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## Review of *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* By William Conlogue

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*Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture.* By William Conlogue. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. 230 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

In *Working the Garden* William Conlogue critiques readings of American literature dependent on pastoral assumptions, proposing instead a georgic perspective that would examine “the history of the intersections we have made among human work, human imagination, and the physical environment.” While he takes a somewhat reductive view of previous critical approaches and of American applications of pastoral modes, his demonstration of the ways in which georgic questions alter our understanding of our literature promises to be of significant importance to the study of Great Plains literature.

The georgic, Conlogue explains, “explores the lived landscapes of rural experience” where “our ambiguous and contradictory relationships with nature are most obvious.” He suggests that American authors “articulate political and social justice positions on an urban-defined agriculture whose central figure is the twentieth-century progressive farmer” invested in philosophies and practices of industrial agriculture. Conlogue frames his argument with clear and involving material contrasting old and new agriculture and expanding definitions of the farm novel. His introduction also traces valuable and productive connections among national history, the politics of farming, and American literature.

Succeeding chapters develop these connections, which seem to me one of the main strengths of the book. The chapter on bonanza farming incorporates details from the lives of Iowa farmers, knowledgeable discussion of the history and culture of bonanza farms and their contemporary consequences, analysis of journalistic contributions to the ideology of industrial agriculture, and a strong reading of Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*. Conlogue’s chapter on racism and industrial farming is particularly forceful and convincing. Reviewing migrant field workers’ activism and the racism directed against these workers and against black farmers, he draws provocative links between literature and social justice, exploring the politics of farming as “warfare” in Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* and in “perhaps the most conspicuous connection between agriculture and literature—Teatro Campesino (Farmworkers Theater) and the new genre it created, the *acto*.” Other chapters examine women and industrial agriculture (*O Pioneers!* and *Barren Ground*); class and agribusiness (*The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Human Kindness*); and possibilities for farm futures (*A Thousand Acres*, *Remembering*, and *A Timbered Choir*). These chapters similarly combine stories of actual farmers—including Conlogue himself, in an effective Postscript—with cogent analyses of

literary texts, assessments of cultural and political movements, and discussions of contemporary issues.

*Working the Garden* significantly “ties the nation’s most life-sustaining activity—food production—to how it thinks through its most pressing and potentially explosive issues.”

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