Classes and Masses

Willa Cather’s “Purely Cultural Studies” and the “New Commercialism”

One need not be a Deweyan pragmatist to recognize that the relationship between public schooling and democracy is a conceptually tight one.


Democracy is a requirement for experimental inquiry in any area. To reject democracy is to reject the idea of being experimental.

— Hilary Putnam, “Between the New Left and Judaism”

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If something cannot at once have a claim to the cultural pedigree Cather talks about in her well-known essay “Escapism” and be common, this is a point that Cather makes in *The Professor’s House* when, for example, she depicts the violation that seems to be permeating the professor’s life, and blames the ubiquitous insatiability of commercial culture. Even the university is not exempt. Along with a precious few colleagues, the professor must “struggle to preserve the dignity of the university, and their own,” for the “State legislature and the board of regents seemed determined to make a trade school of the university” (120). Cather was not alone in her alarm, or at least not alone in her apprehension of this new movement. The *New Republic* noted in a 1922 editorial on “the American College” that the “abandonment of the aristocratic ideal [of culture] in fact brought about a great increase in the number of students able to enter college, while the retention of the ideal in name constituted a powerful inducement to them to do so. The college became one of those democratic institutions . . . whose function seemed to be to give exclusiveness to the masses.”
Adamantly opposed to the “new commercialism,” Cather writes, to “the aim to ‘show results’ that was undermining and vulgarizing education,” the fictional historian Godfrey St. Peter is active against the movement and finds himself fighting the board of regents, which tries “every year” to “diminish the number of credits required in science and the humanities” and instead allow “credits for commercial studies” (120). Such a program infuriates the professor, for in seeking to “abolish the purely cultural studies” it will do away with serious “scholarship” and thus degrade the purpose of the university, which, he feels, is not commercial. As we are given a sampling of the courses that are to replace those in science and the humanities—“book-keeping, experimental farming, domestic science, dress-making, and what not”—it becomes clear that the new curriculum, rather than encouraging the students to cultivate any desire for knowledge as its own result, is designed to prepare them for a life of wage labor, which is to say a life marked not by intellectual freedom and growth, nor by the Thoreauvian spirit of independence that comes with such things, but by an anti- or ahistorical commitment to production that devalues imaginative capacity and announces the individual as merely an automaton, an assurance to the smooth functioning of industry.

What’s anti- or ahistorical is the fact that these courses did not examine the history of industry and the relationship of the individual to it; they did not take as their point the teaching of a comprehensive perspective in which a student learned, as John Dewey put it, the “historic background of present conditions.” Women who enrolled in domestic science, for example, were taught a certain approach to running, or managing, the home. “Efficiency” was the motto, and learning useful skills did not require a knowledge of history in general; it merely required that women learn the skills being taught so they could manage their homes more efficiently. The kind of historical dislocation in vocational education described here was a concern of Dewey and of Jane Addams, both of whom were prominent voices in the field of education around the time Cather was writing. They both saw trade-training as flawed in practice, partially because it failed to incorporate industrial history and, by extension, social reality. This, however, is not to say that Cather shared Dewey’s and Addams’s agenda, because she did not. Rather, the point is that for reasons different from those of Dewey and Addams, Cather saw a problem in the implementation of an ahistorical, industrial training curriculum. Her problem with it had to do with the effects of a changing student body, so to speak.

The student body, in other words, was literally changing. For one thing,
the “commercial” courses that Cather names—especially “domestic science” and “dress-making”—are particularly telling and need to be looked at in the context of the gendered terms they signify. This is to say that vocational training (in general) strikes Cather as a turn away from the self-sufficient individualism of the older society toward a more feminine—and for Cather, less appealing—figuration of identity; this new feminine ideal announces, among other things, the disappearance of what Walter Lippmann called “absolute possession” when describing in 1914 (the passing of) that sense of self traceable to a model of subjectivity rooted in the virtues of self-determination and free agency. If science is about domesticity, and making is about dresses (if books are to be “kept” and not written or read), then the new commercialism endeavors to bring about an essentially domesticated individual, an individual stripped of the fundamentally masculine trait of independence; an individual who can be, or is, appropriated by others, and finally implicated and utilized in a collective industrial effort. The feminization of individuality—the loss of individuality—seems to be on Cather’s mind as she attacks the “aim to ‘show results’” as an invasion of sorts, as a direct affront to the idea of education. 

But education is about culture, as Cather herself suggests—for her it is defined in (or by) a “purely cultural studies.” Here we see, then, how her fear has less to do with her desire to save or produce the individual than with her (undemocratic) desire to protect or reproduce pure culture, which, to her mind, resides in “science and the humanities” and, of course, is utterly distinct from commerce. Certainly she shows herself to be aware that culture and education are reducible, on some level, to one another; this, presumably, is why she opposes the changes in educational ideals that, since the late nineteenth century, have virtually transformed every level of education in the United States. In the end, what she is resisting—knowingly, in an important sense—is a transformation in culture itself. Nothing less than a cultural revolution is taking place if what is “purely cultural” is being alloyed by something else, something that, in Cather’s view, is directly opposed to the very definition of culture.

Cather’s perspective then advances a notion of “high culture” that, grounded in the concomitant notion of the “high arts,” is (or should be) a description in itself of higher education: When she elsewhere describes the “major arts,” naming poetry, painting, architecture, sculpture, and music, when she includes in her discussion of the “arts” references to mathematician-philosopher Descartes and physicist-philosopher Newton, she alludes to all the subjects that make up a classic liberal arts curriculum and so constitute pure culture. Arguing that art and industry
are antithetical spheres, Cather scoffs at the possibility that artists (a category that, in her mind, includes the old, classical school of natural philosophers, architects, mathematicians, and physicists) could or should be expected to “materially help” solve any real social problem. “Industrial life,” Cather proclaims, “has to work out its own problems.” And she conducts her whole discussion in the context of a vision that sharply divides between culture and utility, or art and commodity: “Economics and art are strangers,” she finally writes. In 1936, it is worth detouring to note, this is not merely a resistant statement, but an intensely reactionary one—reactionary in large part to the New Deal, which Cather makes reference to when she mentions in this same essay the “head of the Works Project” (aka the WPA).

The WPA, an organization established in 1935 to put the unemployed back to work in public service projects such as building bridges and roads, was one of the most important agencies created by the New Deal. Cather strives to demonstrate her point about the separate spheres of art and industry, or culture and economics, by rhetorically asking what would happen if the head of the Works Project “Had to write a dozen songs a day.” Her point is that this would be as preposterous as an artist being expected to become involved in the business of business. Cather was against the notion that an artist, or art, had or should have any substantial impact on industrial life or routine, on political issues or social controversies; in this article she articulates this stance when she attacks the reformist agenda for demanding that “the composer should be Citizen Beethoven, the painter Citizen Rembrandt, the poet Citizen Shelley,” and that “they should step into line and speed their pen or brush in helping to solve the economic problems which confront society.” What I have argued in general, here, is that Cather opposes socialization, in the form of cooperative, industrial efforts, and so forth, but in this instance—in the particular example of this article—this opposition is more clearly discernible in the context of the specific historical moment of the New Deal: she is reacting against the socialization of the State, because this means in the first place (to her) the socialization of—the loss of—an exclusive idea of “culture” or art, which, it turns out, is based on a bright-line class division.

During the reign of the New Deal, social legislation was at its height in America, so Cather’s remarks in this article are more entrenched in a critique of the State than anything she says in *The Professor’s House* or her other 1920s material. For example, to argue her position for the artist as legitimately and necessarily—even naturally—removed from the realm of economics and politics, Cather calls up the old poets and philosophers
(the “Hebrew prophets and the Greek dramatists”), declaring, “Since no patriarchal family was without its hatreds and jealousies and treacheries, the old poets could not see how a great number of families brought together into a State could be much better. This seems to be the writer’s natural way of looking at the suffering of the world.”\textsuperscript{15} The writer is thus naturally supportive of the idea that economics and art are “strangers,” which is to say that any writer who supports or seeks the engagement of these two distinct realms is, de facto, a stranger to art.

Cather’s commitment to protecting the “artist” from what she calls the “intrusion of foreign matter” thus reinforces her insistence that economics and art are strangers, which is the same thing as saying that culture and economics (or aesthetics and economics) are strangers.\textsuperscript{16} It follows, then, that we can identify such “foreign matter” as anything that she associates with economics: Whether it’s the Jewish character Louie Marsellus, a feminine presence at the college, or the idea of the vulgar (an idea Cather intimately links up with money, and a class-invested category on its own), the intrusion of “foreign matter” is not only threatening dominant culture, but threatening the chance for culture, as Cather’s aesthetics define it, to remain dominant. A “science and humanities” curriculum—a liberal arts curriculum—as the embodiment of pure culture, not pure individualism, is therefore the only appropriate subject matter for “higher education,” which, until the twentieth century, functioned as a bastion of “culture” insofar as it was inaccessible to the majority of United States habitants.\textsuperscript{17}

What really concerns Cather, then, is the relationship that institutionalized education has to classical culture, and whether or not the former would ensure the authoritative survival of the latter in 1920s U.S. social realms. Visible as a public issue, this relationship received a good deal of political attention. Calvin Coolidge, for example, made frequent speeches on education, as both president and vice president. Sharing Cather’s concerns, Coolidge told the American Classical League of the University of Pennsylvania in 1921 that “Modern civilization dates from Greece and Rome,” and that “the fundamental things that young Americans should be taught” were “Greek and Latin literature.”\textsuperscript{18} But the more interesting point here is that we can find in Coolidge the same privileging of culture over individuality that we have seen in Cather.\textsuperscript{19} Coolidge, too, suggests that the purpose of education is to ingrain culture, not cultivate individuality: “We did not acquire our position through our own individual efforts,” he insists, and “it is only by intense application that the individual comes into the . . . possession of the heritage of civilization.”\textsuperscript{20} Notwithstanding the narrow definition of “civilization” in this remark,
indeed the statement goes so far as to suggest that the survival of culture requires the sublimation of individuality, and that the development of the individual as such must be checked, for individuality can exist only at the expense of culture. The “intense application” that Coolidge urges is the course of a classical education, which—for him and Cather both—restores education to its natural function and in doing so restores the proper symbiosis of formal education and classical culture. The goal for Coolidge is to ensure the “heritage of civilization,” which strongly deemphasizes the position of individuality (or, it might be added, individual cultures).

Looking back at Thoreau for a moment—a good example of someone who tried to initiate an individuality by distancing himself from cultural distractions—this relationship is what he implicitly gets at when he writes in an 1850 journal entry, “What does education do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook.” Taking Thoreau’s “straight-cut ditch” to mean the rigidity of what education imparts—in a word, culture—his statement is instructive insofar as it criticizes formal education for producing conformity. In the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau thus asks and answers a question that Cather considers seventy-five years later from quite a different perspective: what Thoreau says education does is what critics of 1920s America, such as Cather, say it should do. This inversion of the spirit of Thoreau’s remark is due to the crisis in or of culture that Cather and her contemporaries felt they were facing.

Thoreau, on the other hand, in criticizing “education,” indicates that his problem is with the very classical “culture” that Cather and her contemporaries exalt. Fully aware of the custodial relationship between institutional education and classical culture, Thoreau suggests for his moment that the crisis occurring is not at all a crisis in or of culture, but one in or of individuality. Although he indicts commercialism for suppressing and even extinguishing the individuality of the individual, he says little to suggest an anxiety about a disappearance of or encroachment on classical culture (it is arguable that his lamenting of the passing of the “art” of agriculture is an exception). In fact, his remarks on education, exemplified above, suggest just the opposite. His disdain in Walden for the “common course” of instruction is based on his interpretation of school as a domain removed from real life, where individuals do not learn the practical realities of living but gain a limited knowledge based on a distant cultural curriculum. Therefore, unlike Thoreau, whose remarks predate the national debate over the proper place of vocational education in a general educational curriculum, and who is not talking about vocational education anyway but regular or normal schooling, Cather is not dispar-
aging the effects of education in general—far from it. She is deprecating institutional education for agreeing to transform its (definitive) role from the custodian of “culture” into the partner of industry, and perhaps, in the process, democracy.

Yet if Cather’s investment in the “straight-cut ditch” of culture far outweighs her investment in the “free, meandering brook” of individuality, then she is exemplary of a need articulated in the 1920s to cement an idea of culture in a stable, classicist paradigm that constitutes the very idea of, and is systematically transmitted through, education. This paradigm is, as I’ve noted, hostile to or anxious about “foreign” or outside influences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Cather counts women or the influence of a feminine ideal as such a “foreign”—and therefore adulterating—force. Unlike Norris, whom she admired as a writer, Cather did not see the advent of a feminine influence in a positive light. On the contrary, as pointed out earlier, she was threatened by such a development.

*The Professor’s House* is certainly not the first place where Cather implies the connection between practical pursuits—which have brought mass production, or mass culture—and a feminine ideal. In her essay “The Novel Démeublé,” published in 1922, she criticizes modern industrial manufacturing as a quantity- not quality-based enterprise that satisfies those who “want change,” and who thoughtlessly become engrossed in commercial culture, buying—and buying into—the “cheap” forms of amusement it offers: “Does anyone pretend that if the Woolworth store windows were piled high with Tanagra figurines at ten cents, they could for a moment compete with Kewpie brides in the popular esteem? Amusement is one thing; enjoyment of art is another.” Cather’s reference to the “Kewpie brides” is one sign that she is associating a symbol of mass production with a feminine ideal. The celluloid Kewpie Doll, patented by New York author-illustrator Rose Cecil O’Neill in 1909, was not a “bride,” nor was it even necessarily a female figure. Yet Cather thinks of it as feminine, probably because it was purchased for girls, not boys—girls, not boys, played with it and wanted it. Certainly it fares well as a representation of mass production; quickly and cheaply made, the Kewpie doll typifies the culture Cather imagines herself to be so against: a mass-market culture in which Kewpie dolls supersede Tanagra figurines in stores and dressmaking supersedes the classics in college curriculums. What Cather writes above in 1922 is thus analogous to what she reveals in *The Professor’s House*: her animus toward commercialism as a feminine phenomenon, or more specifically, a sign of feminine inferiority. In fact, Cather’s notorious problem with women writers points toward the same association of mass culture with feminine subjectivity.
While it is true that Cather dislikes the mass culture of commercialism because it suggests the prevalence of femininity, the aim here is to show that the implications of this claim exceed the category of gender, and reach beyond the “woman question” per se to a problem with the arrival of immigrants and the influences of different ethnic groups on the specific cultural aesthetic that she wants to preserve. In other words, the attention Cather pays to education in this novel, the anxiety she expresses over the fact that a classical education is being supplanted by an “aim to show results,” is part of a greater anxiety about the demands being made by industry—demands that put the very notion of cultural boundaries at risk. Industrialization, or corporate capitalism, is implicated in Cather’s narrative because its practical requirements include a more cooperative social environment and an expansion of the working population in order to grow itself, which means that even colleges must cooperate in the training of a new workforce. In Cather’s case, her opposition to commercialism therefore cannot be explained as simply a reaction against the downsides of the commodification of American culture. Although this is accurate to some degree, her position is much more complicated than this.

While Cather insists that the primacy of the individual must be preserved, her stance emerges as supportive of individuality in a theoretical sense, or, supportive of the theory of individuality. In other words, she is hard-pressed to support the reality of individuality if, or perhaps because, this reality is a challenge to culture, which relies on a distinct social order. This social—or class—order is in direct opposition to individuality, for its real effects are to form groups and, importantly, one of Cather’s favorite things: standards. Thus Cather is for the idea of individuality, but she fails to account for or forward the reality that this idea could inspire, namely, a more egalitarian or socially mobile society in which every individual is provided with equal opportunities and in which “culture” does not stand in the way of such a provision in order to maintain itself. What this means is that Cather’s interest in individuality is in stark contrast to that of John Dewey, who called for “Individuality operating in and for the end of the common interest.” If Cather’s support for individuality then goes only so far, and tends to remain in the abstract, what we get in Cather is an anti-egalitarian polemic that has its roots in a profoundly undemocratic philosophy. To save culture, she must turn away from any movement for social reform, and from any reconciliation with social reality in general.

She rejects the social reality of industrialization because she associates it with adulteration—with the appearance of women and immigrants, and the presence of class others. After all, the reason why the
college is giving courses in domestic science is that women are now there in enough numbers to warrant such a curriculum; and the reason why vocational courses in experimental farming and managerial skills (such as bookkeeping) are being taught is that, as professor St. Peter claims in a conversation with a colleague, there are questionable transformations occurring: “There have been a great many changes . . . and not all of them good. Don’t you notice a great change in the student body as a whole, in the new crop that comes along every year now—how different they are from the ones of our early years here?” (42). When his colleague asks in what respect, St. Peter answers, “in the all-embracing respect of quality! We have hosts of students, but they’re a common sort” (42). The curse of the common is thus the curse of the common people. The invasion of “common” people is the invasion of a practically oriented, commercial society and, it is worth adding, a common culture that all might share. Cather’s discourse on this “new crop” of students explicitly includes women, of course; the professor quips that “Nowadays the girls in my classes who have a spark of aptitude for anything seem to think themselves remarkable” (52), suggesting the new ambition women expressed upon being granted the opportunity for higher education. This “new crop” of students, therefore, is a diverse group ranging from women, to immigrants, to children of the working class, and Cather’s depiction of it is relatively accurate. In fact, she provides a somewhat accurate picture of an important movement in American educational reform, one that is pertinent enough to look at in detail.

In her presentation of the professor’s views concerning the university’s changing curriculum, Cather expresses her own resentment toward the increasingly prevalent emphasis in American education on industrial training. By the time she began The Professor’s House in 1923, the vocational education movement had made its mark on university curriculums across the country, yet its emergence as a popular dispute can be traced back to the decade before World War I, when American educators were embroiled in a debate over vocational education in secondary schools. Eventually erupting into a large-scale struggle between competing visions of educational reform, this debate was “touched off in 1906 by the report of the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education, which found that thousands of the state’s young adolescents did not attend school and were stuck in dead-end industrial jobs without hope of advancement because they lacked the necessary skills.” Scores of students who were interviewed expressed the uselessness of the curriculum—they “indicated that they had left school not because of pressure to contribute to the income of their families, but because they were alienated by
a school curriculum that had little to offer them.”33 The report finished by saying that schools were not preparing students with “industrial intelligence” and suggested that secondary schools switch from “cultural” to vocational education. This study roused opponents of the schools, “many of whom had been impressed by the example set in Germany, where those deemed unsuitable for university study were directed toward vocational and technical education.”34

Following this study, a forceful movement developed for vocational training programs. Directed by a powerful lobbying organization—the National Society for the Production of Industrial Education—

and supported by a diverse range of interest groups including not only educators, but the National Association of Manufacturers, the Chamber of Commerce, the American Federation of Labor, major farm organizations, and settlement workers, this campaign culminated in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917, which provided federal support for vocational education. As an important part of a broader effort to address the educational needs of a corporate industrial society, the movement for vocational education helped transform the high school in the United States from an elite institution closely connected to the nation’s leading colleges and enrolling a mere 6.7 percent of those fourteen to seventeen years of age to an institution of mass education enrolling 32.3 percent of that population and committed to fostering the social efficiency of the children of the nation’s working class.35

While it turned out that the prospect of vocational education gained broad support, its supporters could not agree on how such industrial training should be carried out. At the heart of this disagreement, it seems, lay the issue of class. For example, the most pressing question facing the supporters of vocational education was whether to work this training into the public school system as it stood, or to make an entirely separate system for it. Robert Westbrook notes, significantly, “Business and labor split cleanly on this issue, with businessmen acting as the strongest advocates for a dual system” (1991, 175). Essentially, a dual system meant a kind of class education in that it would entail, as John Dewey put it, a “fostering and strengthening [of] class divisions in school and out.” Dewey scoffed at such a program, noting that “those who believe in the continued existence of what they are pleased to call the ‘lower classes’ or the ‘laboring classes’ would naturally rejoice to have schools in which these ‘classes’ would be segregated. And some employers of labor would doubtless rejoice to have schools, supported by public taxation,
supply them with additional food for their mills.” More democratically inclined others, however, “should be united against every proposition, in whatever form advanced, to separate training of employees from training for citizenship, training of intelligence and character from training for narrow, industrial efficiency.”\textsuperscript{36} It was not, then, industrial training per se that Dewey opposed, but the segregation of this kind of education (literally and psychically) from the more cultural curriculum favored by college preparatory schools (this could only “accentuate all undemocratic tendencies,” he wrote in 1913). If Dewey saw the prevailing educational practice as the institutionalization of the philosophy of profoundly antidemocratic thinking (which is not necessarily the same thing as antiindividualism), he was certainly not alone. Other progressive thinkers, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois, paid close critical attention to the alliance of privilege and philosophy, which, as Dewey wrote, equated “the educated class and the ruling class.”\textsuperscript{37}

If, as Dewey would agree, the issue of class is really indistinguishable from the issue of wealth, it stands that the “ruling class” is at a financial advantage, and that this moneyed class is at the center of a tangled web woven to protect its own interests. One way of protecting the interests of this class is to protect the vitality of culture (read: Culture); culture, in a circular turn, must be protected from any vulgar association with money. Cather, for her part, shares this agenda to keep culture and economics separate, but not because she is intent on protecting the interests of the wealthy. Actually, Cather would ideally isolate culture from wealth, if this were possible, and endorse the cause of culture without ever endorsing the cause of the wealthy (part of the argument here, of course, is that this is not possible). In the view of purists such as Cather, money is ideally thought about in an abstract sense, which makes it possible to represent it as a problem that should or could go away.

The dislocated position from which Cather critiques the marketplace or exchange holds that almost any association with money is a debasement, because money turns everything into a commodity. While this might be true, Cather’s critique does not address the problem of the “haves” and “have-nots.” In an abstract way, she rather focuses her attention on the problem that (monetary) exchange has taken over as the bottom line—the end of all ends—and thus can only sully the ideals that must stay afloat to constitute pure culture or, its closest relative, true meaning. With these points in mind, I now turn to the representation of money in \textit{The Professor’s House}, beginning a close reading of this overt theme with the premise that, for Cather, profit motives and exchange devalue and precipitate the end of doing things only for the sake of doing them.
Money and Exchange

As the novel opens, Cather’s award-winning historian Godfrey St. Peter is poised between the old house he is reluctant to leave and the “new house into which he did not want to move” (built under his wife’s supervision out of the five thousand pounds that came with the Oxford Prize for history). Poised between the past and the present, Cather’s historian is loath to accept the financial consequences of what is referred to as “his experiment” (his eight-volume study, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*); his apprehensive, even agitated manner suggests that the award money has tarnished and perhaps robbed him of the experience he so treasures: the *process* of creating, or making. When his wife asks him one day whether there is something he “would rather have done with that money than to have built a house with it,” Godfrey replies, “Nothing, my dear, nothing.” Godfrey, in other words, does not want to do anything; he does not want to fulfill such practical goals. He tells Lillian:

“If with that cheque I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you’d never have got your house. But one couldn’t get that for twenty thousand dollars. The great pleasures don’t come so cheap. There is nothing else, thank you. (23)

“If with that *result* I could have bought/brought back the fun of the *process*, I would have,” Godfrey essentially says, indicating first of all money as a result, and second, that (upon its arrival) the “fun” is over. He would rather relive this fun—the making of his history—than have “what were called rewards” bestowed upon him for the finished product. While this passage urges us to understand that he has a profoundly personal relationship to his work process, it goes further than this by claiming that the pleasure of his making process is extraordinary—so extraordinary that even twenty thousand dollars is no compensation. He thus makes a case for “the great pleasures” as definitively uncommon, and not at all subsumable under the principle of practicality. We might say that the experience of the creative process, remarkable and rare, is “fun” for Godfrey because more than anything else it allows for a free hand—it is an abstract venture entailing exploration and discovery. For him, then, creative process is a live moment, a moment of mystery, a synonym, perhaps, for the condition of being free. In the midst of such process, outcome is never certain.

If we can trace the professor’s fondness for writing to this kind of unknowability, or unaccountability, I think we are again touching upon
the concept that is central to Cather’s aesthetics: she imagines herself to be committed to the idea that anything truly meaningful cannot be accounted for and is therefore essentially impractical, especially when it comes to creative inspiration. Even her professor espouses this, telling his students that “believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives” is “what makes men happy” (55). In other words, whatever forces (or discourses) conspire to explain and predict—for instance, practical science, which is what the professor is criticizing when he makes the above remark—“impoverish” rather than enrich human life. However, there is a paradox worth noting here, for Godfrey’s work is to write history, and he does imagine himself to be bound by the idea of historical reality. Within this idea, narrative outcome can be circumscribed by ostensibly determinable events that have already occurred. The story he tells, therefore, is not entirely open-ended, for as “history,” it should adhere to the available “facts,” which is to say its construction should be less innovative than explanatory.

Following this, Godfrey constructs his narrative according to the “original” manuscripts and diaries written by the Spanish explorers, even retracing their steps on a trip to the Southwest with Tom (235). What Godfrey writes is thus to some extent already determined by these historical materials. Yet as much as he seems committed to rendering a historically accurate account of the Spanish explorations, it is also quite clear that his project evolves in light of his own personal development; the more invested he becomes in his narrative, the more it comes alive as a creative, imaginative, even abstract, work. While the “original” documents might continue to provide a basis for the story he tells, Godfrey seems to be an approving—if surprised—witness to the unfolding of his own narrative. Rather than knowing what he will say next, or what he will conclude, he appears to discover his direction gradually, as he goes along: “When the whole plan of his narrative was coming clearer and clearer all the time . . . his relation with his work was becoming every day more simple, natural, and happy” (23). If, as this suggests, Godfrey is becoming more involved “every day” in exploring his own inner imagination and creative potential, in following the direction that spontaneously unfolds before him, then the subjectivity of “history” is laid bare here: narrative outcome is not only de-emphasized, but presented as an evolving discovery that occurs during the writing process. His work is thus being represented as art, or as Cather’s idea of art: it is individual, and shuns context. It is being removed from its social location (like Godfrey himself), its political implications.

It is a paradox, to be fair; Godfrey delights in the unpredictable pro-
cess of his work, even while he retains an investment, as a historian, in stabilizing the past. After all, in a classic sense (and Godfrey is certainly, like Cather herself, a classicist), history is in the business of retrieving, preserving—rehearsing—the past, shaping the past for the larger community. Fixing the past, however, as a civically minded duty, begins to become less important to Godfrey than the private fulfillment and enjoyment he derives from his own creative process (he “hadn’t cared a whoop” [23], Cather writes, what other scholars or the greater historical community thought about his work). Godfrey is isolating his work along with himself, and becoming less responsive to the community’s ideas and needs. Turning away from historical writing as a goal-oriented activity, in which the historian provides a public with a memory of its past, Godfrey revels in his own private experience, in the dimension of unpredictability and chance, of discovery and invention, that makes the process of writing “a great pleasure.”

Following this, it is easy to see why he detests the overbearing presence of the market: in addition to making his discoveries part of a common knowledge pool, and thus ruining their pristine meaning for him, exchange insists on an end to the very process he finds so pleasurable. Money (as the feature of exchange) is the sign of an ending—of a hard certainty that stops the life of process in an unremarkable way; it is a form of accounting, in every sense of the word. To prolong process, or even retrieve it, is what Godfrey wishes were possible, although he knows it’s not; even he must succumb to conclusion (he has, after all, completed his eight-volume study). The next best thing, of course, is to remember the fun he had writing his history. In fact, all he has left of this process is the memory of it; he is therefore intent on protecting this memory from desecration, which, for him, means protecting it (at least as long as he can) from becoming “commonplace.”

To keep something from this cruel fate, Godfrey believes it must remain free (again, as long as it can) from any exchange with money. Indeed, such an exchange has the retroactive power to render a cherished memory as common as money itself. A particularly powerful manifestation of this idea occurs in “The Family,” when Professor St. Peter’s daughter Rosamond wants him to accept some of the returns from Tom’s invention, arguing that “You were the best friend he had in the world, he owed more to you than to anyone else” (48–49). Exasperated, the professor explains why he “couldn’t possibly take any of Outland’s money”:

Once and for all, Rosamond, understand that he owed me no more than I owed him. Nothing hurts me so much as to have any member of my
family talk as if we had done something fine for that young man, brought him out, produced him. In a lifetime of teaching, I’ve encountered just one remarkable mind; but for that, I’d consider my good years largely wasted. And there can be no question of money between me and Tom Outland. I can’t explain just how I feel about it, but it would somehow damage my recollections of him, would make that episode in my life commonplace like everything else. And that would be a great loss to me. I’m purely selfish in refusing your offer; my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue. (50)

In an effort to preserve the purity, and in fact the pleasure, of his memory, the professor needs to keep this memory separate from the currency, so to speak, that collapses everything into the same category: money. Money, Godfrey maintains, has the power to level the remarkable. It notably diminishes boundaries that mark distinctions, allowing for a type of mixing that prevents distinction and purity. After all, its fundamental purpose is to provide a common denominator. Furthermore, money blurs the conceptual line between the commonplace and the uncommon because its context, exchange, disrupts the potential power of the means in the means-ends relationship, which is to say it makes this relationship a hierarchical one and puts ends on the topside. Cather, of course, prefers the process—which does not care about the outcome, or the exchange value—to be the privileged part of this dichotomy. As I argue above, money signifies an ending because it threatens to replace the mystery—the freedom—and the independence of process (as a personal phenomenon) with the conclusion inherent in exchange. It is a fundamentally practical system.

The process in this particular instance is the process of memory—the ongoing relationship the professor has with Tom in his recollections. To introduce the “question of money” into this process is to begin to “settle” this question: Rosamond pleads with her father, “we think you ought to let us settle an income on you. . . . That is what Tom would have wanted . . . If he were alive” (49). But Tom is dead, indicating that the concept behind “settle” is death. Burial, in fact—they want to settle an income on Godfrey; in effect, this would bury the memory of Tom that Godfrey holds dear, the memory of the past that Godfrey depends on for his own self-concept. This instance thus also points to the process inseparable from that of memory: the process of self, the cumulative process by which the self comes to be defined as itself. In much the same way that Thoreau conceived of exchange in Walden, we find Cather suggesting here that exchange threatens the life of the self. This is what makes the
professor’s refusal to accept money from the revenues generated by Tom’s invention “purely selfish”: it is merely his survival instinct. His impulse to protect or save the self he knows is thus dependent on the protection of his memory. The exposure he fears, moreover, has everything to do with the social. In the conversation with his daughter Rosamond, she expresses her suspicion that her father disapproves of her wealth: “I think you feel I oughtn’t to have taken [the money from Tom’s estate], either” (50), she worries out loud. Godfrey replies: “You had no choice. For you it was settled by his own hand. Your bond with him was social, and it follows the laws of society, and they are based on property. Mine wasn’t, and there was no material laws in it” (50). Therefore, Godfrey insists, he has no reason to participate in or cooperate with social imperatives, especially when it comes to the market. He is free to continue to cultivate his idealism.

Striving for the privacy and abstraction of this removed position, the professor makes it quite clear that his memory of Tom must be preserved as is: as an almost mystical dimension of his imagination that, in its utter uniqueness, can reassure him that his “good years” were not “largely wasted.” The “great loss” of this memory thus can only bring another great loss—the loss of his self. The professor’s anxiety about such a loss can stand for a more general anxiety of Cather’s, about the passage or destruction of a specific way of conceiving the past, for in this past certain distinctions are safe; of course, the very fact that this past signifies a past time—a different historical moment—suggests the present as the context for any view of the past, which is to say that historical narratives and personal memories construct a past out of a particular way of conceiving of the present. Cather’s idealization of the past—the professor’s idealization of the past—seems all the more beleaguered if we acknowledge the insurmountable differences between one historical moment and another. But this is partly my point; Cather does not acknowledge these differences, and her harkening back to the ideas of Thoreau, for example, indicate a dated polemic about, in this case, the self and exchange.

In a discussion of Thoreau’s *Walden*, Michael Gilmore writes that to engage in exchange “is [for Thoreau] not merely to debase the self but to extinguish it, to hurry into death.”43 The implicit similarities between Cather’s text and that of her predecessor are extensive. Professor St. Peter seems to share Thoreau’s sense that “The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling.”44 For the moment, let’s take the “finest qualities” of our nature to mean the remarkable ones, those that make us stand out as individuals. The “most delicate handling,” the handling that would ensure preserva-
tion, would then be the most private handling. The more public something is—the more public the handling of something—the less likely the thing is to receive “the most delicate handling” possible. Or, such delicate handling would be more likely to occur in a less common sphere.

St. Peter’s remarks to his daughter, while equating money with the vulgar and exchange with the commonplace, reveal his efforts to preserve his memory by handling it delicately—privately. Moreover, they indicate the indistinguishable functions of preserving and remembering: both entail keeping, which usually requires some degree of privatization. St. Peter’s disdain for the common is also an angle of Thoreau’s critique in *Walden* (he calls the nineteenth century “trivial,” and declares he will not live in it; he also scorns the “common course’ of instruction” and he delivers “a lengthy diatribe against fashionable literature and the public that devours it”). As Gilmore argues, the independence from exchange advocated by Thoreau does not, as civic humanists would have it, finally promote an active devotion to the “common good”; rather, this kind of self-sufficiency becomes, in *Walden*, “a private virtue—a virtue without civic consequences.” The kind of withdrawal that Gilmore notices in Thoreau’s text is also at the heart of Cather’s narrative, as her historian becomes ever more reclusive, until finally he “[thinks] of eternal solitude with gratefulness” (248) and senses that he is falling “out of his place in the human family, indeed” (250).

**Self-Sufficiency and Moral Victory**

Like Thoreau, Godfrey becomes more and more of a recluse, moving toward a dislocated existence in which he will have no social responsibility and no need to cooperate with market exchange. Yet this is not to say that Cather advances a philosophy of anti-production, although she comes awfully close in the story when the professor nearly dies (in an ambiguous incident that one might interpret as a suicide attempt). Cather suggests, in this text and elsewhere, that production without selling, without exchange, is consistent with the idea of disinterest and the ideal of true (abstract) meaning: one receives, or benefits, from one’s actions, but not in dollars. The economy in this circumstance is private; it is the inner, individual economy of the self, of self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency. In this economy, labor has (only) private value. This is, again, an indicator of the kind of individualism Cather supports, as well as the kind of individuality she finds threatening: one is private, without “civic consequences,” and therefore acceptable. The other has consequences, is
driven by democratic desire and thus geared toward securing a democratic reality, something that obviously has social, political implications. Cather’s text advances the virtue of a more private practice of individual labor, connecting it, as Thoreau does, to independent “labor of the hands.” Similar to Thoreau, whose “labor of the hands” can be any kind of work, including intellectual (“My head is hands and feet,” Thoreau writes, “I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it”\(^{49}\)), Cather emphasizes the hands (23, 103, 236) as a sign of independent productivity.

In pointing to the necessity for meaningful independent labor, for meaningful relationships to the environment and one’s activity in it, Cather does not confine meaningfulness to the immaterial domain; on the contrary, in Cather’s view, the material world—material production, material things themselves—can legitimately be of great value to an individual, if the individual is involved in a personal relationship with the material.\(^{50}\)

Above all, the possibility for meaningful independent labor and meaningful relationships to the world requires a personal investment, which is to say a will to value the thing according to something like its “meaning,” and not its status in terms of money or exchange. Cather imagines that as long as such an investment occurs, material concerns need not be subordinated to other, less tangible ones. In this instance, material concerns are spiritual, moral, aesthetic, and so on.

The point here is not, however, that conventional, money-oriented materialism is ever condoned by Cather—the point is that “material” does not encompass money in this scenario. The problem with money is precisely the fact that it is not really material, but rather something that material is exchanged for; as I have illustrated, Cather reiterates Thoreau’s contention that the process of such exchange extinguishes the self and/or the meaning, or intrinsic value, of the traded thing. Approaching this problem more abstractly, I would say that whereas money is closely related to material, in that it can be exchanged for material, it is not itself a representation of anything in particular outside of exchange. It cannot itself be grown or independently made (except illegally). It is not something that an individual can work with manually; it in fact displaces the independent value of manual labor, which, for Cather, has everything to do with the generation of self. As I suggested above, it is not then materialism, per se, that Cather finds problematic. On the contrary, she shows herself to be quite fond of things and surroundings. Her opposition is to a specific kind of materialism, perhaps in her view the most common kind, in which things do not signify—and thus are not valued according to—an idea of meaning that can, in turn, be traced back to a context that exists outside of the marketplace. In Cather’s conception, this context must be
at the heart of materialist sentiment if that sentiment is not to be reduced, finally, to an association with money. She makes this clear in “Nebraska,” a 1923 essay in which she glorifies the work of the pioneers, while writing disparagingly of the generation to take their place:

With these old men and women [“rugged figures in the background which inspire respect, compel admiration”] the attainment of material prosperity was a moral victory, because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character. They can look out over those broad stretches of fertility and say: “We made this, with our backs and hands.” . . . The generation now in the driver’s seat hates to make anything . . . They want to buy everything ready-made. Will the third generation . . . be fooled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?25

Ready-made things lack a moral component because they have no discernible past, Cather seems to be saying; because the history of their materialization is not accessible, because they are encountered by the greater population on the shelves of a store, they cannot constitute a moral victory. Instead they signify and compel a mode of acquisition that Cather finds stultifying. Furthermore, ready-made things do not provide the kind of memory or context that one can “look out over” with a sense of holistic accomplishment. In one sense, the emphasis here is on nothing less than a commitment to history, a commitment to knowing and remembering the past—not necessarily the nation’s past, but a more private, personal past. The idea here, more specifically, is that there should be a shared past between the individual and the material object/environment. The ideal circumstance for the achievement of Cather’s “moral victory” would then be a situation in which such a shared past could occur, and we are directed to conclude that this could not happen in the event of a purchase. It is the actual process of making, with the hands, that makes a moral victory possible. Moreover, according to Cather, making with the hands not only tests character but also produces self. Yet insisting that the self must be made with the hands is less a literal demand than it is desiderative of a laborious process. Without this process (which often does entail some form of manual engagement), the self will be alien, and on some level, prevented: it will be as distant, as unknown a notion as the processes that produce the “ready-made.”

It is then the symbolic aspect of the material that gives it its integrity, or its representational integrity: In the scenario of pioneer life provided by Cather above, nothing is replaced. Rather, the moral is represented
by the material. Money, on the other hand, is a substitute, a symbol not of itself but of replacement. Because, as Walter Benn Michaels puts it, money “cannot be reduced to the thing it is made of and still remain the thing it is,” whatever is exchanged for money is thus replaced by, at best, a representational ambiguity (think of how the professor jealously guards his memory, in which, he feels, survives the only representation of Tom). Money, in other words, is a floating signifier; it is the sign of a sign. In turn, because money must depend on exchange for its value and meaning, it comes to signify something that Cather seems loath to admit: the dependency of meaning (or the contingency of representation). Buying things ready-made is thus a problem for Cather because these things are so removed from what they symbolize that they cease to symbolize at all. For Cather, their meaning is replaced by their materiality—they are purely, or merely, material.

As she indicates in the passage above, the process of making, of individual manual labor, constitutes the intangible (“moral”) aspect of the made thing; the idea of this creative labor process, as a source of self-generation, is lost in the activity of producing and exchanging ready-made things. The purpose or motive behind such activity is as fatal to meaning as a broken use-thing is to utility. Mass produced, “ready-made” things are not the symbol of a process of making, are not the symbol of a “moral victory” or any other aspect of the immaterial that might define meaningful practice and, with this, the self; indeed they are not the symbol of any individual idea, except the intention to exchange (just as money can only be purchasing power, or the idea of what one intends to buy with it).

In lucid terms, Cather’s article “Nebraska” reiterates a distinction between mental and manual labor, which is to say a class distinction, and even legitimates such a distinction by declaring manual labor the more moral. By the time Cather wrote this article in 1923, the “displacement of men by machines” had become almost a cliché of the new cultural critique, which focused on the issues pertaining to a consumer society; the function of Cather’s glorified portrayal of pioneer production-based values is thus to construct a moral framework—a moral difference—that will help to solidify the difference between capital and labor, or enhance the difference between the producing class and the consuming one.

Part of the problem in the 1920s, of course, is that this difference is receding, as mechanization of commodity production threatens to eliminate it. This is exactly why we can point to Cather’s approach as an instance of the new rise of cultural authority: the very essence of her essay declares a cultural authority by declaring the moral superiority of a
labor practice that can be associated with a particular class. She is telling her readers who wins moral approval (the manual makers), and so telling them about a fundamental difference between moralities, or moral lifestyles, and in turn, between classes. In other words, to declare the moral superiority of manual labor—from the standpoint of an intellectual, educated, privileged writer—is to affirm the difference between the manual and the mental that historically describes class difference. It is also to establish a new educational relationship between classes, in which an intellectual elite presides over and monopolizes “culture” in the United States, and thus constantly redraws the line between classes. By glorifying the manual labor of pioneers and criticizing capitalists, Cather is certainly expressing her respect for physical labor and by extension craftsmanship, but she is also participating in the reorientation of “American” culture around the differences between those who, as she puts it, “live easily,” and those who do not.

In *The Professor’s House* we can find the same argument for manual work in Cather’s depiction of the hero, Tom Outland. Cather wants to suggest (like Thoreau) that without exchange, the self is cultivated simply, actively, in the context of independent “labor of the hands.” In the second book of *The Professor’s House*, “Tom Outland’s Story,” we explicitly encounter the idea of the self as inextricably bound up with the creation and discovery of things, with a process of exploring and making that is both physical and metaphysical. The conflict that animates this section of the novel is over the relics that Tom and his close friend Roddy dig up while living near the “Cliff City”—the nickname for the “little city of stone” (179) that Tom finds while he is working out on the mesa. While this section of the book gives us a glimpse of Cather’s utter reverence for the practice of craft, exemplifying this practice both in the modern project of excavation and in the ancient life of the tribe itself, it also speaks directly to the problem of exchange, and the damage it can effect. To begin, this section of the novel is the most transparent in terms of expressing Cather’s views on art as the domain of culture. We learn from this story how culture cannot be—or simply rarely is—popular or popularly accessible.

The highly dramatic, emotionally raw exchange that occurs between Tom and Roddy after Tom learns that the mesa things have been sold serves to clarify the meaning of the things to Tom, specifying that they were neither things he intended to use, necessarily, in a direct sense, nor things he intended to sell, but rather things that he wanted to see preserved, appreciated, understood, and kept safe. Although Roddy has sold the things in hopes that Tom will go to school with his share (“That
money's in the bank this minute, in your name, and you're going to college on it,” he offers in his own defense), Tom is irreconcilable:

“You think I’d touch that money? . . . [D]id you ever think I was digging those things up for what I could sell them for?”

Roddy explained that he knew I cared about the things, and was proud of them, but he’d always supposed I meant to “realize” on them, just as he did, and that it would come to money in the end. “Everything does,” he added. (220; emphasis added)

But Tom does go to college, though it is unclear whether he uses any of this money to go. The upshot of Roddy Blake’s explanation is that caring about things—a private experience—and “realizing” on them—a public one—need not cancel each other out. He seems surprised that Tom cannot be comfortable with caring about something and selling it (like Grannis in *McTeague*). But Tom insists the two are mutually exclusive. Roddy, who can be read as a sign of the potential merging of moral motives with capital gains, disappears after this argument, never to be seen by Tom again. The reconciliation he offers between these two domains is thus dismissed.

Between Roddy and Tom, the problem ultimately rests in their different ways of conceiving value. In the course of their discussion, Tom tries to “make Blake understand the kind of value those objects had had” (221) for him. The “kind” of value that Tom speaks of, he wants to believe, is not something that can be accounted for; it never occurs to Roddy, however, to value something in this way. He is so entrenched in commodified thinking that everything, including the Cliff City relics, is always already a potential commodity. “I didn’t know you valued that stuff any different than anything else a fellow might run on to: a gold mine or a pocket of turquoise” (221), he tells Tom. Valuing something differently is then valuing that thing against, or outside of, its exchange value; it is a kind of valuing that focuses on the object in a nonsubstitutive way.

Uncoincidentally, Cather associates this kind of value with the idea of art; art, she writes in a 1920 essay, is something “where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values.” In an essay published in 1936, Cather refers to the actual people who inspired her Cliff City narrative to articulate her idea of art as something that cannot be explained. “Why did they take the trouble?,” Cather asks about the “Indian women in the old rock-perched pueblos of the Southwest [who] were painting geometrical patterns on the jars in which they carried water up from the streams.” “These people,” Cather continues,
lived under the perpetual threat of drought and famine; they often shaped their graceful cooking pots when they had nothing to cook in them. Anyone who looks over a collection of prehistoric Indian pottery dug up from old burial-mounds knows at once that the potters experimented with form and colour to gratify something that had no concern with food and shelter. The major arts (poetry, painting, architecture, sculpture, music) have a pedigree all their own. They did not come into being as a means of increasing the game supply or promoting tribal security. They sprang from an unaccountable predilection of the one unaccountable thing in man.55

To try to account for art is thus in Cather's view a futile, perhaps even damaging, endeavor. Art has no reason other than itself—as Cather puts it in another essay called “Light on Adobe Walls,” art is “concrete and personal” and is “no good at all unless it is let alone to be itself.”56 If Tom Outland wishes in the end that the Cliff City things had been “let alone,” this is because he has discovered them as art (certainly we can infer from the above passage that Cather considers the bulk of them to be art), and experiences a personal attachment to them as such. When he tells Roddy that the things “were something that had been preserved through the ages by a miracle” (220), he is expressing Cather’s belief in the “eternal material of art,”57 her belief in both art’s permanence and its inexplicability. But understanding the things as art does not make them any less historical for Tom, or, rather, any less meaningful as historical artifacts. It is in fact precisely their historical significance that Tom cites when castigating Roddy for selling them. Arguing that they are America’s ancestral inheritance, and that they “belonged to the country” (219), he criticizes Roddy for selling his “country’s secrets” to Germany, “a country that’s got plenty of relics of its own.” This kind of nationalist discourse, attached to the meaning of the objects, draws a distinct boundary between cultures and between nations, suggesting that there is more to art than a purely personal, dislocated status.

Furthermore, if the relics are indeed “the country’s secrets,” as Tom calls them, Cather is making explicit the interchangeability of their meaning and mystery: the mystery of the relics points to the secret aspect of meaning itself. Like art, it is something that defies explanation and, importantly, has no determinable public use-value. Art and meaning, the concepts behind culture—behind the idea of cultural authority—point up this authority as private and largely inaccessible. Why the relics lasted through several centuries is a mystery, and it is the mystery that is the fundamental argument for their meaning. The paradox that I pointed out earlier, concerning Cather’s insistence that meaning cannot be accounted
for, arises here, as Cather’s statement about the “pedigree” of the “major arts” defines culture against the idea of the commonplace. The “pedigree” is thus the very opposite of the common, and so is violated by the common.

**Meaning and Exposure**

In Book II of *The Professor’s House*, in which Cather tells the story of Tom Outland before he arrives at the university, a hostility and anxiety emerges in Tom’s worry that the Cliff City civilization might be ruined if it becomes “exposed,” so it is to this part of the novel that I now turn to elucidate Cather’s problem with the idea of a more public culture—which is to say not only a mass culture, but a culture inextricably linked with the political sphere, a link that can only diminish the meaning of (the highest form of) culture as an independent, unworldly expression.

In Book II, “Tom Outland’s Story,” Cather advocates without reservation the irreproachability of a civilization “cut off from other tribes,” a self-sufficient civilization that “made their livelihood secure” by farming (197–98). Having “overcome the worst hardships that primitive men had to fear,” this tribe became craftsmen, making all kinds of tools, producing art, and otherwise subsisting on the work of their own hands. They “developed considerably the arts of peace,” we learn, entertaining an interest in something beyond plain survival: “There is evidence on every hand that they lived for something more than food and shelter” (197). They lived, in other words, for something more than the practical necessities. The things left behind by this civilization—art, tools, the city itself (“more like sculpture than anything else” [180])—testify to its containing a “superior people,” a people, “perhaps, too far advanced for their time and environment” (198). It follows that this chapter sets out to contrast the motivation of a hurried, commodity-driven production culture with the more “advanced” culture of the Cliff City tribe, a culture that privileges contemplation and the aesthetic value of everyday surroundings and activities. These are a tribe of “thoughtful people” (197), who, unlike the people of Cather’s century, “built themselves into” the materials and material surroundings they produced (199). Certainly Cather wants to signal that to build their selves into their work is something that took time and care. “One thing we knew about these people,” Tom takes pride in telling Godfrey, “they hadn’t built their town in a hurry. Everything proved their patience and deliberation”:
The cedar joists had been felled with stone axes and rubbed smooth with sand. The little poles that lay across them and held up the clay floor of the chamber above, were smoothly polished. The door lintels were carefully fitted (the doors were stone slabs held in place by wooden bars fitted into hasps). The clay dressing that covered the stone walls was tinted, and some of the chambers were frescoed in geometrical patterns, one colour laid on another. In one room was a painted border, little tents, like Indian tepees, in brilliant red. (190)

The significance that Tom attributes to such careful, enduring craftsmanship can be traced to its power to indicate its own process. This is essentially what he is describing above—the visible evidence of a process, particularly a process of handwork that signifies a personal investment. There is something more in this work, Cather wants to say, than the mechanism of trade or even the principle of utility. There is what I earlier called representational integrity: the finished product does not eclipse the process that produced it, so it stands for itself, which is the same as saying that it stands for the process of its creation and, importantly, for the motives behind its creation, which translate directly into the site before Tom’s eyes.

The question of why the tribe constructed such a beautiful, “worthy” (198), “sacred spot” (199) is central to Cather’s project. She raises this question to emphasize the inexplicability of their motivation; they made it, Cather writes, simply because they had “some natural yearning” (199). If it is indeed impossible to account for the motives of the tribe, this is precisely what impresses and captures Tom, what makes the mesa “a religious emotion” (226) for him. When Father Duchene tells Tom, “Your people were cut off here without the influence of example or emulation” (199), we can hear Cather glorifying their self-sufficiency and ability to live in isolation—in a sense without a context. In this abstracted environment, she stresses, they did not forsake the immaterial aspects of life, but celebrated such aspects in “religious ceremonies and observances” (198), artwork, and other customs. Above all, the people of this tribe “built themselves into this mesa,” having nothing to gain but a collective sense of fulfillment and personal gratification, from the labor itself, and from the environment it produced. As Tom is well aware, the Cliff City tribe did not engage in production—in the way of tools, surgical instruments, artwork, architecture, and so forth—to reap a monetary reward. Their motive was not to substitute, but to subsist—spiritually and aesthetically (as well as physically). Production for these “fine people” (191)
was a contained enterprise, having nothing to do with commodification. Everything they produced is thus still present—signifying its own process of materialization—in a sacred environment that has endured on its own for centuries. Thoreau wrote in Walden that labor of the hands “has a constant and imperishable moral.”

This maxim, a central theme in Cather’s work, can also be located at the heart of Tom Outland’s story. When he first sets eyes on the Cliff City, he is astonished by the sculptural work of it, and following this, struck by its “immortal repose.” “That village sat looking down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity” (180), he recalls. The emphasis Cather places on the city as hand-carved, joined with her emphasis on it as immortal and eternal, certainly suggests the link between labor of the hands and a constant, imperishable moral. For Cather, it is the moral of meaning itself.

This moral of meaning is distinctly illuminated in the passage in which Cather discusses the tower that stands in the middle of the city. Tom notices something “symmetrical and powerful” about it; he likens it to a sculpture in itself, and says, “I’d never seen a tower like that one. It seemed to mark a difference. I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design” (182). In the same breath that Tom expresses his admiration for the form or “design,” he mentions the hardship of completing such a structure, indicating his sense that the tower must have been the most difficult, time-consuming project. He concludes that the tower is the “fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something” (180). An idea of meaning, directly related to the manual labor Tom discerns, thus stands at the center of his attraction to this civilization.

Furthermore, the tower embodies an idea of meaning because of its associations: it was built to be observed, as the center, or to provide a material incarnation of center. It was also, importantly, built as a place to facilitate observance. If, as Father Duchene thinks, it was used for “astronomical observations” (197), it can be thought of as something that brings the people closer to an idea of immortal presence: to look out on the constancy of the stars is to encounter the eternal. Tom thus mentions this tower in a gesture toward the timeless, independent—constant—nature of meaning, and how it inheres in this handmade city, regardless of its visibility to the outer world. The city itself exemplifies the “constant and imperishable moral” that Thoreau spoke of, “hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries, preserved in the dry air and almost perpetual sunlight like a fly in amber, guarded by the cliffs and the river and the desert” (180).

Meaning, then, far from being entirely intangible or immaterial, emerges here in concrete form—in the form of things and surroundings.
Because things and surroundings must be kept, or keep on their own (like the Cliff City), meaning also thus emerges as a phenomenon in need of some degree of privacy: Cather suggests that the only reason the City relics survived intact is that the City was unexplored, and/or “inaccessible.” Yet, this is where she runs into a problem in her argument, for such an implication manifests a contradiction: how can meaning be at once immortal and vulnerable to common exposure? Cather cannot, I think, have it both ways. What is meaning, or rather what is the point of it, if when it is discovered it begins to disintegrate (or, worse, is already lost)? Looking in the text, we find that however immortal Tom considers the meaning of the remains to be, he nevertheless expresses concern early on about making “our discovery any more public than necessary” (183). Like the professor, who seeks to privatize what is precious to him, Tom has an impulse to keep the City from becoming commonly accessible. “We were reluctant to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar curiosity” (183), he exclaims. Worried that such exposure would disrupt the sanctity of the City, Tom is nonetheless intent on having a trained archeologist come out and “study the remains” (199). In his mind, the “proper specialists” (199) would appreciate the site and, most importantly, “understand it” (202). Imagining that these scholars will discern even deeper, hidden meanings, Tom anticipates their arrival as an opportunity to have the City (and its contents) properly looked after. In bringing back “men who would understand it,” Tom tells himself, “I would have done my duty by it” (202).

The emphasis on the necessity for understanding is highly visible in this section of the novel, and should be considered in relation to the text’s approach to the problem of meaning itself. The question of what Cather means by the term “understand” is then an important one; though her use of the word is quite conventional, a special definition of it can be located as it functions in the preceding context. What Cather seems to be getting at is the ability to perceive and comprehend the significance of; meaning is then the operative concept here—the thing to be understood. To understand is to recognize, know, or grasp (some form of) meaning. The men who would understand the City are, in Tom’s mind, able to do so because they have been trained; in turn, because of their knowledge base, they can situate the existence of the City in a historical context, which, the narrative implies, will enhance the overall significance of the discovery. These men, in other words, will understand the City better than Tom and his comrades, because of their historical knowledge.

Tom’s grasp of its significance is portrayed as more visceral; he knows that the site has meaning, but this is as far as his knowing goes (for
instance, when he finds three bodies “wrapped in yucca-fibre,” he speculates about the circumstances, but ultimately defers to the authority of the specialists. “Of course,” he says, “an archeologist could have told a great deal about that civilization from those bodies” [193]. Tom’s sense of the importance of his finding is thus, to some degree, context-free; his desire and subsequent search for the specialists who can provide the proper context suggests that it is difficult to gauge meaning, and even more difficult to fix it, without a framework. The framework, finally, emerges as classical training, or a classical education. Tom wants scholars to come out to the mesa precisely because of their cultural training, which is to say their cultural pedigree. But what happens, instead, is that he becomes embroiled in a battle over politics and economics, and learns that his belief that culture is independent and removed from political disputes is an ideal, and that the men he encounters merely want to “realize” on things.

It is Father Duchene who encourages Tom to go to Washington, and convinces him that an archeologist will be sent who will “revive this civilization in a scholarly work” (199), thus reassuring Tom that the meaning in these remains will be affirmed and safely kept. Tom’s impulse to keep the site private is only tempered, therefore, by the opportunity to have the discovery immortalized in writing. If this is his “duty”—to protect the Cliff City through a scholarly narrative—then its meaning is not as self-sufficient as its “immortal repose” might suggest; rather, it is dependent on its surviving materiality in the form of a narrative that properly understands its past, and the mere fact that it was written proves its importance in the present. Certainly this illuminates the role of scholarly writing in the construction of meaning, and more particularly, history and historical narrative as indispensable to this construction. Meaning, in other words, is a function of history; it has a pastor, perhaps, in the role of the past in the present. Yet the role of meaning is brought into question by the text, even as Cather strives to fixate it, for if it is something that must be accompanied by (nothing less than) a heightened understanding, its existence is contingent.

I am arguing that Cather is caught between two competing versions of meaning: on one level, she seeks to reify meaning outside of history, so as to eliminate the possibility of meaning being dependent on understanding (which, in turn, is dependent on knowledge and memory). On another level, however, she insists on the indispensability of history to any understanding of meaning, locating meaning in a structure of knowledge that must be retained in order for that meaning to survive. Essentially, Tom would only trust the archeologists as, say, Meaning Keepers, because they have historical knowledge; his desire to keep the City a secret except
from those men who would understand it is a good example of Cather’s investment in understanding, and, conversely, her lack of faith that such understanding will occur, barring the most limited circumstances. This lack of faith is at the heart of Cather’s impulse to deny the historicity of meaning; offended and troubled by the notion that meaning is in need of understanding, she defensively maneuvers to isolate meaning from the common sphere and thus from the possibility of being missed, or misunderstood. Ultimately, this leaves meaning in a highly privatized sphere.

Paradoxically, this sphere turns out to be, for Tom, the most public of forums: it is writing that he turns to, to secure the meaning of his findings. It’s as if he believes that what’s written is safe, and in this regard, private. In his view, the written achieves permanence and inaccessibility to anyone who would revise his inscriptions; we know this because Tom places such importance on the work of writing as a way of protecting his findings. Before he is “let down” (212) by the men who he had imagined would be the mesa’s Meaning Keepers, he has complete faith that their scholarly work would not only recognize and revive the civilization, but effectively preserve it as is. For Tom, the public aspect of writing is overshadowed by the hermetic privacy of the written: once something is written, it is inoculated. The work of writing is therefore a crucial part of Tom’s project; not only does he dream of having the history of the Cliff City written (by the appropriate scholars), but he keeps a diary himself, in which he enters “a minute description” of everything he and his companions find, along with sketches and diagrams (238). In an effort to be as thoroughly dedicated and reverential as the Cliff City people themselves, Tom is very careful to treat each discovery, each “specimen” (189), with the utmost respect and appreciation. Whether it’s a “beautifully shaped” water jar, a pair of moccasins, or a painted cloth or piece of pottery, he keeps a record, writing down “just where and in what condition we had found it, and what we thought it had been used for” (189). Every evening, Tom recalls, “I sat down at the kitchen table and wrote up an account of the day’s work” (189).

The “patience and deliberation” of the tribe is reflected in this work of writing, as well as in the actual work of excavating the site, a job that demands a comparably intensive labor of the hands, which Cather takes pains to highlight: the “patient” Henry, assisting Tom and Roddy in their explorations, “would dig with his fingers half a day to get a pot out of a rubbish pile without breaking it” (190). With Tom writing more of the time and his assistant digging more, there comes into view the very split that I pointed to earlier between the mental and the manual. Certainly the kind of labor of the hands that Tom engages in on the mesa emerges
as a profound experience for him: rather than encountering the City’s artifacts in the more sterile environment of a museum, for instance, Tom finds them or digs them out himself, in a sense reenacting the handwork of the tribe. But it is his writing that finally survives this whole episode in his life and legitimates his efforts; if it were not for this cultural work, which like any historical narrative embodies the voice of cultural authority, the meaning of Tom’s experience would be lost. And, in an important respect, the meaning of it is lost—on the powerful men in Washington from whom Tom tries to derive support. Tom’s failure to arouse the interest of these men only reinforces the distinction between cultural and commercial pursuits, or between culture and politics, for these officials fail to see the cultural value of what Tom is doing and can only look for the potential to profit from or use his research as a vehicle for political advancement.59

What this section of the novel conveys, finally, is Cather’s will to privatize meaning, or the meaning in—or of—culture. This ultimately amounts to the privatization of history itself. The past must be sealed off from interpretation (the past is where classical aesthetics reside), Cather insists, even while she indicates how impossible this is. In these terms, the Cliff City represents the ideas of art and meaning, which are the concepts constituting culture, behind culture (in the form of the past, and in a generally figurative sense). These concepts are thus the ones behind the idea of cultural authority, and serve to point up this authority as private and largely inaccessible. The upshot, then, of Cather’s persistent thematic focus in this novel on the “common” (or “vulgar”) as a destructive force is to point to a cultural distinction that posits the masses as a threat to the order and meaning of culture; because public access and/or public exposure are constantly determined as threats to the survival of cultural meaning, we know that Cather’s idea of culture is exclusive and undemocratic—it seems that for her, once something becomes a mass phenomenon it ceases to be culture. The sentiment expressed in *The Professor’s House* and in many of Cather’s letters and essays thus points us toward an understanding of a more general crisis in cultural authority taking place in the 1920s, as “culture” became increasingly exposed and disseminated, utilized, and, in Cather’s mind, brought toward an end.

**Art and Propaganda**

Cather scholars might recognize the contradiction invoked here in the suggestion that this novel harbored some sort of political or social
agenda, for Cather was an opponent of literature or fiction that wanted to make a statement of this kind. But there is a consistent undercurrent of animosity in Cather’s essays toward the idea that an artist has some kind of responsibility or even ability to express a stance concerning social, political, or economic affairs. Art, Cather insisted, was outside of politics and economics; nothing that was “art” could have anything to do with these realms. In particular, she resented “literature” or novels that she thought were “propaganda,” and refused to grant such work the status of “art.” In concluding this chapter, it is worth going back, for a moment, to her essay “Escapism” (1936), in which, for example, she specifically criticizes writers who think that novels should “cry out against social injustice,” and asks, “Why does the man who wants to reform industrial conditions so seldom follow the method of the pamphleteers? Only by that method can these subjects be seriously and fairly discussed. And the people who are able to do anything toward improving such conditions will read only such a discussion: they will take little account of facts presented in a coating of stock cinema situations.”

Apart from suggesting a division between the world of socioeconomics and the world of fiction, partly by insisting that “the people” who help to resolve socioeconomic tensions characteristically refuse to see beyond the parameters of a particular reformist methodology—they are uninterested in or immune to or too busy for fiction (or perhaps don’t even read)—essentially what Cather is barring here from the category of “literature” is a reformist agenda that advocates in the interests of the class other (the socially, politically, and economically marginalized and exploited). According to her, literature is not the place to argue about the inequities of society, nor is it the place to initiate a critique that would call for the redistribution of wealth. It is certainly not a place to promote a more democratic worldview.

With this point in mind, it is worthwhile to note that in the same essay, Cather criticizes the approach of new writers who debunk the past, and who want to change literature and society by “eschewing” or “renouncing” “the old themes”—she finds such a project to be “disagreeable” and not “very worthy.” If we look at what Cather argues here alongside the discourse of The Professor’s House, we can conclude that, for her, it is the place of literature to criticize contemporary society, yet not for something such as failing to improve things for the class others, but rather for engaging in an assault on the past, and abandoning the “old themes” that define classical culture (and identify classical literature or—or as—“art”). What I am arguing then is that The Professor’s House cries out against the cultural injustice of “destroying the past,” and calls for the resurrection of a glorified past (“destroying the past” is cited by Cather in “Escapism”
as the only accomplishment of the “new social restlessness”). Of course
Cather does not acknowledge that her novel is propaganda for the cause
of enshrining the past, but this is probably because she considers it art,
and art cannot be propaganda. Furthermore, the irony of Cather’s posi-
tion, noted earlier, is that she must devote her novel to the very problems
(money, commercial processes, etc.) that she excludes from literature’s
subject matter in order to make her case and illustrate the depravity of
contemporary society and the de-emphasis or disappearance of “art.”