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WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*: VIOLENCE AND MODERNIST AESTHETICS

by

JORDAN FLETCHER HOBSON

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

Willa Cather's 1913 novel, *O Pioneers!* concludes with an unexpected moment of extreme violence as two young lovers, Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata, are murdered by Marie's husband in a mulberry orchard. Cather's novel is almost wholly devoted to the psychological interior of the protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, thereby rendering this violent interruption more dynamic as it essentially undercuts the generally lulling interiority of the narration. My interest here is to examine this strange moment of violence and Alexandra's subsequent forgiveness of Frank for the murder of her brother and his own wife through the theoretical paradigms of René Girard, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek.

INDEX WORDS: Violence, Modernism, Murder, Sacrifice, Deconstruction

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DEDICATION

For my grandmothers, Virginia Hobson Hicks and Lois Fletcher Blaylock.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Faber Book of Murder, an encyclopedic compilation of narratives portraying various forms of violence, examines murder as "the extreme crime. . .through which character is refracted" (xxii). Scholar Piotr Hoffman describes violence as "the necessary condition of my emergence as a universal, communal being" (144). More recently, Elana Gomel's *Bloodscripts* considers violent narrative as "a scar of the sublime" (xxix). These examples underscore the burgeoning and diffuse scholarly interest in studies of violence in literature and philosophy. Each of these works engages violence as an aesthetic, not merely a physical incident. While my analysis of *O Pioneers!* will consider the gross physicality of the novel's murder, it will also analyze the technical and stylistic components of the narrative that give the murder scene its mythic impact. The critical approach in this work is purposefully experimental in that my objective is not definitive but exploratory. I examine the existing scholarship on this novel and propose Cather's work as a Modernist composition *par excellance*.

Notably, *The Faber Book of Murder* labels the gruesome double-homicide of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* as "unpremeditated" thereby underscoring the unexpected nature of this violence in the text (481). My interest in Cather's early novel lies in the distinctly aberrant appearance of two slain bodies in a text described by the author as a "novel of the soil. . .about Nebraska farmers" (*Writing* 93-94). Although the land of the Divide and the immigrant population that inhabits that space comprise an important aspect of Cather's novel, the author's explanation of the text's thematic content appears overly simplistic. As indicated by the label "unpremeditated," the gruesome murders of Emil Bergson

and Marie Shabata bring into question the validity of Cather's simplifying assertion. After the murders the community of the Divide and the exterior community of Cather's readers are equally confounded. This incongruity deserves scholarly attention as the deployment of violence in this novel exposes Cather's deceptively complex narrative techniques and stylistic sophistication. I propose three distinct theoretical paradigms through which to analyze the author's technique underscoring the text's heretofore underestimated complexity.

In her posthumously published book of criticism, *On Writing*, Cather explains that *O Pioneers!* was a nostalgic endeavor as it "brought about old neighbors, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten" (93). Cather explains that these farmers were Swedes—an ethnicity which until then "had never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches" (94-5). Furthermore, the dust jacket of the 1913 publication describes the novel as "a stirring romance of the Western prairies. . .the very story of youth" (Skaggs 52). The author's treatment of her second novel is limited in scope to these short notes regarding plot and character thereby positioning it in some ways as a less complicated work than subsequent publications. Critics were initially underwhelmed by the novel.

After the publication of *O Pioneers!* in 1913, Frederick Taber Cooper, a contemporary literary critic, reviewed the work as a "slow-moving and frankly depressing tale" (Murphy 112); furthermore, Cooper was frustrated with the work's lack of "cohesion" and "loosely constructed" narrative which would serve as an example of Modernist aesthetic principles (Murphy 113). My intention is to examine the various readings and critiques of Cather's literature and biography in a loosely chronological format thereby exposing the analytical and critical trends in this singular field.

After the original publication and critique of *O Pioneers!* in 1913, the critics of the 1920s sought to place Cather among the Modernists despite (or *because of*) preliminary evaluations of her style as disjointed and lacking in narrative unity. The reviews, though, were largely thematic in content and focused on Cather's handling of war, pioneering, and the artistic endeavor as universal struggles (Murphy 6). Some critics, however, judged Cather's agrarian subject matter to be "out of touch with the painful social and economic realities of Depression-era America" (Lindemann 1). In contrast more recent critics describe the 1920s as the author's "paramount decade" in consideration of her fictional and critical publications (Shaw 41).

Cather's death in 1947 was followed by a comprehensive analysis of her fiction by Maxwell Geisman (*The Last of the Provincials*) and four biographies within five years. However, the criticism of the 1950s was generally "small and taxidermic" with a split focus on Cather's classical Christian motifs or her elegiac prairie idealism (Acocella 34). Cather scholars, nevertheless, are nearly unanimous in their acknowledgment of 1967 as a watershed year for criticism. John J. Murphy marks Bernice Slote's publication in that year of *The Kingdom of Art* as "a new dimension in Cather studies" (21). *The Kingdom of Art* catalogs Cather's extensive library, compiles her voluminous critical writings on theater and literature, and provides important cultural backgrounds for situating the author's fiction in a biographical frame. This work disavows the common "myth" of Cather's reclusiveness and describes the author as a forceful critical presence: ". . . as early as 1896 Willa Cather had written nearly a half million words of criticism, self-analysis, and explorations into the principles of art and the work of the artist" (4). By revising Cather's authorial myth, Slote partially acknowledges the deceptively sophisticated nature of both Cather's biography and her fiction which I expand in this work.

Slote attempts to overhaul what she calls “the standard biographical sketch” of Cather’s childhood: “. . .the untutored western girl running wild on her pony and talking to old Bohemian women on the Nebraskan Divide” (3).

After *The Kingdom of Art*, Slote became an even larger figure in Cather scholarship with her 1974 publication of an essay entitled “Willa Cather,” which addressed Cather's work through the lens of women's studies and feminism. The publication was monumental in its timing only two years after the Equal Rights Amendment was passed in the United States Congress officially initiating feminist criticism of Cather's fiction. Furthermore, the critics of the sixties and seventies examined Cather's “intellectual complexity and the significant experience with the arts and world literature informing her fiction” thereby creating a distinction between analyses of influence and technical studies (Murphy 21).

Feminist critics wrestled with a need to create a woman-centric literary canon in the seventies and eighties (Acocella 37). Cather proved a paradoxical figure for these critics due to the strong male influences of Henry James and Flaubert and her anti-feminist rhetoric: “sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts [literary] talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it” (Acocella 39). Moreover, her characters often recognize and even idolize male figures. In an effort to recuperate Cather for the feminist cause, many scholars applied the unreliable-narrator school of criticism to her work thereby ignoring the problematic aspects of Cather's influences, biography, and general style (Acocella 41). In later years feminists would become more comfortable with Cather's seeming contradictions. Feminist critics examined Cather's prose as “a process of making and unmaking, settling and unsettling that operates at times on the surfaces and at times on the deep structures of her

fiction" thereby making room for Cather's sometimes anti-feminist rhetoric and masculine influences (*Queering* 4).

During the years in which feminists grappled with Cather's almost problematic rhetoric, Jane Rule published *Lesbian Images* in which she declares Cather a lesbian and describes her characters as masked homosexuals (Acocella 57). Under this banner Rule examines Alexandra, the protagonist of *O Pioneers!*, as an especially important example of Cather's coded sexuality. Cather's biography is, in fact, sprinkled with deep female friendships and one life-long partner although she was never "out" in the contemporary sense. However, Rule's declaration effectively and finally recuperated Cather for the feminine as well as the queer canon. Similarly 1987 saw the publication of Sharon O'Brien's "psychobiography," *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, which supposedly "brought [the lesbian Cather] out of the closet after decades of diffident silence" (Lindemann 3). O'Brien's lengthy consideration of Cather's biography and oeuvre addresses *O Pioneers!* as the novel that "resolved the conflicts that had kept 'woman' and 'artist' apart" ("Mothers" 282). Notably, her biography stands as a vital reference to more recent critics like Patrick W. Shaw who adopts O'Brien's work as a point of departure for his own consideration of Cather's "psychic dissonance:" "[Cather's] psychosexual conflicts were not resolved, as O'Brien suggests, but were perpetuated as a major element in her imaginative processes" (42). More than just an examination of Cather's sexuality, O'Brien's biography addresses her literary influences as a product of her patriotism. O'Brien specifically addresses Cather's title drawn from Whitman's poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!": "the title announces Cather's desire to represent her work as the product of indigenous American material. . .This author, the title declared, was singing a song of ordinary American people and speaking

unaffectedly in a vernacular voice" (422). Despite this seemingly complimentary statement, O'Brien's analysis of Cather's intertextuality tends to deprecate Whitman as a misogynist.

Further discussion of Cather's use of intertextuality appears in Maire Mullins' article addressing the titular intertext by Walt Whitman. Mullins echoes John J. Murphy's insistence on Whitman's "Song of Myself" as a more vital intertext to Cather's fiction than "Pioneers, O Pioneers!;" however, Mullins performs an important close-reading of the similarities between Cather's novel and the poem from which she drew her title:

> Sections of Whitman's poem. . . are directly related to the characterizations and themes of Cather's novel. Marie and Emil's death, Frank's imprisonment, Ivar's citations of scripture, and Alexandra's struggle to understand her brother's death are prefigured in stanza 16:
>
> > All the hapless silent lovers,
> > All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
> > All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
> > Pioneers, O Pioneers! (Mullins 128)

Mullins intuitively locates the instances of thematic overlap between the novel and the poem while resolutely denying O'Brien's earlier characterization of the poem as "a jingoistic hymn to progress, manifest destiny, and the Westward Movement" (*Emerging* 440). In fact, Mullins argues that Whitman's poem is every bit as gender-bending as Cather's prose thereby collapsing the gendered distance between the two authors. Simultaneously Mullins asserts a notion of tradition at which other scholars only glanced.

Mullins makes use of an early quotation by Eudora Welty which asserts that “Willa Cather brought past and present into juxtaposition to the most powerful effect” (qtd. in Mullins 123). This quotation introduces Mullins’ own understanding of Cather's internalization of her literary past: “Cather thus used well what was bequeathed to her by absorbing and transforming the themes, imagery, and poetic style of a male precursor into the epic story of a strong female pioneer” (Mullins 133-4). While O'Brien understands Cather having “appropriated a 'great tradition' of male American writing,” Mullins uses more conciliatory rhetoric while minimizing gender dynamics in her analysis of Cather’s intertextuality (*Emerging* 5).

The University of Nebraska initiated their scholarly edition project in 1992 by producing the definitive editions of Cather's works which remain the standard scholarly editions to date (Lindemann 4). With the new millennium, though, begins an interest in Cather's status within or beyond the traditional canon and as a literary icon and authorial myth. In his 2007 work Guy Reynolds offers an intriguing view of Cather’s authorial trajectory: “in the 1890s she [Cather] was a wasp and a critical shrew, a precocious reviewer of books, plays, and music, armed with an acid pen. In the early years of the twentieth century . . . she became an adept businesswoman . . . continually [adjusting] herself to the literary market” (ix). Reynolds is especially interested in the multifaceted nature of her legacy which he examines through essays centered on her personal and professional correspondence. Similarly, Robert Thacker examines Cather’s authorial identity as a process of “violent self-construction” reimagining the concept of violence in (auto)biographical terms. Although my work eschews the implications of violence

for Cather's biography, I explicitly engage the burgeoning scholarly interest in the violent machinations of Cather's ostensibly "Nebraskan" fiction.

In *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*, a compilation of essays presented at the 2005 International Willa Cather Seminar, the study of violence begins with a consideration of the current notion of terrorism. Joseph R. Urgo explains that this new vein in Cather studies extends from the events of September 11, 2001 and hurricane Katrina that have warned Americans "away from a bipolar sense of international danger toward an acknowledgment that our antagonist is no longer a political state or regime, but 'terror': sudden death may strike anyone at any time" (15). He compares the unexpected murders in Cather's fiction to the fear permeating modern existence: "Cather's world holds existential terror: from anywhere and at any time, men and women may face death and destruction" (13). Moreover, Urgo considers the psychological concerns of Cather's work. His introduction to this compilation addresses the entirety of Cather's canon; however, he acknowledges the importance of the murder scene in *O Pioneers!* as a hallmark of Cather's manipulation of existential terror: "the ghosts of Emil and Marie. . .haunt Cather's oeuvre" (14).

Although Urgo's work is contemporary (2007), the study of violence in Cather's fiction began in earnest in the 1990s. Most works address the Modernists as a whole without focusing on Cather specifically or, like Gomel's work, consider violence broadly as a literary device without focusing on a specific author. Even Cather's inclusion with the Modernists is at times questioned by scholars who see her as a literary outlier. For my purposes she serves as a harbinger of Modernism in literature due to her manipulation of narrative structure and the complex concision of her prose. As previously noted, the issue of violence in Cather's fiction has

recently been the subject of debate among noted scholars including Terry Eagleton at the 10th Annual International Cather Seminar in 2005 in Red Cloud, Nebraska. As with many canonical authors the critical dialogue is constantly shifting; however, this relatively new vein of discourse proves especially relevant to my research regarding Cather's manipulation of violence within the structure of the Modernist narrative.

In 1928 *Newsweek* printed an article by Sinclair Lewis which named Cather "the greatest American novelist" (Murphy 15). Lewis applauds her nationalism and her literary individuality among the Modernists: "The boys have roared and fought; they have left out the commas and added the hyphens; they have galloped to Paris or Moscow; they have dived into degeneracy or phony holiness, but quite alone, Willa Cather has greatly pictured the great life" (Murphy 15). Like Lewis, I suggest that Cather's work bears the hallmark of the Modernist aesthetic sensibility while eschewing some of the techniques that Lewis attributes to "the [Modernist] boys."

In a recent article, Michael Squires describes the early twentieth century shifts in narrative technique and style as "destabilizing Modernist forces—of violence in Lawrence's plots and language; of dissonant harmonic progressions in Berg's and Bartok's composition; of colliding Cubist planes in Pablo Picasso's art, which alter a subject's identity—[which] all reflect new forms of order that arrived in *avant-garde* culture about 1910" (84). Of course, Squires is not the first scholar to recognize the pointed disunity of Modernist art. However, Cather's work tends to be overlooked or readily glossed in this category because her narratives *seem* to maintain more coherence than those of Faulkner, Joyce, Stein, or Picasso—all examples *par excellence* of the Modernist inclination toward narrative and artistic experimentation. By

examining her text and the murder scene specifically through multiple theoretical paradigms, I attempt to underscore the aesthetic complexity of her early novel situated chronologically at this important moment in the development of Modernist aesthetics. More than a simple pastoral or nostalgic reimagining of the author's biography, I examine *O Pioneers!* as a text which deprecates its own sophistication. More specifically, Cather's aesthetic is one of deception in as much as the narration, style, and content of the novel *seems* more simplistic than the work of Joyce or Eliot. Even the author's commentary on her novel tends to endorse the notion of the novel as a grand American pastoral. Alternatively, I engage this deceptive quality in Cather's fiction as a stylistic technique that prepares the foundation for the more formal experiemntation of later Modernist artists.

O Pioneers! concludes with an unexpected moment of extreme violence as two young lovers, Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata, are murdered by Marie's husband, Frank, in a mulberry orchard. Cather's novel is almost wholly devoted to the psychological interior of the protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, rendering this violent interruption more dynamic as it essentially undercuts the generally lulling interiority of the narration. The novel tends to focus somewhat monotonously on the protagonist's awe of the vastness of the American West and the plight of the newly-arrived immigrant. As the plot erupts in violence, the reader and the community of the novel are ambushed by the author just as Emil and Marie are blasted by the report of Frank's gun. Each chapter of this analysis will alternately engage the theories of René Girard, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek in a consideration of the complexity of Cather's early novel.

Gomel's work informs my consideration of each critic as she describes narrative violence in distinctly aesthetic terms. Her monograph examines the violent subject's narrative endeavor:

> Human beings are narrative animals, finding themselves only through the lineaments of a tale. The attraction of violence lies precisely in the phantasmagoric escape from the strictures of narrative coherence, into the timeless realm of the sublime. If violence enters culture through narrative, it is also through narrative that it is apprehended and resisted. (xlvii)

By engaging the socio-psychoanalytical theory of Girard, Derrida's deconstruction, and Žižek's analysis of the machinations of ideology, I attempt to explain the means by which Cather's deployment of violence allows her text to comment on its own narrative (in)coherence. Characteristically playful, Derrida asks: "Can a method be borrowed, like a tool?" ("Violence" 118). This work supposes that it can in as much as the theories of each scholar allow the reader to more thoroughly comprehend Cather's carefully nuanced prose and deceptively complex narrative structures.

2 Girardian Sacrifice

O Pioneers! concludes with an extreme scene of physical violence that appears in direct contrast to the psychological interiority of the majority of the novel. This chapter examines this incongruity through the terms and constructions of René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* as well as a later article entitled "Deceit, Desire and the Novel." Both works examine violence as a form of sacrifice devoted primarily to maintaining (or restoring) communal harmony. I assert that the violent climax of *O Pioneers!* in which Marie and Emil are murdered by Marie's cuckolded husband, Frank Shabata, functions as a Girardian sacrifice on multiple levels. Primarily, Emil and Marie are sacrificed in order to maintain the structural harmony of the community which is threatened by their coupling. Marie and Emil threaten the institution of marriage within a small immigrant community by surrendering to a mutual, though ill-advised, passion. In this community marriage is privileged in so much as it provides order, progeny, and harmony. Marie and Emil disregard this social imperative when they meet in the orchard. In a more dynamic sense the violent double-murder serves as an authorial sacrifice warding against the psychological disarray of the novel originally situated in a series of misunderstandings between characters and finally located in Frank Shabata's neutered memory of the homicides committed by his own hand. In order to explore the concept of sacrificial violence and its effect on the community of the Divide as well as the exterior community of Cather's readers, I begin by considering the author's treatment of the land itself.

As noted by Melissa Ryan, Cather's "art is commonly evaluated in spatial terms" thereby underscoring the scholarly interest in the author's aesthetic manipulation of physical spaces. Moreover, during the composition of *O Pioneers!*, Cather explains that "the country insisted on

being the hero" (*Pioneers* 286). The novel is, in fact, replete with sweeping vistas of the Nebraskan prairie. Correspondingly, the first section of the novel is devoted nominally to "The Wild Land." Mark D. Noe considers Cather's "evocation of the hardships involved in breaking the prairie and carving a life out of harsh environmental extremes" as the means by which she "places the land at the center, a full-fledged character in its own right" (33). Although the land requires acknowledgement as a colossal factor in the text, Noe's assertion appears slightly simplistic. More than just a presence, it is precisely this untamable, almost malignant, quality of the Divide that sets the scene for conflict in the novel. The land is often discussed in direct opposition to the people who work it: "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes" (*Pioneers* 21). This bleak picture of the tenants' relation to their land subtly characterizes the conflict that permeates the work. The means by which the inhabitants of the Divide negotiate this struggle with the "wild" land proves instructional.

As an immigrant pioneering community, the frontier straddles a particular cultural and geographic divide in which mysticism and modernity are symbiotically counterbalanced. The land, of course, is called "the Divide" reinforcing the notion of juxtaposition as the community is understood as simultaneously pioneering a new land while holding tight to the vestiges of a forsaken homeland and culture. In an effort to mitigate the overwhelming antagonisms of her new homeland, Mrs. Bergson develops a hybridized coping mechanism:

> For eleven years she had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult. Habit was very strong with Mrs. Bergson, and her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of

> her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally. . . She missed the fish diet of her own country, and twice every summer she sent the boys to the river, twenty miles southward, to fish for channel cat. . . She had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth; but, now that she was there, she wanted to be let alone to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible. (*Pioneers* 11)

Far from embracing her new home, Mrs. Bergson denies the adaptive necessities of the Nebraskan prairie and fortifies herself against the evils of a new diet and lifestyle with the domestic accoutrements of the old world. In an article on *My Ántonia* which seems to apply to *O Pioneers!*, Keith Wilhite aptly describes the immigrant's plight: "At the outset, the new world is always an anticipatory space, distinct from the immediate, old-world past that tags along as the antecedent to the unsettling experience of im/migration against which the new world is measured" (276). By featuring this conflict between old and new in her characterization of Mrs. Bergson, Cather foreshadows the more violent and dramatic conflicts that will shake the fledgling community of the Divide.

It is particularly the community's fidelity to the past amid a wholly new geography which allows the violent climax its mystic irrevocability. The community's conflicted status prefigures the friction which will eventually require the sacrifice of Emil and Marie. Scholar Piotr Hoffman explains this crescendo-like effect:

> Violence looms at the horizon of escalatory social conflicts and antagonisms; violence is the very counterpart of the inherent fragility of human communities which, unlike physical phenomena, are sustained in existence not by the

> operation of some natural laws but by a precarious social consensus, vulnerable to disintegration and collapse. (vii)

Cather reminds her reader of the community's immigrant status through Ivar's ecstatic mysticism, Alexandra's singing of "old Swedish hymns," and Mrs. Bergson's devotion to the practices of her homeland (*Pioneers* 25). Thus to fully comprehend the ramifications of the young couple's decision to indulge their passion, one must understand this particular community as simultaneously mythic and modern in its disposition. The community's dependence on its past amid the necessities of the present proves symbiotic in that the old-world values ensure the preservation and continuation of the new. Mrs. Bergson's canning and pickling (a hold-over from her homeland) depletes the family financially but sustains them practically in lean years. By describing the internal conflict with which Mrs. Bergson approaches her new home, Cather exposes the variety of conflicts at work on the Divide.

Once Emil and Marie trespass on this precariously symbiotic communal structure, a dangerous disequilibrium reigns. Girard posits extra-marital sex as a major threat to communal harmony: "Even within the ritualistic framework of marriage. . . sexuality is accompanied by violence; and as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of matrimony to engage in illicit relationships. . .the violence, and the impurity resulting from this violence, grows more potent and extreme" (*VATS* 35). The community of the Divide must maintain the equilibrium established between the past and the present in order to subsist in a new and forbidding land. By forsaking the established more of sexual and marital monogamy, Emil and Marie effectively upset the established codes of conduct of their community.

The young couple jeopardizes the ideological harmony of the community through the stark physicality of their coupling. Girard recognizes this relationship between the ideological or moral imperatives of the community and the physical violence latent in the sexual act: ". . . sex is more involved in human violence than are thunder and earthquakes, closer to the hidden source of mythic elaboration.'Naked' or 'pure' sexuality is directly connected to violence. It is the final veil shielding violence from sight" (*VATS* 118). Thus, the tenuously constructed nature of the immigrants' new home on the Divide relies upon the violence of unsanctioned sexuality remaining "veiled." Girard's invocation of sight as the sense which reveals violence is also important in the evaluation of the murder scene which is entirely devoted to views and gazes.

As Frank Shabata approaches his home on the night of the murder the landscape contracts. Whereas the landscape of the Divide is typically described in expansive, pastoral, and even mythic terms, this scene focuses on enclosures and bounded spaces. Immediately Frank is struck by the sight of Emil's mare hitched in his barn (233). Moreover, Frank describes the stile, a man-made boundary marker, as "haunted" by Emil Bergson (234). Importantly, the murder scene is effectively framed by Frank's viewing: "Resting the butt of his gun on the ground, he parted the mulberry leaves softly with his fingers and peered through the hedge at the dark figures on the grass, in the shadow of the mulberry tree. It seemed to him that they must feel his eyes. . ." (235). Sight continues as the focalizing sense throughout this pivotal scene as Frank "sighted [the gun] mechanically" (235), "peered again through the hedge" (235), and finally cannot "see himself at all" after the shots are fired (237). In fact, the seven pages that comprise the murder scene allow sixteen direct references to seeing and sight reinforcing Girard's formation of the violent subject (233-39):

> The [violent] subject watches the monstrosity that takes shape within him and outside him simultaneously. In his efforts to explain what is happening to him, he attributes the origin of the apparition to some exterior cause. Surely, he thinks, this vision is too bizarre to emanate from the familiar country within, too foreign in fact to derive from the world of men. The whole interpretation of the experience is dominated by the sense that the monster is alien to himself. The subject feels that the most intimate regions of his being have been invaded by a supernatural creature who also besieges him without. Horrified, he finds himself the victim of a double assault to which he cannot respond. In deed, how can one defend oneself against an enemy who blithely ignores all barriers between inside and outside? (*VATS* 165).

Again, in Girard's writing we see an emphasis on sight and seeing and the alienating effects of violence. This construction is echoed in Piotr Hoffman's work as he asserts that ". . . violence educates me to the inescapable reality of others" (144). For both Girard and Hoffman, the violent subject experiences a dual assault as both the victim and the perpetrator. This duality conveys the conflicted psychology of the violent subject and recalls my assertion of the important juxtapositions Cather consistently revisits in her novel. The movement Girard describes from inside to outside takes shape physically as Frank moves from room to room in his house and over his grounds and psychologically as he internalizes and rejects responsibility for the murders. Tellingly, Frank asks: "why had she [his wife] brought this upon him?" (*Pioneers* 239). In this moment the murderer essentially casts himself as a victim of his wife's sexually perpetrated violence. In stead of understanding his own culpability and violent agency

in the murder, Frank focuses on the horrific image of “[a] woman, mutilated and bleeding in his orchard” (237). Because Frank does not believe himself capable of this horror his experience of the murder takes on the supernatural and alien qualities that Girard describes.

More literally, the murder scene is obsessively concerned with interior and exterior spaces. During the frenzy that follows the murders, the narrator explains that “[the] thought of going into a doorway was terrible to [Frank]” (237). This fear of thresholds and boundaries appears in direct contrast to the earlier part of the scene in which Frank examines the various and delineated spaces of his home and property. Upon his arrival Frank is met with Emil's horse in his barn. With this discovery he searches the house twice over. From there he moves through the orchard gate to the barn and hayloft (233-34). He moves methodically from space to space “with dark projects in mind” (234). Finally, after the murders, we find Frank “in the bright space between the barn and the house, facing his own black doorway” (237). Here he is in a state of suspended action or paralysis which serves as contrast to the fluidity with which he earlier examined the house and grounds. Though Girard describes a strictly psychological assault in which “ all barriers between inside and outside” are ignored in the alienating wake of violent action, Cather creates psychologized landscapes in which physical boundaries, thresholds, and space itself are meant to bring the inside out. In stead of merely explaining Frank's psychological anguish, Cather allows the Shabata's farm to serve as a physical model of “the most intimate regions of his [Frank's] being.”

Girard understands violence, especially sacrificial ritual violence, as a communal steam-valve that allows for the alleviation of the psychological pressure of the community. Frank's psyche is ripe with jealous ramblings: “At the bottom of his heart Frank knew well enough that

if he would once give up his grudge, his wife would come back to him. But he could never in the world do that. The grudge was fundamental" (*Pioneers* 87). All of Frank's jealousy is inwardly directed thereby increasing the psychological pressure he feels toward the expedient of violent intervention; however, he is only able to act on these violent impulses after unequivocally witnessing his wife's infidelity. The Girardian term "triangular desire" is relevant here as Frank's paranoia is comprised of jealously for his wife tempered by revulsion and "fascination with the insolent rival" ("Deceit" 300). Thus, the "fundamental" grudge that provokes the cuckolded husband to violence is paradoxical in as much as Frank is simultaneously attracted and repelled by Emil's status as "the insolent rival:" "This adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object, are the paroxysms of the conflict caused by internal mediation" ("Deceit" 308). Frank's simultaneous anger at the presence of Emil's mare and obsessive search for the couple exposes the internal conflict with which Frank contends. He is at once repelled and attracted. Girard imbues this internal conflict with communal implications:

> Nevertheless, there is a common denominator that determines the efficacy of all sacrifices. . . This common denominator is internal violence-all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. (*VATS* 8).

Thus, the murder of Emil and Marie may be understood as an effort to restore communal harmony in as much as their union threatens the "social fabric" of the narrow community of the Shabata family and the larger immigrant community of the Divide. Once again it is the

community's distinctly conflicted allegiance to a past system that lays the foundation for this violent climax.

The murder of the young couple effectively relieves the psychological pressure of the work in as much as the immediate source of conflict is permanently removed. A more nuanced discussion of *O Pioneers!* as a novel about interiors and interiority is useful here. Cather peripatetically examines the inner workings of each character thereby creating a multi-vocal text devoted to the texture of a community at once out-of-doors and exceedingly secretive. Even as she describes the grand landscape and stark geography of the Divide, Cather gestures toward a description of deep psychological interiority.

The novel opens with a portrayal of Alexandra in a wagon at nightfall: “Alexandra drove off alone. The rattle of her wagon was lost in the howling of the wind, but her lantern, held firmly between her feet, made a moving point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper into the dark country” (*Pioneers* 7). Here the landscape becomes an internal space such that Alexandra's interior loneliness and isolation is reflected in the geographic tableau. This collision of interior and exterior spaces again emphasizes the ever-present conflict finally addressed through violence. I suggest above that the Divide is a landscape ripe with symbolic meaning. The interior spaces of the novel prove just as complexly constructed, though. Alexandra’s home is yet another site of friction and potential conflict:

> If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house, you will find that it is curiously unfurnished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare. The pleasantest rooms in the house are the kitchen . . . and the sitting-room, in which Alexandra has brought together

> the old homely furniture that the Bergson's used in their first log house, the family portraits, and the few things her mother brought from Sweden. (32)

Here, again, we see the juxtaposition of old and new as relics of Alexandra's past are arranged within the confines of her more modern home. Moreover, Alexandra's home is a curiosity in its uneven comfort thereby intensifying the psychological disarray of the novel through a sense of disequilibrium. The house is at once expansive and disjointed, comfortable and curious, modern and antiquated. Wilhite acknowledges Cather's singular manipulation of conflicted spaces: "There is a real androgyny to region . . . as old and new worlds collide" (270). Although Wilhite teases-out the homoerotic implications of Cather's spaces, my interest lies more squarely in his consideration of those spaces as sites of symbolic, aesthetic, and physical conflict.

In like manner the community of the Divide proves "curiously uneven" in its own right. The first page of the novel describes the prairie homes as "haphazard" and lacking "any appearance of permanence" (*Pioneers* 11). Alternatively, the land itself is often characterized as timeless, mythic, and unforgiving. Just as Alexandra's psychology is juxtaposed against the looming vastness of the land in the opening scene, Cather proposes the impotence of human striving as a counter to the mystic irrevocability of the land. These deliberate juxtapositions underscore the tensions of the community as well as the aesthetic tensions of Cather's novel that bare witness to the ". . . Modernist[s'] preoccupations with the psyche's dark forces" (Squires 54).

By locating much of the novel within the psychologies of various characters, Cather examines the Girardian implications of misunderstanding. The novel itself is riddled with confusions and misinterpretations. Alexandra's brothers fail to understand her methods or her

motivations, the community of the Divide cannot understand Ivar, Marie misinterprets Frank's fitness as a husband, Emil misreads Alexandra's interest in Carl, and, importantly, Alexandra does not recognize the bond between Emil and Marie before their murders: “If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie's mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil's. But that, as Emil himself had more than once reflected, was Alexandra's blind side, and her life had not been the kind to sharpen her vision” (*Pioneers* 79). As the misunderstandings increase so too does the psychological pressure of the novel. The narrator's detached tone belies the extreme violence which will erupt in the coming pages. Girard posits that “the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding” (7); in fact, the general psychological confusion of the community enables the sacrificial process by which Emil and Marie are murdered.

Finally, the interpersonal misunderstandings of the pioneer community aggregate in Frank's inability to understand his own violent actions. For Girard, this denial becomes a form of projection: “. . . the [violent subject's] knowledge of these violent impulses continues to expand in the course of the sacrificial crisis. However, far from restoring peace, the knowledge only increases the antagonist's awareness of the other's violence, [and] is succeeded by an all-inclusive ignorance” (82). Frank is only able to justify his murderous actions after unequivocally witnessing the coupling of Emil and Marie in his own orchard. This knowledge, though, is symbolically and physically rejected as Frank rides away on Emil's horse:

> When Frank was halfway to Hanover, the motion of his horse brought on a violent attack of nausea. After it had passed, he rode on again, but he could think of nothing except his physical weakness and his desire to be comforted by

> his wife. He wanted to get into his own bed. Had his wife been at home, he would have turned and gone back to her meekly enough. (*Pioneers* 239)

Frank's reaction to the murders exposes in physical terms what Girard proposes psychologically as “internal violence” (*VATS* 8). Frank quite literally purges the knowledge of his own violence. The above paragraph closes the chapter and allows for the “all-inclusive ignorance” described by Girard after the complete alienation of the self in psychological as well as physical terms (through the act of vomiting). Frank denies not only his culpability in the murders, but the deaths themselves by engaging in a tragic fantasy of home. This denial is further explored as Alexandra visits Frank in jail.

After the sacrificial act, Frank is relegated to the penitentiary. In reflection, he must understand Marie as his antagonist, the “other” in Girard's construction:

> “Yes, Frank,” Alexandra said kindly. “I know you never meant to hurt Marie.” Frank smiled at her queerly. His eyes filled slowly with tears. “You know, I most forgit dat woman's name. She ain't got no name for me no more. I never hate my wife, but dat woman what make me do dat-Honest to God, but I hate her! I don' want to kill no boy and no woman. . .” (*Pioneers* 262)

Here, Marie is entirely “othered” such that Frank is able to claim a form of Girardian ignorance in which his actions are no longer his own, but perpetrated by the “other's violence.” The “all-inclusive” nature of Frank's ignorance is further witnessed in his loss of command over language. Although there are very few direct examples of Frank's speech throughout the novel, much of the murder scene is narrated fluidly through his consciousness. The fractured English offered in this last section of the novel suggests the disjunction of Frank's psyche.

The violence which concludes Cather's novel is important in its incongruity. Wilhite describes Cather's aesthetic as one of "narrative indeterminacy and regional instability" thereby emphasizing the distinctly conflicted and complex nature of Cather's portrayal of geographical and psychological spaces (270). Thus, a consideration of the geography of the Divide in concert with my analysis of the psychological spaces of the novel proves especially useful in articulating the means by which Cather produces and manipulates the inhabitants of this "wild" land. The reader is ill-prepared for the horrors that await Emil and Marie in the orchard. In this chapter, I assert that the incongruity of the violence of the novel is engendered by the contradictory dynamics of the community, the problematic geography of the Divide, and the authorial pressure exerted over the characters' psyches which demands alleviation. Cather's novel fuses the communal and individual (psychological) implications of literary violence. Echoing Girard's analysis of the communal necessity of violent sacrifice, Elana Gomel describes the dual effect of literary violence: "violence both wounds the narrative and stimulates its recovery" (xxix). The deaths of both Emil and Marie expose the contradictory nature of the inhabitants of the Divide and their problematic relationship with their new land.

3 The Derridean Dynamic

The previous chapter is concerned with the strange thematic fact of murder in Cather's early novel and the narrative handling of this violent interruption with all its communal and psychological implications. This section will make an alternative and complimentary metafictional turn in as much as Derridean deconstruction examines a correspondence between language and meaning in a text that "comes to speculate, to reflect, and to question about itself within itself" ("Violence" 80). After examining Cather's construction of a character's or community's interior I consider the tools with which she creates that interiority. Derrida's thought is particularly appropriate here as his analyses are always concerned with the violent rupture of form and meaning in language. Specifically, I consider the possibility and implications of violence at the level of the word of the text. In this effort I employ the terms and constructions of multiple essays by Derrida. Primarily, I engage his long essay, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emanuel Levinas;" however, I also reference "Cogito and the History of Madness" as well as "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book." Each of these essays is concerned with the instability of meaning in language as well as Derrida's own discomfort with his position as a critic.

Colin Davis' excellent book, *Critical Excess*, proposes Derrida's deconstructive criticism as "an attempt to traverse the *event* of the text in its utter singularity, to stand exposed—and obliged to respond—to its untamable strangeness" (28). That final word, "strangeness," is so appropriate to Cather's novel. Though the author herself claims the work to be "a novel of the soil. . .about Nebraska farmers," the "strangeness" of the murder scene seems to disavow any attempt at essentializing the text to a kind of idealized pastoral (*On Writing* 93-4). I argue that

the novel explores an eschatological trajectory in as much as the work devotes itself to death in multiple forms. The novel's plodding movement toward death and decay tends to bring Cather's more optimistic critical rhetoric into stark relief. For my purposes Derridean eschatology is literally rendered in the dead and dying bodies of Cather's text. Derrida asserts that eschatology "is but a question of designating a space or a hollow within naked experience where this eschatology can be understood and where it must resonate. This hollow space is not an opening among others. It is opening itself, the opening of opening. . ." ("Violence" 83). This dual construction of the eschatological and the irreducible Other resonates within Cather's text. In his uncalculated movement toward murder Frank Shabata moves physically toward the Others (i.e. his wife and her lover). Most importantly, the morbidity of the novel enhances the deceptive complexity of Cather's novel as the cyclical rejuvenation of the land is juxtaposed against the bleak detritus of human existence.

The second chapter of the first section of the novel introduces the eschatological poetically: "on one of the ridges of that wintry waste stood the low log house in which John Bergson was dying" (25). The novel is essentially littered with death. Before the untimely death of her husband Mrs. Bergson has lost two children. The novel also includes the death of Emil's friend, Amédée, from a ruptured appendix before the climax of the novel in which both Emil and Marie are murdered. In this Derridean analysis I propose the eschatological nature of the text as a form of violence associated with the simultaneously unknowable and strangely familiar status of the "Other." Derrida's construction of the other in his long essay, "Violence and Metaphysics," as "that which is most irreducible within experience" examines this familiar strangeness that permeates existence and the experience of Others (83). Specifically, I examine

Frank's relationship to his two victims before, during, and after the murder as well as his process of self-alienation that appears to dramatic effect during Alexandra's visit with him in jail. Finally, this chapter will also explore the novel's interest in its own unknowability. Davis asserts that "Derridean deconstruction [proposes] a belief that meaning is a matter of language, an interest in interpretation and in particular the interpretation of works of literature, a rejection of the 'single correct reading,' a sensitivity to ambiguity, and a concern to preserve and to attend to the text's distant otherness" (33). Derrida's profound interest in the residue of the rupture of form and meaning in the articulation of language finds new application in Cather's novel through deliberately metafictional moments, the use of parallel (double) monologues disguised as dialogue, and a constant concern on the part of each character to be "understood." Thus, this analysis not only examines the scenes of physical violence, but the violent cleavage that creates a nebulous and problematic space between language and meaning.

My consideration of the Derridean implications of physical violence in the text begins with the assertion that the novel's primary epistemological concern is, essentially, eschatological. In other words the aesthetic thrust of *O Pioneers!* is deathward. Although Cather's own words about this text and its composition seem to convey a more idealistic and nostalgic devotion to the heroic myths of the American immigrant and the rugged individualism of the American West, the text itself demands an alternative consideration. The novel is, quite frankly, too littered with corpses to be accurately described as "a stirring romance of the Western prairies" as the 1913 dust jacket would propose. For Derrida the constant, plodding movement toward death is connected to his understanding of the Other in as much as both

death and the Other occupy a contradictory space of familiar unknowability. Death, like the Other, is always looming but never anticipated or understood. Davis addresses this concern as Derrida's attempt "to encounter, to interpret, and to understand otherness" (55). In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida describes this concept of the Other as an "inaccessible horizon"—always present, but never apprehended (116).

The scene in which Frank murders Marie and Emil begins with Frank's limited recourse to experience itself as he questions his own empirical reality. The unknowable status of the Other is emphasized as he wonders why Emil would leave a horse in his stable—a euphemism, to be sure, but also a movement toward the Others in its teasing seduction. He imagines the stile leading to the orchard as "haunted by Emil Bergson" as he walks toward the "murmuring sound" of the lovers just beyond sight (Cather 234-35). Thus the empirical, though problematic, fact of the horse and the stile allows Frank's physical passage toward the Others just as the darkened empty doorway of his house requires Frank's departure from them. This analysis employs Derrida's terminology very literally in an effort to examine Frank's physical movement toward and away from the murdered couple that has become "irreducibly [othered]" through the literally "naked" experience of their coupling and the physical indicators of his cuckolding.

In considering the implications of this scene Derrida's notion of the eschatological space "within naked experience" proves particularly useful. Frank moves toward the couple with his "murderous .405 Winchester," but cannot see them because of the leaves of the mulberry trees in his orchard (233). He parts the leaves and "[peers] through the hedge at the dark figures on the grass" (235). It is this parting of the leaves that physically designates the "space or hollow" within Frank's experience from which death must materialize (here, a literally hollow physical

space between the parted hedges). Moreover, the leaves tend to frame the murder scene much like a camera lens thereby distancing Frank from the "naked reality" of the couple by aestheticizing their physical reactions to the gunfire: "They had fallen a little apart from each other, and were perfectly still—No, not quite; in a white patch of light, where the moon shone through the branches, a man's hand was plucking spasmodically at the grass" (236). By placing the murdered couple in "a white patch" of moonlight the naked reality of the murderous act is rendered in aesthetic terms.

In Derrida's formulation an encounter with the Other requires a space in which the violence must resonate just as the report of the weapon resonates sonically within the physical space of the orchard. This resonance occurs formally through the use of exclamation points, dashes, and extended listings of verbs in the proceeding paragraph:

> Suddenly the woman stirred and uttered a cry, then another, and another. She was living! She was dragging herself toward the hedge! Frank dropped his gun and ran back along the path, shaking, stumbling, gasping. He had never imagined such horror. The cries followed him. They grew fainter and thicker, as if she were choking. He dropped on his knees beside the hedge and crouched like a rabbit, listening; fainter, fainter; a sound like a whine; again—a moan—another—silence. (236)

Generally, Cather sparsely employs typographical markers therefore this moment represents the resonance described by Derrida in both grammatical and stylistic terms. This grammatical resonance recalls the Derridean metaphysical turn in which the text "comes to reflect and to question about itself within itself" ("Violence" 80). Cather essentially allows the typographical

aspect of the text to echo the "violent report of Frank's gun" and subsequent confusion; moreover, this moment irrefutably others Marie as she is never named, but only referred to as "the woman" or with the general feminine pronoun, "she." Later, Frank notably admits to Alexandra that he "most forgit that woman's name. She ain't got no name for me no more" (262). For Elana Gomel, the narrative of the violent subject is "shattered and (imperfectly) reconfigured by the impact of an experience, for which ordinary means of representation are inadequate. Violent subject stories constitute a very special subset of narratives: narratives structured by their own impossibility" (xvi). Frank's loss of language, denial of culpability, and fractured memory all speak to Gomel's description of violent narratives. Moreover, the impossibility of Frank's self-narrative is further evidenced by his renunciation of the Derridean Other.

Cather initiates a Derridean renunciation of the other "not by being weaned from it, but by detaching oneself from it, which is actually to be in relation to it, to respect it while nevertheless overlooking it, that is, while knowing it, identifying it, assimilating it" (91). Here, Derrida is characteristically circuitous; however, the syntactical difficulty of Derrida's prose tends to underscore his understanding of the distinctly paradoxical and oppositional status of the Other which is at once unbearably close and impossibly distant. Derrida's syntax establishes the complicated relationship between the same (the self) and the Other. The status of each can only be described negatively in relation to its opposite. Through her typography Cather describes Frank's ultimate detachment from and renunciation of Emil and Marie as irremediably othered. In other words "to renounce the other is to enclose oneself within solitude (the bad solitude of solidity and self-identity)" (91). The invocation of solitude as the

result of the renunciation of the Other is particularly useful as I consider Frank's imprisonment and its effect on his status as a violent subject.

The final section of the novel portrays Alexandra's visit to Frank in jail in order to comfort and forgive him for murdering her brother and Marie; however, she meets instead with Frank's "bad solitude." He has lost his command of English after only a short time, he cannot recall his wife's nor Emil's names clearly, and his motions are "jerked" and "clenched" in direct contrast to the physical fluidity of the murder scene (*Pioneers* 260-61). Alexandra embodies Derrida's positive conception of the renunciation of the Other in her identification and assimilation of Frank's violence through the Christian tenant of forgiveness. She even literally attempts to "overlook" Frank's "hideous clothes [and] face" while maintaining sympathy for his plight (260). Simultaneously, Frank expresses the notion of "bad solitude" through his constant reiteration of the first-person pronoun, "I," and his physical inability to meet Alexandra's gaze not to mention his literal isolation within the enclosure of the prison. During this exchange, Frank speaks thirty-four sentences. Of those thirty-four, "I" appears thirty-eight times and usually as the subject of the sentence thereby underscoring Frank's bad solitude of self-identity grammatically. Frank quite literally wraps himself in the grammatical trappings of self-identity. The repetition of the first-person pronoun establishes Frank's abysmal solitude from which all others are denied access. This formal aspect of the text corresponds to the earlier discussion of the typographical portrayal of violent resonances in the murder scene. Just as Cather's manipulation of syntax and punctuation in the murder scene emphasizes the violent resonances of the text's eschatological trajectory, Frank's repetitive assertion of self tends to convey Derrida's "bad solitude of self-identity."

Whereas the murder scene emphasizes the otherness of both Emil and Marie through Frank's distant viewing of the couple in the orchard, this late jail scene exposes the difficulty with which Alexandra attempts to penetrate Frank's "bad solitude." Derrida elaborates on this type of meeting: "face to face with the other within a glance *and* a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt totalities, this being-together as separation precedes or exceeds society. . ." ("Violence" 95). Though the jail scene nominally seeks to provide closure to the most horrific thematic concerns of the novel, this meeting between Frank and Alexandra only re-emphasizes the "inaccessible horizon" that is the Other. This is a space where communication can never occur because language is always already violently separated from meaning such that a coherent dialogue is foreclosed from the outset. Essentially, Alexandra and Frank occupy a similar physical space but are, in fact, worlds apart as evidenced by the incoherence that accompanies each utterance. Frank admits that he "'forgit English. We not talk here, except swear'" (261). Alexandra describes him as "somehow, not altogether human. She did not know what to say to him" (261). Thus Alexandra is denied closure because neither she nor Frank can suture the distance between the self and the Other. Derrida further describes the nature of this separation as "[the] impossibility of translating my relation to the Other into the rational coherence of language. . .[because] thought is stifled in the region of the origin of language as dialogue and difference" ("Violence" 128). Cather's work meta-fictionally examines the implications of the communicative impossibility of language both thematically and technically.

In "Cogito and the History of Madness" Derrida describes the rupture of meaning as a violent interaction: "[It is a] war or misunderstanding or confrontation or double-monologue"

(37). Of specific interest to this analysis of Cather's technique is the final term, "double-monologue," which Derrida further explicates:

> The issue is therefore to reach the point at which the dialogue was broken off, dividing itself into two soliloquies—what Foucault calls, using a very strong word, the *Decision*. The Decision, through a single act, links and separates reason and madness, and it must be understood at once both as the original act of an order, a fiat, a decree, and as a schism, a caesura, a separation, a dissection. I would prefer *dissension*, to underline that in question is a self-dividing action, a cleavage and torment interior to meaning *in general*. . ." ("Cogito" 38)

After the murders of Emil and Marie, the communication in the novel transforms in as much as Cather constantly reasserts the futility of communication through the deployment of the double-monologue. We are told that "the day after Emil's funeral, Alexandra had written Carl Linstrum; a single page of note-paper, a bare statement of what had happened" (254). This unanswered letter introduces Derrida's double-monologue as a deceptive narrative technique through which communication *seems* to occur but never truly takes place. The unread letter proves an excellent example as it attempts in its "bare statement" to honestly convey the horror and devastation of loss, but fails as the letter is never received. Of course, in Derridean terms even an answered letter would never allow for communication to take place but would only convey the form of the double-monologue as a parallel and ineffectual correspondence. Margaret Doane reads the relationship between Alexandra and Carl as one of comfort and communion: "Of all Cather's bereaved survivors, it is Alexandra alone who is allowed by Carl to talk through her greif" (49). Quite the contrary, I examine the apparent communion between

Alexandra and Carl as yet another example of Derrida's double-monologue in which conversation seems to take place but is actually denied. Essentially, the communication between characters after the murder scene takes the form of Alexandra's unanswered letter to Carl—a monologic attempt to convey meaning to which a response is impossible.

After the murders the speech throughout the remainder of the novel takes the form of the Derridean double-monologue. Upon Alexandra's visit to Frank in jail the narrator asserts that "the warden listened genially while she told him briefly of Frank's history and character, but he did not seem to find anything unusual in her account" (258). To "listen genially" to the account of a double murder is entirely inappropriate and underscores the communicative failure that occurs. Though we never know the exact content of the history she recounts, the warden's "genial" response never approaches the status of dialogue. In stead of a commentary on Frank Shabata's history the warden emits a string of almost unrelated assertions in response to Alexandra's history:

> "Sure, I'll keep an eye on him. We'll take care of him all right," he said rising. "You can talk to him here, while I go to see to things in the kitchen. I'll have him sent in. He ought to be done washing out his cell by this time. We have to keep 'em clean, you know." (258)

The meeting between the warden and Alexandra is representative of the mode of communication in the novel after the murders. No communication ever truly occurs; in stead, each character emits a string of monologic statements that only appear to function as dialogue. Though the entire jail scene provides all the typographical and syntactical paraphernalia of dialogue between Frank and Alexandra the content reveals the "two soliloquies" or double-

monologue Derrida describes. While Alexandra offers absolution and forgiveness, Frank alternately asserts his own guilt and sense of victimization in a train of disjunctive soliloquies. Both characters are provided with speech; however, Cather disallows communication. Thus, Alexandra's reflection that "she and Frank had been wrecked by the same storm" is witnessed in the dissonance and incoherence of this late scene (264). Despite the typographical and syntactical indicators no communication or exchange actually takes place and it is this deliberate authorial deception which allows Cather's work to examine the "torment interior to meaning" so masterfully.

In her exemplary collection of close readings Julian Wolfreys examines Derrida's analytical technique as one in which he seeks to "inscribe the act of reading within the text being read" (52). Davis recognizes this effort in Derrida's thought as well as he playfully proposes that ". . . the attempt to understand the nature of understanding [is] littered with misunderstandings" (43). Both scholars locate a tendency in Derrida's thought toward a metafictional epistemology. Derrida finds most interesting the text's (un)awareness of its own implausibility. Devoting so much thought and writing to the impossibility of conveying meaning requires "[a] grammar in which all the dislocations of dead syntax, all the aggressions perpetrated by speech against language, every questioning of the letter itself. . ." are included ("Edmond" 78). Early in the novel Cather allows for the uncomfortable inevitability of misunderstanding and communicative failure. In describing the land of the Divide the narrator acknowledges that "[the] record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings" (25). In a nearly Derridean turn Cather

proposes the mythic insignificance of her authorial endeavor. This early maneuver is just as deceptive as Cather's use of double-monologue in that this short reflection simultaneously asserts and disavows the possibility of coherently uniting the word with its meaning with any success. This statement, then, anticipates the novel's preoccupation with the rupture or dissension that occurs in language at the moment of articulation ("Violence" 48). Thus, the violence of Cather's novel is not only apparent in the scenes of murder and death, but at the level of the word itself and in the author's stylistic deployment of the communicative impasse of the Derridean double-monologue.

4 Žižek's Psychological Remainder

In order to expand on the Derridean notion of violence at the level of the word while keeping in mind the psychological interests of Girard, I employ Slavoj Žižek's more recent work. Both Girard and Žižek are united in their theoretical indebtedness to the psychoanalytic methods developed by Freud. The connection between Derrida and Žižek is likewise not without precedent. Colin Davis locates an intriguing point of correspondence (and divergence): ". . .psychoanalysis tends to pin literature down, seeking out its occluded truth. . . whereas deconstruction attempts to respect the text's residue, which resists critical appropriation" (115). Like Derrida, Žižek is concerned with "the 'stain' or 'uncanny excess' of the text" and both thinkers examine the violence inherent in language (Davis 123). With these connections in mind I propose Žižek's thought as the final movement in this reading of Cather's novel. In my Girardian reading I generally and broadly introduced psychoanalysis through Girard's sociological lens. My Derridean reading contracted the analytical scope by focusing on the rupture between language and meaning that becomes manifest in the final sections of the novel. This reading expands the psychoanalytical dimension of the text through a Lacanian lens while maintaining a patently Žižekian interest in discovering and describing the often violent machinations of ideology that permeate language, art, and being.

In his 2008 work, *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek makes a distinction between subjective and objective, or systemic, violence. For Žižek subjective violence is "performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (1). "[Acts] of crime and terror, civil unrest, [and] international conflict" serve as examples of subjective violence (1). Comparatively, objective violence "is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively

violent" (2). Systemic violence describes the context in which subjective violence is experienced as such. It is the seemingly benign setting from which physical, brutal violence emerges. In a 2008 interview Žižek further elucidates his terminology: "[Objective violence] is violence inscribed into the very social structure. If someone attacks you, you might think of this as a violent interruption of nonviolent normality. But this violence is already inscribed in the same social rules that were violated when they attacked you" ("Obscure"). The deaths of Emil and Marie are, of course, examples of Žižek's subjective violence—a bloody double murder perpetrated at the hand of a cuckolded husband; however, my interest here is to uncover the systemic (objective) conditions which instigate the murders. More specifically, I assert that the act of subjective violence perpetrated by Frank Shabata is predicated upon what Žižek terms a "successful miscommunication" ("Undergrowth" 25). Through the constellation of Žižek's various and nuanced definitions of violence I propose a meta-critical evaluation of Cather's own activity within the novel by examining the possibility of authorial violence. While examining Žižek's assertion of the violence inherent in the acts of reading and interpretation I evaluate the violent potential of the author in an effort to account for the incongruity of the murder scene within the larger body of the text. Finally, in a distinctly Žižekian turn, the chapter concludes with a close analysis of the aesthetic (and nearly cinematic) components of the murder scene.

In "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment," Žižek offers an anecdote in which a man propositions an underground spy ring for the murder of his wife's lover never discovering that the spy ring is, in fact, a group of boys playing war games. Although the lover eventually dies, there is no correspondence between the actions of the spy ring and the death beyond what Žižek terms a "successful misunderstanding" (24). He continues:

> . . .the two poles of the communication are thus asymmetrical. [One] embodies the great Other, the symbolic universe of codes and cyphers, with its senseless automatism; and when as a result of its blind functioning this mechanism produces a body, the subject (the hero) reads this purely arbitrary outcome as an 'answer of the real', a confirmation of successful communication" (25).

In the case of Cather's novel the process by which the bodies are "produced" is not necessarily in question as the reader accompanies Frank on his murderous trajectory; however, it is the appearance of the body (or, in this case, *bodies*) that produces in Alexandra (the hero) a need to understand the murders as an "answer of the Real." She asks Carl repeatedly if he "can understand it," meaning the divine purpose of the murders (Cather 269).

After the murders Alexandra attempts to uncover the "answer of the Real" amid the emotional disarray of a double-homicide. In this effort she visits Frank in jail but finds him inarticulate and incapable of aiding her search. Her conversations with Carl Linstrum are similarly concerned with the discovery of a stable and coherent meaning in the violence: "'Can you understand it, Carl?' Alexandra murmured. 'I have had nobody but Ivar and Signa to talk to. Do talk to me. Can you understand it? Could you have believed it of Marie Tovesky?. . .'" (269). Tellingly, Alexandra imputes all blame to Marie thereby recognizing what Žižek would term the systemic or objective conditions which allowed for Frank's violent rage to take murderous shape. When Alexandra tells Frank in jail that ". . .they were more to blame than you," she acknowledges the community's ideological condemnation of adultery and tacit approval of the revenge he exacted (261). By transgressing the sexual mores of the community, Marie and Emil provoke a violent eruption of ideology.

Moreover, as Alexandra searches for traces of the Real amid the gore and terror of the murders, she mirrors the work of the reader. Like Alexandra, the reader is entirely unprepared for the horrific appearance of two gruesome dead bodies. Žižek describes this unexpected stylistic maneuver as "an aesthetic *explosion* of violence" (emphasis added "Ambiguity" 121). "Explosion" is, of course, appropriate here as it corresponds nicely with the sonic report of Frank's gun and conveys the emotional and psychological destruction concomitant with the murders. Interestingly, Cather later describes the composition of the third section of the novel as "a sudden inner explosion" thereby acknowledging the unexpected turn toward violence in her narrative (*Pioneers* 286). In her search for meaning Alexandra, like the reader, betrays what Žižek describes in *Violence* as "the hermeneutic temptation:"

> [It is] the search for some deeper meaning or message hidden in these [violent] outbursts. . .they are what Lacan called a *passage a l'acte*—an impulsive movement into action which can't be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration. This bears witness not only to the impotence of the perpetrators, but, even more, to the lack of what cultural analyst Frederic Jameson has called "cognitive mapping," an inability to locate the experience of their situation within a meaningful whole. (76)

Alexandra's visit to Frank and her questioning of Carl expose this ultimately fruitless temptation toward the assignation of meaning. More accurately, each communicative attempt is a means of developing a coherent, logical narrative through which to account for the violent explosion. After their return from Hanover, Carl and Alexandra discuss the young couple: "They sat down on the grass-tufted bank and Carl told her how he had seen Emil and Marie out by the pond

that morning, more than a year ago, and how young and charming and full of grace they had seemed to him. 'It happens like that in the world sometimes, Alexandra,' he added earnestly" (269-70). That final, platitudinous statement underscores Carl's attempt to narrativize the horror of the murders and provide a cohesive account of the unexpected tragedy. Frank inhabits an entirely inarticulate and impotent space as the perpetrator of the murders. As survivors both Alexandra and Carl undertake a desperate search for a "meaningful whole" through their attempts to narrativize and aestheticize the bloody facts of the murders.

Just as Alexandra's sympathy toward Frank exposes the definitively asymmetrical nodes of communication described by Žižek, the unexpected violence of the murders establishes an asymmetrical power dynamic between the reader and the text. The novel itself seems to function blindly through "its senseless automatism" as the reader searches for the outcropping of the Real amid the literary mechanisms of bindings, pulp, and ink. Cather ingeniously manipulates the text and the narrative to create the "aesthetic explosion of violence" that Žižek describes. David Stouck's notes on the text explain Cather's integral role in the publication of her early novel:

> [Cather's] concern for the "tone" and "distinction" [of the novel] extended to an exceptional concern for the format of her books; indeed, she had a remarkably clear sense of what she wanted. . .In subsequent letters she continued to use the American *O Pioneers!* typographical designs as a touchstone, asking Houghton Mifflin to repeat its type and paper (rough and cream-colored) for *My Ántonia* in order to give the text the same look as her first pioneer novel. (352)

Furthermore, the chosen font, Caslon, is described as "superior to many versions of Caslon for its evenness of color—a product of consistent spacing within and between letters and its harmonious, understated stroke weight" (310). The apparent consistency of the letters on the page and deliberately antiqued paper stock belies the novelty and complexity of the book's content. Cather's participation in the physical composition of her novel appears to add credence to Žižek's interest "in the way the content, so far from being simply 'depicted' [through the narrative] is directly 'rendered' in the very form of the narrative" ("Undergrowth" 27). In its simplistic physicality the text does the same deceptive work as the ploddingly stark narration. This simplicity of form and narration allows the murders to be more strikingly felt and more aesthetically jarring. Thus, the violence of the murder scene is emphasized by the innocuous nature of the physicality of the text as it was originally published under Cather's proscriptions.

In the physicality of the text itself we see the insidious nature of the objective, or systemic, violence Žižek describes. The consistency of the type-face and the weight of the paper-stock create the "zero-level" from which we experience the lulling narration of Cather's grand pastoral before being shocked by the bloody murders of Emil and Marie (*Violence* 2). Through the physical properties of her novel Cather carefully constructs an ideological space ripe with violent potential. In much the same way she creates the sweeping landscape of the Divide which effectively masks a community full of "dark projects" through her masterful manipulation of narrative technique and stylistics (*Pioneers* 234).

One of the major stylistic techniques Cather uses for her murder scene is described by Žižek as the "close-up shot" ("Ambiguity" 115). Elana Gomel likewise recognizes "the shifting

dynamics of visibility" as an important feature of violent narratives (xxxii). For Žižek the close-up is especially effective in pornography:

> . . . the very unity of the bodily self-experience is magically dissolved, so that the spectator perceives the bodies of the actors not as unified totalities, but as a kind of vaguely coordinated agglomerate of partial objects—here a mouth, there a breast. . .The effect of close-up shots and of the strangely twisted and contorted bodies of the actors is to deprive these bodies of their unity. . . ("Ambiguity" 115)

The invocation of pornography is vaguely appropriate here as Frank does, in fact, witness his wife and her lover in the proverbial throes of passion. More important, though, is the disunity of the bodies Frank views.

As Frank approaches the orchard, the physical space of the scene contracts. In stead of the expansive openness of the wheat field, or even the comparatively close darkness of his house, the murder scene is staged amid the carefully parted leaves of a dense mulberry hedge (*Pioneers* 235). After firing the gun Frank sees "a man's hand plucking spasmodically at the grass" (236). Emil is essentially deprived of his corporeal unity here as the hand serves as synecdoche for the larger gruesome body that is too traumatic for full viewing. Seemingly, Marie maintains her complete corporeal form: "Suddenly the woman stirred and uttered a cry. . .She was living! She was dragging herself to the hedge!" (236). As previously noted, Frank never refers to his wife by name after the murders. In stead, he calls her a "girl" or "woman" or refers to her using the general feminine pronoun, "she." It is precisely *because* he views Marie in her totality that Frank leaves his farm and the town: "Terror was the only thing that kept him

from going back to her, terror that *she* might still be *she*, that *she* might still be suffering. *A woman*, mutilated and bleeding in his orchard—it was because she was *a woman* that he was so afraid" (emphasis added 237). In stead of narrating a close-up visual shot of Marie, Frank essentializes her—an alternative, linguistic imagining of the Žižekian close-up. Whereas Emil is reduced to the ghastly gesture of a bloody hand, Marie becomes a nameless, essentialized woman. She is effectively reduced to the site of her transgression—the vagina.

For Žižek this process of essentialization is understood as violent: "Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it" (*Violence* 61). By labeling Marie "woman," Frank denies her organic unity and constructs a "'wall of language' which forever separates [him] from the abyss of another subject" (Violence 73). Much like Derrida's double-monologue, the Žižekian wall of language provides the appearance of understanding while actually foreclosing or essentializing meaning. Frank can recognize the "woman mutilated and bleeding in his orchard," but he must relieve this traumatic personal recognition through the ambiguity of language. Thus, calling his wife "woman" allows Frank to maintain an acceptable (though crippling) distance from the abyss of the Other.

Frank Shabata's essentialization of his wife, his loss of speech in jail and his inability to recall his wife's name are protective psychological maneuvers that maintain what Žižek terms the "hysterical knot" ("Ambiguity" 118). Žižek's hysterical knot is described as a "libidinal investment [in] one's own victimization" ("Ambiguity 118). Žižek's analysis of violence locates an important moment of collision as the violent subject addresses and suppresses his

experience of trauma through language. The wall of language described by Žižek effectively protects the violent subject's investment in his own victimization thereby asserting what Derrida describes as "an enclosure within solitude." Cather's portrayal of Frank's debilitating terror after the murders and his subsequent means of diffusing that terror through language attests to the high level of sophistication of this early novel.

5 CONCLUSION

Cather's singular manipulation of violence in her second novel provides the reader with a unique analytical recuperative opportunity as *O Pioneers!* is so often classed among the less sophisticated of the author's works. By examining this text through a variety of theoretical lenses, I emphasize the aesthetic complexity of what some scholars have underestimated as Cather's "elegiac prairie idealism." Far from a simplistic pastoral, *O Pioneers!* is a novel that allows for an intensive exploration of what Colin Davis describes as the "unnerving strangeness" of the text (54). Just as James Joyce's streaming narration in *Ulysses* disarms the reader's expectations, Cather's deployment of violence demands treatment as a literary technique and narrative device.

The deaths of Emil and Marie unexpectedly jar the reader on a first reading of this early novel. The "unnerving strangeness" of this work echoes in the thick, deadly atmosphere of Frank Shabata's mulberry orchard. My object in this analysis was to examine the "traces and residues" of this violent encounter that echo much like the report of Frank's gun throughout the text (Davis 31). The critical approach in this work is admittedly one of experimentation. My purpose is not to arrive at a definite conclusion nor prove a hypothesis, but rather to survey and enhance the critical scholarship of this novel in an effort to recuperate Cather's work as a Modernist composition *par excellance*. By engaging the critical writings of René Girard, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek I strategically negotiated a very narrow survey of the trends in literary theory of the last forty years. With each theorist the text is reconfigured and meaning realigned thereby uncovering a wealth of analytical material in a novel ostensibly devoted to "the pioneers' struggle to tame a wild land, the storms of winter, the heat and drought of

summer, the tending of live stock, [and] the exhilarating labors of harvest time" (*Pioneers* 289). The theories of each critic allow the reader to reevaluate the validity of these all too simplistic scholarly assertions of Cather's aesthetics. In *Critical Excess*, Davis asserts that Žižek's ecstatic analysis of film, texts, and culture are "an earnest plea for *over*interpretation" (emphasis added 125). In this spirit of excessive scholarship, I address Cather's aesthetic and technical ingenuity.

Of course, work remains to be done and my interest in scenes of violence could be expanded beyond this single text in Cather's canon. In fact, Joseph R. Urgo's compilation of essays from the 2005 International Willa Cather Seminar provides an excellent sampling of scholarship which examines violence in the author's later novels and stories; whereas her early novels tend to suffer from at least a modicum of scholarly neglect. Anecdotally, *My Ántonia*, the sister text to *O Pioneers!*, includes graphic scenes of death and strange moments of violence especially ripe for analysis. In a seemingly benign vignette the narrator likens sleeping children to murder victims. We are told that the resting bodies of the children appear "as if they had been shot" thereby exposing the deceptive means by which "sublimated violence gradually infiltrates the style, the dialogue, and the plot of the [Modernist] novel" (*Ántonia* 234; Squires 101). In his essay on D.H. Lawrence's fiction, Michael Squires examines instances of violence in Modernist narratives that employ "odd, simplifying verbal structures" that tend to undercut the emotional and physical brutality of the subject matter—a stylistic maneuver most certainly at work in Cather's sparsely narrated fiction (99). Her description of the sleeping children exemplifies Cather's subtle inclusion of death and gore into seemingly innocuous scenes. A simile of this type accosts the reader with its utter strangeness and recalls Žižek's "wall of language"—an aesthetic concept that at once invites and resists interpretation

(*Violence* 73). As previously discussed, *O Pioneers!* is designed physically and stylistically to simultaneously deceive and engage the reader's expectations. I have examined Cather's choice of antiqued paper stock and a controlled, even type-face to prove that she deliberately constructs a space in which the bloodied and distinctly messy bodies of Emil and Marie are almost inconceivable. To imagine the pages of the novel and the type on those pages as a physical barrier (a wall) against interpretive exhaustion in a novel so devoted to physical and psychological spaces, then, seems wholly appropriate (Davis 31). The words on the page literally construct the Žižekian wall of language in which meaning and coherence are always destabilized. Far from foreclosing interpretation, though, Žižek's thought celebrates the seductive unknowability of the text and revels in the potential for *over*interpretation.

Each movement of my analysis addressed the seemingly aberrant nature of violence in Cather's text. The Girardian analysis invoked a sociological understanding of the necessity of physical violence on a communal level. For Derrida, violence is most apparent in language as form and meaning are irreparably severed at the point of articulation. Finally, my Žižekian reading offered a combined approach that more fully inscribed the reader.

For Žižek, the text resists totalizing interpretation through the Lacanian "sinthom" defined by Davis as "the excess or surplus which upsets the interpreter's construction of coherence" (129):

> What is perhaps most crucially at stake in the sinthom is the interpreters own enjoyment. It incites him to find and to lose himself in the production and the disarray of meaning, the sense and excess, the promise of coherence and the brute, dumb senselessness in which the interpreter wallows. . . (Davis 130)

Essentially, the enjoyment of a text is complex and contradictory in as much as meaning is always already slippery and myriad. This examination of Cather's work embraces the instability of coherent meaning by re-focusing each chapter through a different analytical lens thereby establishing a productive (dis)array of interpretive methods and interests.

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