commemorating loss in the postwar period, she plays a prominent part in the Nebraska chapters of *One of Ours* as a projection of Claude's psyche and desires before he enlists. By selecting Joan of Arc as the topic for Claude's research, Cather accentuates the romanticism and masochism of her protagonist.

The affinity Claude feels for Joan may derive from her rural isolation. They were both children of the frontier though Joan's homeland differed from Claude's in a critical respect: its susceptibility to partisan violence. As



Figure 2. Apotheosis of Joan of Arc in *The Stars and Stripes* [Paris, France], (May 9, 1919), 4. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, American Memory, *The Stars and Stripes: The American Soldiers' Newspaper of World War I, 1918–1919*.

Jules Michelet, the most influential historian of France, explains, Domrémy was a farming area whose “unfortunate inhabitants . . . belonged to no one, were supported by no one, were spared by no one. . . . They till the soil, the soldiery take the harvest. Nowhere is the peasant more deeply concerned with the affairs of the whole country; his immediate interests are at stake; the least repercussions of national conflicts are felt with shattering force.”⁵⁰ Like the most celebrated daughter of France, Claude hails from a provincial area, but unlike Joan’s blood-soaked native ground, Nebraska has no immediate political or military importance in his lifetime aside from its agricultural production.

Claude’s dissatisfaction with the tedium of Nebraska seems explicable in the context of his fundamental difference from Joan of Arc: his profane and directionless existence. He takes Frankfort’s peaceful conditions for granted and waits passively for something to happen—for some sort of sign like the divine direction Joan received from her saints. Due to his passivity, Claude can hardly be characterized as a fanatic, but his talk of “something splendid” and his masochism (demonstrated repeatedly throughout the story) reflect the superficial manifestations of martyrdom, if not the essence. Unlike Henry Adams, who recognizes the Virgin figure as a powerful motivating force, Claude can neither articulate his fascination with Joan nor grasp her historical significance. In his impassioned ignorance, Claude conflates Joan of Arc and Enid. He envisions Joan, the defender of France, in a “luminous cloud, like dust” and Enid, the crusader of Frankfort, in a “luminous vagueness.”⁵¹ Claude remains obsessed with the idea of martyrdom, yet the similar light in which he views the genuinely holy Joan of Arc and the Holy Roller, Enid Royce, suggests he cannot truly comprehend such sacrifice.

RURAL APPRENTICESHIP

Like Claude, Enid anxiously awaits a chance to leave Frankfort, but she has nothing of his clumsiness, apathy, or suspicion of machines. She is capable, efficient, and in control. In fact, Enid actually resembles the contraptions Claude distrusts, and Cather subtly reinforces this mechanized image of Enid—particularly in relation to her Christian activism and her physical relationship to Claude—throughout the novel.

Enid’s Christian evangelism seems rather mechanical and at odds with others in her community. Her personal habits reinforce this impression. For instance, she eschews eating meat and drinking alcohol.⁵² Through vegetarianism, Cather links Enid to some of the more militant missionary

practices of the early 1900s. Eric Reinders notes the growing popularity of vegetarianism among missionaries: “In publications such as the *Church Missionary Gleaner*, *India’s Women* and *China’s Daughter*, and popular travel literature, there were numerous reports of vegetarianism and its religious implications. Occasional voices in missionary culture spoke out for meat-avoidance: one extreme of the temperance movement extended its prohibition of alcohol to meat (and even sex).”⁵³ Cather’s characterization of Enid closely resembles the extreme practices of avoidance mentioned by Reinders. By making Enid a vegetarian, Cather equates her with the Chinese she hopes to convert, since strict adherents of Buddhism avoid eating flesh. While Enid’s diet has the potential to minimize her distinction from the people she wishes to convert and make her more effective in her mission, her practice lacks the sincerity and compassion to be truly successful. Empathy plays no role in Enid’s campaign for temperance, and Cather gives no indication that it will play a larger role in her endeavors in China.

Enid has trouble with human intimacy. Cather wryly notes that she disapproves of “ardour of any kind.”⁵⁴ Her marriage to Claude is no exception. Although Enid feels no physical attraction to Claude, she is a capable homemaker who performs household chores systematically.

Enid liked to iron, and Claude had never before in his life worn so many clean shirts, or worn them with such satisfaction. She told him he need not economize in working shirts: it was as easy to iron six as three.

Although within a few months Enid’s car traveled more than two thousand miles for the Prohibition cause, it could not be said that she neglected her house for reform. Whether she neglected her husband depended on one’s conception of what was his due.⁵⁵

Enid’s efficient management of her home allowed her to drive about the countryside to campaign for Prohibition. She is most recognizable to her neighbors by the car. For one neighbor, Leonard Dawson, Enid is completely fused to the mechanism she drives: she and her car are reduced to a single “black object rolling along the highroad in the moonlight.”⁵⁶ Enid’s mechanical nature is further underscored through her collaboration with Claude’s grim brother Bayliss, the dyspeptic farm implement dealer. Together, these two reformers lend their characteristic blandness to the crusade against alcohol, which Bayliss “hated . . . less for the harm it did than for the pleasure it gave.”⁵⁷ Cather describes their cooperative efforts

coldly as “business,”⁵⁸ rhetorically linking Protestant activism to capitalist enterprise.

People like Enid and Bayliss are no laughing matter. Despite being dedicated to their causes, they lack the humanity and sincerity of venerated Christian figures like Joan of Arc. Illiberal citizens represent the greatest threat to the culture of provincial America, a threat Cather voiced in an article about Carry Nation, the militant temperance crusader from rural Kansas: “There is no figure in society who can work more discomfort than the village Semiramis, whose prejudices are as violent as her information is limited, and who has an accepted outlet for her ferocious energy.”⁵⁹ Though Enid is more restrained than the hatchet-brandishing Carry Nation, she and Bayliss provoke animosity and acrimony in Frankfort and drive a wedge between Claude and his closest friend, the Bohemian immigrant Ernest Havel. Both characters, in fact, make disparaging comments about Ernest. In the second chapter of the novel, Claude drops by his elder brother’s store on the day of a fair and asks if he had seen Ernest, to which Bayliss replies, “What would he be in here for? Better look for him in the saloon.”⁶⁰ The comment about Ernest is inflammatory and unwarranted. “Nobody,” the narrator admits, “could put meaner insinuations into a slow, dry remark than Bayliss.”⁶¹ Enid also dislikes Ernest Havel because of his atheism and his consumption of alcohol. She even confesses to Claude, “I never . . . liked Ernest Havel.”⁶² Ernest solidifies Enid’s contempt by refusing to hang posters endorsing Prohibition on his barn “as an example to the Bohemians” and informing her that he plans to vote against the Prohibition referendum.⁶³ In the face of this rebuff, “Enid was quite spiteful.”⁶⁴ Like Carry Nation, Enid cannot tolerate people with differing opinions and lacks the charisma to persuade others to her views.

Together, Bayliss and Enid signify the lack of imagination, destructive impulses, and intolerances of Protestant evangelism and its attempts to stultify the development of a rich and varied civilization like that which the historian Jules Michelet celebrated in France (or the one Cather remembers from her Nebraskan childhood). Unfortunately, Claude’s elder brother and wife also represent the victorious faction. Success in their endeavors stifles others. Bayliss’s implement business thrives (at the expense of small farmers who must incur debt to purchase machinery or fail to compete with their wealthier and better-equipped neighbors), and Enid plugs steadily away at her projects to the chagrin of her husband and father. Bayliss and Enid are wreaking cultural havoc in Frankfort. How much worse might it be if they were to extend their withering influence overseas? Although Cather does not

answer this question in the narrative, she gives readers pause to consider it.⁶⁵

MISSION IN CHINA

As opposed to the indecision biting at Claude, Enid is instilled with a sense of purpose. She knows exactly what she wants from the beginning, and she repeatedly informs Claude of her intentions before marrying him: “The only thing I really want to do is to go out to China and help Carrie in her work.”⁶⁶ Enid longs to join her elder sister, Carrie, as a missionary in China, a dream pursued by a great many American women after 1900. From 1890 to 1919, American missionary presence in China grew exponentially. By 1919, there were over 3,300 American missionaries serving in China, and over 60 percent of the Protestant missionaries were women.⁶⁷

Enid’s alliance with her businessman brother-in-law Bayliss mirrors an actual historical phenomenon: the convergence of American missionaries, American foreign policy, and American trade in China. Diana Preston notes that American interest in China had always been economic:

America’s interest in China had, like Britain’s, remained primarily commercial. She wanted trading opportunities rather than territory and by the late nineteenth century was better placed than ever to pursue this. Her recent victory in the Spanish-American War had given her the Philippines, an operating base a mere 400 miles or so off the coast of China, while industrial production at home was increasing rapidly. However, [Secretary of State] John Hay knew that this promising market would be prejudiced if other foreign powers established mutually exclusive spheres of interest in China. Hay’s call for China’s territorial integrity to be preserved and for commercial equality [“Open Door policy” in 1899] was therefore prompted as much by economic self-interest as by the political desire not to see China carved up as Africa had so recently been by the Europeans.⁶⁸

The Protestant missions formed a key part the United States’ strategy for expanding economic influence in China without subjecting the republic to criticism, as taking control of Cuba and the Philippines had after the Spanish-American War. In the midst of the anti-imperialist debates, Chinese missions were used covertly as alternatives to direct political and military involvement, as Jane Hunter acknowledges: “When the costs of imperialism became apparent, American leaders withdrew their support for political

expansion and used mission organizations as a partial strategy to retain the exhilaration of empire without paying its bills or taking on its corrupting responsibilities.⁷⁶⁹ Although they were unsuccessful in gaining large numbers of converts to their faith, Christian missions in China were promoted by the US government as a strategy to gain entrance into the markets.

The timing of Enid's departure for China is critical historically. Enid leaves in the years between the Boxer Rebellion of 1900—an event that had fascinated Cather as a journalist—and the conclusion of the Great War (1919).⁷⁰ As Paul Cohen explains, the Boxer Rebellion was depicted and perceived by Americans and Europeans as a conflict between forces of superstition and enlightenment.⁷¹ Accounts of this cultural conflict in the newspapers and in personal correspondence, such as the letters Eva Price, a Christian missionary serving in China, wrote to her family and community, would have convinced American Christians of the need to spread the Gospel.⁷² The letters Enid receives from her sister Carrie (and shares with her community) convince her of just such a need.⁷³

After the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, Western missionaries regained much of what they lost at the hands of the Boxers, and anti-Western sentiment gradually subsided. But their improved status did not last long. The influence of the Christian missionaries in China was dealt a serious blow by the Treaty of Versailles, which awarded Shantung Province in northern China to Japan for its part in eliminating German influence in the Pacific and Asia during World War I.⁷⁴ The increased Japanese presence in northern China adversely affected the Christian missions that were forced to vacate under pressure from the Japanese now controlling the territory.⁷⁵ Consequently, it would have been fruitless for Enid to leave for China much later than she did.

Though she is not a sympathetic character, Enid is a compelling figure in whom Cather's fascination with international events and a revulsion for Protestant zealotry and commercialism converge. For better or for worse, Enid represents what R. Laurence Moore termed the twentieth-century "religious triumphalism" of the United States.⁷⁶ Moore recognizes that the United States "became the major missionary power of the world faster than it achieved clear dominance in any other area" and that "reasons quickly developed to link the twentieth-century work of Protestant missionary groups with general programs to Americanize the world."⁷⁷ In Nebraska, Enid is rather easily equated with her religious beliefs and social practices. In China, she will become the representative of a wide range of implicit

American values. The “thing not named” (a term Cather used in her essay “The Novel D meubl ” to describe a desired suggestiveness) as it relates to Enid is cultural imperialism.⁷⁸ When she sails for China to spread the Gospel, she is also charged with economic, political, and social conversion.

CONCLUSION

Cather published *One of Ours* in September 1922. Several years later, in the preface to *Not under Forty*, she claimed the “world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.”⁷⁹ This pronouncement has intrigued Cather specialists for decades. As the year that also witnessed the publication of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, 1922 is typically considered the zenith of literary modernism. So how can scholars interpret Cather’s statement other than as a disparagement of the “new poetry” or the “modern novel”? To what else might she have been alluding?

The answer to this question may be found in Cather’s correspondence. In a letter to a long-time friend, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather describes her reasons for writing *One of Ours* and the impact its composition had on her.⁸⁰ As noted earlier, she based this novel on the life and experiences of her cousin, G. P. Cather, who died while fighting in France during World War I. Cather describes feeling a strong connection to her cousin: “With this boy I was all mixed up by accident of birth. Some of me was buried with him in France, and some of him was left alive in me.”⁸¹ This work was an emotional exercise for Cather. It took her three years to complete and exacted a physical and psychological toll. On finishing this tribute to her kinsman, she confesses to feeling broken: “Well, he’s given me three lovely, tormented years. He has been in my blood so long that it seems to me I’ll never be quite myself again.”⁸² After completing this project into which she had put so much of herself, Cather feels diminished.

One of Ours is also the literary embodiment of Cather’s declaration in 1936 that the “world broke in two.” It is concerned with the political and cultural fracturing of American identity in the years following World War I. As such it also serves as an epitaph for America’s political identification with Europe and the Jeffersonian ideals of the yeoman farmer, on which the United States was founded. In earlier novels, such as *O Pioneers!* and *My  ntonia*, Cather depicted the rural Plains as an environment benefitting culturally from the infusion of European immigrants and rivaling the cosmopolitanism of urban settings of cities like New York City. In *One of Ours*, however, America’s rural cosmopolitanism is threatened by crass

economic motives, conspicuous consumption, and religious intolerance. The single-minded pursuits of Bayliss and Enid alienate residents in the rural community and mimic the myopic isolationist stance the United States Congress adopted in the postwar period by refusing to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and support the establishment of the League of Nations.

NOTES

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¹ Amy Ahearn, "Longer Biographical Sketch" (Willa Cather Archive), accessed 2 July 2016, <http://cather.unl.edu/life.longbio.html#rn1m>. The Willa Cather Archive is a scholarly website devoted to Cather studies run by the University of Nebraska.

² James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 130–31.

³ Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (1922; repr., New York: Vintage, 1991).

⁴ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

⁵ For a discussion of how Cather traces the shift from continental expansion to overseas colonialism in her fiction, see Michael Gorman, "Jim Burden and 'the White Man's Burden': *My Ántonia* and Empire," *Cather Studies* 6 (2006): 28–57.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the agreements affecting the territories in the Rhineland and Saar Basin, see Michael Howard, *The First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The First World War* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1999), 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁹ In *One of Ours*, Cather alludes to French history beginning with the Merovingian kings, the descendants of the Frankish chieftain, Clovis I, who initiated the unification of France. For more detail about Cather's interest in French history see Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 47, 178n3; Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953; repr., New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), 88.

¹⁰ Cather, *One of Ours*, 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119, 110.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

¹⁷ *The New York Public Library American History Desk Reference* (1997; repr., New York: Hyperion, 2003), 266. According to this source, the "first gasoline engine tractor makes its appearance in South Dakota" in 1892.

¹⁸ Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 169.

¹⁹ Cather, *One of Ours*, 66, 67, 83, 115.

²⁰ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1996), 231.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 380.

²² Ibid., 388–89.

²³ Ibid., 43. Claude's desire to experience the world before renouncing it reflects advice Sarah Orne Jewett shared with Cather: "A knowledge of the world was needed in order to understand the parish." See L. Brent Bohlke, ed., *Willa Cather in Person* (1986; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 40.

²⁴ Cather, *One of Ours*, 46.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 186.

²⁷ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 5th ed., ed. Michael Meyer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1133–34, lines 7–8.

²⁸ Cather, *One of Ours*, 129.

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

³¹ Ibid., 92.

³² Ibid., 92–93.

³³ Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 11.

³⁴ Cather, *One of Ours*, 7–8.

³⁵ Ibid., 33.

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; repr., London: Verso, 1991), 194.

³⁷ Cather, *One of Ours*, 53.

³⁸ Ibid., 53.

³⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁰ Domrémy is now called Domrémy-la-Pucelle (Domrémy of the Maid) in honor of St. Joan.

⁴¹ By 1911, France had already started devising military plans to retake Alsace-Lorraine. See Prior and Wilson, *First World War*, 39.

⁴² Cather, *One of Ours*, 136–37.

⁴³ Historian H. W. Brands discusses how the issue of heritage complicated most decisions in regards to World War I. See *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Times Books, 2003), 52–53.

⁴⁴ Joseph R. Urgo, *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁶ Steven Trout, *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 167.

⁴⁷ Howard, *First World War*, 146.

⁴⁸ Trout, *Memorial Fictions*, 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49–50.

⁵⁰ Jules Michelet, *Joan of Arc*, trans. Albert Guérard (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 7.

⁵¹ Cather, *One of Ours*, 54, 120.

⁵² For a noted Francophile and epicure like Cather labeling someone a vegetarian and a teetotaler is equivalent to defining her as a cultural philistine. Edith Lewis describes Cather's fondness for wine and how even during Prohibition they continued to enjoy fine French wines while summering on Grand Manan Island in New Brunswick, Canada. See Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 193.

⁵³ Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 153–54.

⁵⁴ Cather, *One of Ours*, 172.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 172–73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Willa Cather, “Small Town Life,” in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902*, vol. 2, ed. William Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 849–52.

⁶⁰ Cather, *One of Ours*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ For a more positive interpretation of Enid's character, see Pearl James, *The New Death: American Modernism and World War I* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 59. James offers a convincing alternative to my reading.

⁶⁶ Cather, *One of Ours*, 105.

⁶⁷ Jane Hunter, “China: Women Missionaries and Cultural Conquest,” in *Imperial Surge: The United States Abroad, the 1890s–Early 1900s*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson and Stephen G. Rabe (Lexington, KY: Heath, 1992), 189–204. 189–90.

⁶⁸ Diana Preston, *The Boxer Rebellion: The Dramatic Story of China's War on Foreigners That Shook the World in the Summer of 1900*, (1999; repr., New York: Berkeley, 2000), 14.

⁶⁹ Hunter, “China,” 192.

⁷⁰ Cather was fascinated with China and the Far East in general. In her early career as a journalist, she interviewed Lee Chin, a successful Chinese merchant living in Pittsburgh. Cather unsuccessfully tried to secure comment from him about the Boxers—he referred her to the Chinese diplomat, Wu T'ing-fang. See “The Chinese Minister,” in Curtin, *World and Parish*, vol. 2, 803–6.

⁷¹ Paul Cohen, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 105.

⁷² Eva Jane Price, *China Journal 1889–1900: An American Missionary Family during the Boxer Rebellion* (New York: Scribner's, 1989).

⁷³ Cather, *One of Ours*, 109–10.

⁷⁴ Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (2001; repr., New York: Random House, 2002), 476.

⁷⁵ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods*, 31.

⁷⁶ R. Laurence Moore, “American Religion as Cultural Imperialism,” in *The American Century in Europe*, ed. R. Laurence Moore and Maurizio Vaudagna (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 151–70. 153.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁸ Willa Cather, “The Novel Dêmeublé,” *Not under Forty* (1936; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 43–51. 50.

⁷⁹ Willa Cather, prefatory note, *Not under Forty*, v.

⁸⁰ Willa Cather, Letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, 22 March 1922, in *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout (New York: Knopf, 2013), 311–13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁸² *Ibid.*