minnesota english journal

focus

A MINNESOTA AUTHOR:
O. E. RØLVAAG

Second Issue of Academic Year 1971-72
Number: Volume VIII, No. 1
Winter, 1972

MCTE
minnesota council of teachers of english

NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS IN 1972

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minnesota english journal

Published by the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English

VOLUME VIII, No. 1 Winter, 1972

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preamblings

When we were in high school, the class was assigned O. E. Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth as part of a unit on "Know America First." For a New Yorker to whom Ohio was the Far West, Rølvaag's novel came as confirmation of our conditioned anxieties. Out there was the prairie, and the prairie drank blood. Per and Beret spoke to us, but the landscape, the snowstorm, the whole ominous, brooding country of the pioneers held us in a thrall that dwarfed the canyons of New York.

Now here we are, twenty-one years a Midwesterner, settled in a Rølvaag town, Northfield. There's a stretch of virgin prairie nearby that we've visited in the spring time. And we've turned out early in the morning of a blizzard to struggle towards the campus and classes. We owe a sentimental debt to O.E. Rølvaag, and this issue of the M E J which is focused on his work is one kind of payment.

We owe a debt also to those who helped in assembling materials for this issue: to Karl Rølvaag who provided us with a selection of photographs of his father; to Ella Tweet, daughter of the author, whose essay of reminiscences begins the issue; to Myron Swanson of Bemidji State College who sent us Paul Engle's poem, and the essay of Wayne Mortensen, product of a Rølvaag seminar held at Bemidji in the summer of 1970.

We can't think of a better method to involve students in a creative reading of literature than to suggest they try their hands at the kind of reconstruction that Elmer Suderman, of Gustavus Adolphus College, has done in his poetic representation of Giants in the Earth, of which a selection is printed in the pages following. To write like this successfully proves a thorough understanding and appreciation. It could represent as well a strong stimulus for students to create their own poetry.

A comparison of the three essays about Rølvaag, those by Mrs. Tweet, by Wayne Mortensen, and by Erling Larsen, professor of English, short story writer, and former editor of The Carleton Miscellany, should be instructive to students who are to learn how the same materials can be used in quite different yet equally profitable ways. In all, we are hopeful that the Rølvaag issue will not only do honor to a renowned Minnesotan but also serve a useful function for teachers of literature. If this latter aspiration should be realized, we'd like to hear from you about some other authors to focus an issue on. How many of us, for example, are teaching Sinclair Lewis or F. Scott Fitzgerald in ways that exhibit the regional bias of these authors?

Scott Fitzgerald will be the subject of a session culminating in a tour of his St. Paul haunts, at the National Council meeting next Thanksgiving. Among the Conference planners locally are Art Elfring, Anna Lee Stensland, and Gloria Erwin, which is to say that plans are falling neatly into place. And that place is Minneapolis in 1972.

O. E. RØLVAAG (1876-1931)

by PAUL ENGLE
Iowa State University

Here he can sleep, far inland from the sea
Where the wind's sweet with clover and wild hay
And cooled in blowing over water free
From the wave's salty tang of shattered spray,
Here may a sea-forsaken man find rest,
Where he can hear no sound but the soft tune
Of home-sick birds that fly into the West,
Where no tides leap and lapse against the moon.
He would not find repose where the world's rim
Is a thin line of water edged with sky
But here amid the wheat is peace for him,
Where he can see no ship dock and depart,
Where he can hear no startled cormorants cry
Where no gull's wings go beating through his heart.

Recollections of My Father, O. E. Rølvaag

by ELLA VALBORG TWEET

A thick fringe of islands protects the long Norwegian coast from the onslaughts of the northern seas. One of these, lying just south of the Arctic circle is Dønna, which, except for two heights, is a low mass of rock and heath. On the northwest side, along a barren, rocky, windswept inlet lies the hamlet of Rølvaag. Walking eastward, across moor and rock, one comes upon a low mountain with a shrubby growth of aspen and birch on the seaward side, and plantations of mountain ash and fir along the southern slopes. Nearby is an old, thick-walled stone church dating back to the twelfth century, and beyond lies the school. The high, angular outline of the mountain on the southern point of the island is in sharp contrast. Its jagged peaks resemble the features of a man lying with his face to the sky--like a giant struck suddenly dead. At Rølvaag, facing this Dønna-man, a cluster of small homes, low and sod-roofed, stand silhouetted against the sky. In summer, in the brilliant never-ending daylight, the heart sings and laughter comes easily, but the long dark days of winter and its violent storms are cause for deep depression.

No one knows when the first people settled here, but history tells of famous Viking chieftains who sailed up the inlets to their homes on the island. For generations these island people have made their living on the sea -- fishing in the home waters in summer, and in winter, sailing several hundred miles to the Lofoten Islands to seek the cod. Along the northwest side of the island it is only in the clefts that there is soil enough to raise small patches of grain, a few potatoes and other hardy root vegetables. Until very recent times most families had one or two cows; and in summer, a few sheep were moved from islet to islet for grazing. Each family owned carefully conserved stretches of peatland and was allowed to harvest enough peat to dry for fuel.

The ancestors of the family at present living at Rølvaag settled on the ridge above the water seven generations ago. In about 1870, Peder Benjamin Jakobsen brought his bride, Ellering (Ella) Vaag to his parental home. Peder was the second son of a family of four children. His elder brother, Gunnar Berg, early showed intellectual vigor; at the age of eighteen be became an itinerant schoolmaster; after several years of teaching, he was awarded financial aid to attend a teachers' college at Tromsø. Following completion of the course of study, he returned to a neighboring parish to spend a lifetime as a highly-regarded teacher. A younger brother also left Rølvaag, studied and worked

for a time in Trondheim, but finally emigrated to the United States, settling in South Dakota.

Peder Benjamin Jakobsen, according to his sons, also showed latent abilities, but for one reason or another, he remained at Rølvaag. He was respected by his neighbors and, by the standards of his community, was considered a good provider. Besides being an able fisherman he also had skill as a carpenter and cabinet-maker, to which many items in the old home bear witness. He was a voracious reader and, at a time when newspapers in the home were uncommon, he subscribed to two metropolitan papers. One of his daughters recalled how eagerly the whole family looked forward to the arrival of the mail boat. They read every article and discussed the issues of the day. The serialized novels were carefully clipped and saved for re-reading through the long winter evenings. Peder was fond of music and loved to sing and enjoyed playing tunes on his violin. He also loved an argument, and held his own in many a debate on some fine theological point.

The family has no pictures of Ella Vaag who came to Rølvaag from the eastern side of the island, but those who remember her, describe her as physically strong, though slender. Her expressive eyes reflected gentleness and goodness, yet she was firm and patient too--from all accounts, a softening influence on her husband who tended to be stubborn and strong-willed. Her children were fascinated by the stories she could tell of her uncles who were famous in that area for their feats of great strength.

Peder and Ella had eight children, of whom seven lived to adulthood. The third child and second son of the family was Ole Edvart, born on April 22, 1876. From his own accounts he had a happy childhood. He and his older brother Johan were inseparable. As soon as they could walk, the children found their way down the steep rocky path to the boathouse by the sea. There they could explore the deep mysterious shadows where the winter gear was hanging. But most of all they liked to climb into the boats--there to rock and dream, or fish with their own improvised lines, or simply to peer over the edge, down, down into the water, fascinated by the swaying seaweed or by the myriads of living beings below.

Each child had his appointed tasks. One that Ole remembered was that of helping his mother gather kelp for the cattle. One day as they were working together along the shore she asked him "And what do you intend to do when you grow up?" Without hesitation he blurted out "Oh, I'm going to be a poet, or a professor ". She chuckled a bit, then smiled down at him and took his hand as they walked back to the house.

Perhaps it was natural for him to dream of these professions, for wasn't his good, kind uncle Gunnar a teacher? And among his mother's ancestors there was the famous and beloved folk-poet, Petter Dass. Moreover, Ole himself was the namesake of Ole Edvart Klaebo, a cousin of his mother. His brother, John Klaebo was recognized as a fine poet and sensitive short-story writer.

Ole must have been five when his father decided that he was to learn to read. For his brother Johan and sister Martha, learning the alphabet and getting through the first reader had been no effort at all, but for Ole it was another story. He said later that he did not then--nor later at school--like to memorize, though he could tell things in his own words and reason well enough. But he could not fathom how K-A-T could spell soft, furry kitten, nor how the letters M-O-R stood for dear, kind Mother. The more Ole struggled, the more difficult it became, and Father got more and more exasperated and impatient. Ole's eyes finally blurred with tears so that he could no longer see the letters, and the lessons often ended with a scolding, so Ole began to feel that he was the dumb-bell of the family.

From the age of seven, when he started school, until he was confirmed at fourteen, Ole spent nine weeks a year at the school east of the mountain--three weeks in the autumn, three weeks in mid-winter, and three weeks again in the spring. In good weather the children from Rølvaag trudged the seven miles across the moors each morning and home again each evening. But in the winter term they stayed at the school during the week, living and studying in dormitories above the school-room. There were no hot lunches for these children. Each Monday morning, early, they left home carrying their meager provisions for the week--dry bread and soured milk. Though the days were long and the teacher a strict task-master, the children enjoyed their school days. Fortunately "Old Beiermann" as he was called, had travelled widely and was an able teacher, and it seems that the children were allowed to advance at their own pace.

Ole may have had difficulty learning to read, but this was not evident once he started school, for then he began to devour books. Not least enjoyable for the boys from Rølvaag was their growing friendship with the Heitmann Boys from Akvik--a settlement along the eastern coast of Dønna. The community library was housed in an upstairs room of their home, and the four boys spent endless hours, almost systematically reading book after book, both fiction and non-fiction. The most difficult volumes they read aloud and discussed, and tried to discover their significance. One of them recounted later that one book he especially remembered reading and discussing in this manner was Either-Or by Søren Kierkegaard. In this small library they

made the acquaintance of many of the world's great books. Most important, perhaps, was the influence this had on their dreams and aspirations.

It was while they were still in school that Johan Rølvaag wrote a novel which they read aloud together. Now Ole, too, began to write, but his work was done in utmost secrecy. When Johan came upon him suddenly one day as he sat writing and demanded to see what he was doing, there was a battle royal. The two boys rolled from one end of the room to the other, and before they were parted the twelve-year old Ole had torn his manuscript to shreds rather than let anyone see what he was working at. He dreamed of writing poems and songs for people to sing, too, but somehow he couldn't get the words and the rhymes to behave and he gave up in disappointment.

Johan had an unusually fine and expressive voice and his father often excused him from other tasks so that he might read aloud to the rest of the family gathered in the large living room with their work. This happened most often in the long evenings of late fall and early winter when all were busy preparing for the approaching fishing season. The men and boys had to check and mend their lines and nets, or knot new ones. Mother and Grandmother spent long hours carding, spinning and weaving, and then sewing the warm clothing the family needed. Knitting needles clicked--for socks and mittens had to be ready before Christmas. Even the younger boys often had to take their turn at knitting. Occasionally reading would give way to story-telling. Then the young Ole climbed up into Grandmother's lap, where he felt safe and secure, for the stories were of sea-demons, trolls and witches, or the hidden people of the hills and other supernatural creatures. There were those in the family circle who could relate some very mysterious experiences. Some of the men had seen that most terrible of sea-creatures, the draug, whose appearance always foretold storm and disaster; another had seen the hulder, --one of the hill-people--or their cattle disappearing around a bend in the road. One grandmother in the family was reputed to have second sight, and Ole's own mother had once seen a ghost.

The young boys on Dønna reached manhood early. As soon as a boy was confirmed, he was expected to take his place with a fishing crew. Ole Rølvaag was confirmed at fourteen, and that winter he sailed with others from Dønna, up the coast to Lofoten. The first two seasons the youngest of the crew were listed as "half-men" in the profit-sharing group. Theirs were the most demeaning tasks--cooking, washing the few pots and pans, cleaning the bunk-houses, and then helping to dress out the days' catch through the long, cold evenings. It was a hard life, but full of suspense and excitement.

For six years Ole went each winter to Lofoten. He gained a reputation as an indefatigable worker, whom neither wind nor wave could vanquish. He displayed stubbornness, grit, determination to excel, yet he was full of life and jokes and laughter. But his moods could change as suddenly as those of the sea--wild and stormy, or gentle, calm, and mysterious. Though he loved the boisterous and busy life at Lofoten, he also felt an inexpressible longing to go far away. There were dreams and ambitions to be fulfilled.

In 1893, after surviving one of the worst storms ever recorded on the Lofoten fishing banks, Ole wrote to his uncle in South Dakota, begging him to lend him money for a ticket to America. The answer was long in coming. But shortly after the ticket arrived, Ole was offered the chance to acquire a boat of his own, and to become chief of a crew. It was a difficult decision to make--to stay and enjoy the security offered him, or to face the unknown far away. But regretfully he turned down the offer of the boat, and shortly afterward set sail for America.

With only a thin dime and a Norwegian copper coin in his pocket, he arrived in New York; after three days on the train, he was literally dumped off at a station in South Dakota. Through some misunderstanding his uncle failed to meet him. It was a forlorn young man who tried to find his way on the prairie that evening--a stranger in a strange land, weary and starving. He has later told the story of that immigrant in an autobiographical novel Amerika-Breve (Letters from America). For the next three years Ole Rølvaag worked as a farm hand at Elk Point, South Dakota. Four bachelors made up the household during the time he worked there--the owner, a hired hand, Ole and his uncle. The newcomer proved to be as ambitious on the land as he had been on the sea, and quickly learned the unaccustomed chores. The same stubborn determination to excel characterized him now, too.

Even when he was on the Lofoten banks with the fishing fleet, Ole had continued the reading habit developed during his school days. When storms made it impossible for the men to put out of the harbor, he made use of the excellent library provided the fishermen by the state. At times he even read aloud to the crews who shared the bunkhouse--everything from the classics to dime novels. "But they preferred the shilling shockers" he later told a reporter. "I couldn't get them to take much interest in the tales of Sir Walter Scott." He found little opportunity for this kind of recreation in the prairie community in which he was now working. Moreover, once he had mastered the new tasks, working with horses and machines on the land instead of boats and lines and nets on the sea, he began to lose interest

in farm work. Ole now began to cast about for something more challenging to do. The dreams of childhood and manhood were not yet fulfilled. He realized also that if he wanted to better himself, he would have to become more fluent in English.

A Lutheran pastor in the community had befriended the young newcomer and lent him books occasionally. Now that pastor began to encourage Ole to go to school.

It was much against his fathers' advice that in the fall of 1898 the twenty-two-year old Ole entered Augustana Academy, a church-related school at Canton, South Dakota. This marked the beginning of a happier existence. Under the guidance of dedicated teachers he received the intellectual stimulus he had been hungering for. Though he had had little formal education at the time he entered the academy, he was in reality better educated than he knew. At twenty-two, he had reached maturity, had spent six years as a fisherman, had experienced the difficulties of emigration, the consequent adjustment to a new land and a new language, had in fact, also learned a new way of life. He said himself that "Life had educated me, and reading had educated me. My imagination was fully developed, my reasoning powers were mature, and work had taught me concentration."

Since Ole Rølvaag was entirely self-supporting, he had to find means of earning money for his schooling, for the few dollars he had earned on the farm were soon gone. He then tried his skill as a salesman. He told his own students later that no man could call himself truly educated who had not tried to sell books and aluminum-ware from door to door. He certainly spoke from experience, for he spent part of two summers as a wandering salesman. When selling books failed to produce the dollars he needed, he became a jack-of-all-trades and did whatever he could find to do: carpentry, well-digging, factory work, and in the early fall he returned to the farm to work in the harvest fields. Only in his senior year was he able to return to Augustana for the opening of the fall term. That year he worked as a janitor at the school in order to pay for his room and board.

Although the same ambition, the compulsion to excel which had marked him as a farm laborer and fisherman, characterized his work at Augustana, life at school was not all drudgery. He participated in debates and discussion groups, was a member of several organizations and enjoyed the social functions. He was high-spirited, gay, and a good conversationalist. Here at school he made life-long friends, and he met the young woman who was later to become his wife. In the spring of 1901 he graduated with honors. The text of his valedictory address no long exists, but from a newspaper account we learn that here he expressed for the first time an idea which was to recur again and again in his

lectures and writing--namely, that a human being cannot deny his own background and inherited culture and remain a whole and true and healthy person.

Following graduation from Augustana, Ole Rølvaag again took to the road as a salesman--this time of stereopticon views, a popular novelty at that time. In the fall, he entered St. Olaf College at Northfield, Minnesota. Again it was his friend and pastor, the Reverend P.J. Reinertsen, who encouraged him and sent letters of recommendation. He had almost no resources, but soon found work in the dormitory kitchen. In those days there were no central heating plants at the college, and he added to his meager income by carrying wood for the stoves which heated the rooms of Old Main, and one summer he was part of the crew which painted the buildings on campus.

In the summer of 1902 he augmented his income by teaching a term of parochial school. This proved to be both interesting and challenging, and in the summers of 1903 and 1904, he again found teaching jobs. He loved the children and the work in the classroom. No doubt these experiences strengthened his resolve to seek a teaching career.

Rølvaag took active part in many college activities--was a frequent contributor to the college publications, participated in the many debates sponsored by the literary societies, became an active member and leader of the Norwegian literary society--in short he was the typical college student of his day. But in one aspect he was not typical, and that was in the amount of course work he took on. For instance, he wrote in a letter dated 1903: "I have twenty-six hours a week . . .The most any college student is allowed to take here is twenty hours, but there were some very nice electives this year, so I thought I would try a little more." He was very conscious of the gaps in his education, and tried desperately to make up for this deficiency. Actually, the regular course of study he was registered for was one that could lead either to the theological seminary or into teaching. It included Greek, Latin, and German in addition to English composition and Norwegian and some mathematics and science courses. With the addition of the "nice electives" the four years at St. Olaf was a period of sustained, intensive effort.

It was during his junior year that he once again began writing a novel. He confessed in letters to his fiancee that he hardly had time to sleep for he dreamed of having it published before he graduated. He wrote her that he was neglecting his studies in order to spend as much time as possible on his novel, and he worried that he would fail in his final examinations. The publisher to whom he sent it rejected the manuscript. A few years later he took it out again and rewrote portions of it, but

this novel ("Nils og Astri") remains unpublished.

In the spring of 1905, Ole Rølvaag graduated with honors. Now the question of his future became more pressing. He was eager to enter the teaching profession; he was also eager to continue his education. Consequently when President Kildahl asked him to return to St. Olaf as a teacher on condition he would spend a year in study at the University of Kristiania (Oslo) he was overjoyed. With five hundred borrowed dollars he left for Norway in July, 1905.

He was excited by the prospect of returning to his native land, and overjoyed at the thought of seeing parents and home once more--of sitting in a boat and rocking on the sea. The fall and winter of 1905-06 were months of incessant reading and study, interrupted by weeks of serious illness. Intermittent moods of elation and depression mark the letters to his fiancee and friends in America. He felt it was his duty, as the first representative of his college to enter the University, to do credit and honor to St. Olaf by doing the best work he was capable of. But he also felt this was a great opportunity for him to widen his horizons, to come under the influence of great scholars, to be a part of a more cosmopolitan community, and he grasped the opportunity eagerly. In the spring he took the examinations and was elated to find himself at the top of the class. He was then able to relax by taking a tour through the fjords and mountains of western Norway, and spending a month with his family at Dønna.

Not until the summer of 1908 did he realize his dream of establishing his own home. On July 9 of that year he was married to Jennie Marie Berdahl, daughter of South Dakota pioneers. Four children were born to them: Olaf Arnljot, who died in childhood; Ella Valborg (Mrs. Torliff Tweet); Karl Fritjof (former Governor of Minnesota and U.S. Ambassador to Iceland); and Paul Gunnar, who, as a small child, was drowned in a neighbor's cistern. In spite of intrusions from the outside world and the pressures of a many-sided career, this was an unusually close-knit family circle. Ole Rølvaag loved children, and his were allowed, even encouraged, to sit at the desk while he was writing, and they soon learned when they had to be very quiet because Father was especially busy. He found time to tell them fairy stories and folk-tales, or to draw pictures of boats and sea-gulls. And one snowy afternoon he showed an entranced little child how to mark the cadence of poetry. There were Sunday afternoon walks down to the river and picnics in the yard.

An even greater sense of family unity came during the summers spent at the secluded cabin in Northern Minnesota. Thanks to his considerate and understanding wife, the days there soon settled into a routine which would at one and the same time give him time

to work as well as the opportunity to read and relax after the strenuous months of teaching and writing at home in Northfield.

When Ole Edvart Rølvaag returned to St. Olaf in the fall of 1906, he began a life-time connection that ended only with his retirement shortly before his death in 1931. The first year he taught a variety of subjects, and in addition was resident head of the men's dormitory. In addition to Norwegian, he taught Greek, physiology, geometry, geography and Biblical history. After a number of years he was able to concentrate his efforts on Norwegian language and literature, finally becoming head of that department. Suitable texts were almost non-existent; consequently, in addition to his class-room duties he busied himself with the preparation of teaching materials. There was a series of readers for which he wrote much of the material; a dictionary; and finally he assisted in the preparation of a handbook in grammar.

Rølvaag himself had, to a high degree, the ability to concentrate, and he demanded much of himself. Consequently it is not strange that he also demanded much from his students. It was not sufficient that they complete the day's assignments; he tried to awaken in them an insatiable hunger for a greater knowledge and understanding of mankind as it is mirrored in the world's great literature. He, himself, had great sensitivity, but he drew a sharp distinction between sensitivity and what he termed emotional and sickly romanticism. Though he demanded much, he also was quick to encourage, and took great personal interest in his students. His office and home were always open to anyone who needed advice, help or just a sympathetic hearing. To those who were creative he spoke of truth and life. They should write of what they knew and had experienced themselves, he stressed. He was a creator as well as an interpreter of literature, and stressed time and again the effort that must go into the act of creation. "We do not take enough pains to teach young minds that true art, whether of the pen, or the voice, or the brush, or the chisel, resists creation--that it never comes into being without a definite struggle, and sometimes a terrible one, on the part of the artist. The result is that they expect quick returns for slight effort, and so miss the whole meaning of life."

During the 1920's he developed a course in Norwegian immigration. He intended through his lectures to give the young people a knowledge of their pioneer ancestors, the sacrifices as well as the contributions their forbears had made, and which the students could still make to American culture. He was imbued with the idea that one of life's great tragedies was the feeling of not belonging. For the immigrant this was a double tragedy--he had abandoned his Fatherland, and, try as he might, it was difficult for most and well-nigh impossible for others to feel completely at home in the new land. For many of the second

generation it was a lack of knowledge or a lack of understanding of their heritage which made them feel so tragically inferior and insecure.

It is only natural, then, that Rølvaag should become a prime mover in organizations formed to promote a knowledge of his people's ethnic background. As early as 1910 he became one of the founders of the Society for Norwegian Language and Culture. He soon became a leader in Norlandslaget, an organization to keep those who had emigrated from North Norway in touch with one another as well as with their homeland. For a number of years he was editor of Nord-Norge, a magazine sponsored by this group. In 1921, he became the first editor of For Faedrearven, a publication supported by an organization formed in 1919 for the promotion of Norwegian culture in the Northwest. Because of the press of other work and a desire to concentrate on his teaching and writing, he dropped the editorship after two years. Without his driving force, the organization and its publication disappeared. He was active in the preparations for the Norwegian American Centennial which commemorated in 1925 the first organized emigration of Norwegians to the United States. It was quite natural, then, that he should be one of the group which in 1925 organized the Norwegian American Historical Association. The purpose of this organization was to collect and preserve the heritage of the Norwegian people in America. In order to accomplish this, the historical archives were established at St. Olaf College; support was pledged to the museum already in existence at Decorah, Iowa; and the publication of volumes of both scholarly and general interest was begun. He acted as corresponding secretary until his death. In this capacity, Rølvaag spent countless hours writing letters, and seeking support for the organization; in addition he spent days in the collection of and the organization of this collection of early publications and correspondence of pioneers. Ahead of his time, he was helping to develop an ethnic center in the Midwest.

In spite of these time-consuming duties he was at the same time engaged in creative endeavors. From his college days and through the first decade of his teaching career he wrote short stories, poems, numerous articles, as well as aiding in the writing of texts and readers. His first published novel, written under the pseudonym Paal Mørck, was Amerika-Breve (Letters from America), printed in 1912 by Augsburg Publishing House of Minneapolis. This is a collection of letters written by a young immigrant, Per Smevik, to his father and brother at home in Norway. Written in Norwegian, the book did not come out in English translation until November, 1971, when it appeared as The Third Life of Per Smevik, published by Dillon Press of Minneapolis. The translation was a joint venture of the author's daughter and granddaughter.

Paa Glemte Veie (On Forgotten Paths), also published by Augsburg Publishing House, appeared in 1914. This time, too, he used the pen-name of Paal Mørck. Polemical articles in the Norwegian American press and a few short stories and poems of that time also appeared under this name.

The novel To Tullinger (Two Fools), which appeared in 1920, dealt with the deterioration of character; it is the story of a couple whose avarice leads them to physical as well as spiritual death. This story was substantially re-written and translated, and in 1930 was published in English by Harper & Brothers as Pure Gold.

In Laengselens Baat (The Boat of Longing), Rølvaag pictures the dreamer, the poet who is tragically lost in a society in which he is a misfit. Like the other books, this was written in Norwegian; it was published by Augsburg in 1921. The English translation appeared in 1933.

A collection of essays dealing with the problems of adjustment of the immigrant and the immigrant's children, and a challenge to them to understand and value their culture and past was published by the St. Olaf College Press under the title Omkring Faedrearven (Concerning Our Heritage). This book, which appeared in 1922, has not been translated.

For some time Rølvaag had been planning a novel on the pioneer theme. Much factual material for such a work he had received from his wife's father and uncles, who had moved from Minnesota to South Dakota in the early 1870's. But when he learned that a Norwegian author intended to make a tour of the Midwest in order to gather material for a novel about Norwegian emigrants, Rølvaag was impelled to start work on his own projected novel. In 1923 he sought and was granted a leave of absence. He intended to work at the cabin in the woods through the early fall and then spend some time in Norway to finish the book. A serious fire which destroyed the chapel at St. Olaf led him to offer his services to the college, and his leave was cut short in order that he might spend some time in soliciting funds for his beloved institution. In February of 1924, however, he sailed for England. After a short stay there, he went on to Norway, there to immerse himself in polishing the manuscript of the novel which was to become Giants in the Earth. In the spring he brought the manuscript to the publishing house of Aschehoug & Company of Oslo. It was immediately accepted for publication. However it was agreed that the first half, with the title I de dage (In Those Days) should appear in the fall of 1924, and the second half, Riket grundlaegges (The Founding of the Kingdom) in 1925. Both books met with success in Norway. A news story in a Minneapolis newspaper concerning these novels by an American about the

American scene, but written in Norwegian and published in Norway, caught the eye of Mr. Lincoln Colcord, a free-lance journalist and short story writer. He immediately urged that the novels be translated, and introduced Rølvaag to an American publisher.

Then there began a unique literary venture. Mr. Colcord knew no Norwegian and worked only from rough translations prepared by colleagues and friends of the author. After he had made his suggestions, Rølvaag studied the revised manuscript and made further corrections and revisions. Much of the time the two worked together until they had achieved a style in English that expressed the nuances of the original. Rølvaag himself believed that translation is more than a mere transferring of words and expressions from one language to another. It is an independent artistic work, just as demanding and difficult as writing a book itself. The innate feeling, the subtleties of meaning, have to be preserved. Perhaps that is why the cooperation between author and translator was such a happy one in the translation of Giants in the Earth. The English version was published by Harper & Brothers in 1927.

While still working on the translation, Rølvaag was thinking about a sequel. In this novel he took up the story of the second generation. Shortly before Christmas of 1928, Peder Seier (Peder Victorious) appeared in Norway. The English translation came on the American literary scene in 1929.

A third novel in this series dealing with the Holm family was begun early in 1930. Both the original Norwegian version and its English translation appeared almost simultaneously in the fall of 1931.

Though Mr. Colcord worked only on the translation of Giants in the Earth, the method that they used was repeated in putting the novels that followed into English. Mrs. Evelyn Tripp Berdahl, a sister-in-law of Mrs. Rølvaag, gave valuable help. She took pains, too, to find the exact word in the preparation of the English that marked the style of the original Norwegian. And only one who saw the many revisions the manuscripts underwent could appreciate the craftsmanship that went into this man's writing.

All his life Rølvaag waged a battle against poor health. Yet he exhibited great physical stamina, and was never one to shirk any task. From time to time when illness or adversity struck, he would endure periods of depression, but they soon gave way to a more optimistic outlook. When recurring heart attacks weakened him physically, they slowed his work, but never dimmed his ambition or determination to reach the goal he had set himself.

Following an exceptionally severe illness in late October, he died at his home in Northfield on the afternoon of November 5, 1931.

RØLVAAG AS A ST. OLAF COLLEGE STUDENT

The Art of O. E. Rolvaag

by ERLING LARSEN
Carleton College, Northfield

When the English version of O.E. Rølvaag's Peder Victorius appeared in 1929, one young critic, reviewing it in the St. Olaf Quarterly, made reference to an earlier book, Giants in the Earth, which he called Rølvaag's "first great novel." Whether he meant that until Giants in the Earth Rølvaag had not written a great novel or that he, the critic, was unaware that Rølvaag had written four novels before Giants is not clear. But this ambiguity points to an important problem in the criticism of Rølvaag's writings.

Rølvaag really wrote for three distinct audiences: the Norwegian community in the United States, and perhaps specifically for the Norwegian Lutheran community in what he called the Northwest; the reading public in Norway itself; and finally the non-Norwegian world. His early works were published in Norwegian, of course, by the Augsburg Publishing House of Minneapolis, the first appearing in 1912. It was not until 1924 that one of his books appeared in Norway. Three years later Giants in the Earth, translated into English, was published by Harper and Brothers and selected as a Book-of-the-Month. To reach the third of his audiences had taken fifteen years.

According to his biographers, Nora O. Solum and Theodore Jorgenson, he had written five books for the Norwegian-American audience before 1924. The biographers credit him with one volume in the diary written during his first years in America as a young immigrant, which they say could be titled Diary of an Immigrant. Rølvaag's first published book, Letters from America, is in broad ways based on this diary and is a series of brief discourses on problems of importance to immigrants and to the Norwegian community in the upper Midwest. He followed this with a novel called Nils and Astri, which was rejected by the great Oslo publishing house of Aschehoug and never published anywhere. This rejection no doubt increased Rølvaag's feeling of isolation. During these early years he is reported to have said that the subject with which he was concerning himself was of no interest to the Norwegian public. This he may have said only to rationalize the rejection, and to increase in his mind the importance of parochialism. On the other hand, he might have unconsciously expressed the thought that he would change his subject in order to reach the wider audience.

Three books later than Letters from America were published by Augsburg: On Forgotten Paths, Two Fools, and The Boat of Longing. Letters from America and On Forgotten Paths appeared under the pseudonym Paal Mørck. Mørck is pronounced as is the Norwegian for darkness.

That "it is all a darkness" we have heard from Ford's Dowell and Conrad's Marlow - and from Rølvaag's Beret. But for Rølvaag the darkness must have been especially deep, at least as deep as for Marlow going upriver seeking the unknowable Kurtz. He was in his beginnings as isolated as Marlow. He was an immigrant Norwegian Lutheran writing about Norwegian Lutherans who were settled in small enclaves on the great prairies of North America, separated by barriers of language and religion from the Irish Catholic and the German communities about them. He was writing abou these people and, at first , for them. That Nils and Astri had got no hearing in Norway might have been less a blow than was the first royalty check from Augsburg -- $47.10. His first and closest audience was rejecting him.

Still, he continued to write. He had a strong sense of mission and of duty. He believed firmly that men were given certain vocations. In at least one of his classes at St. Olaf College, where he taught Norwegian language and literature, he told his students that a proper man must exercise his talents and devote his life to what his abilities indicate he should devote it to regardless of whether or not this career is congenial or happy. Later, in Their Father's God, he was to have Nikoline and Peder discuss for many pages the necessity for and the tragedy of striving for success despite the fact that inevitably happiness would not be found on the same road.

Rølvaag wanted success. But he said on at least one occasion that he would never write deliberately seeking financial success. The success he wanted was rather the success of a mission or in a vocation. One is reminded by a photograph of Rølvaag made in 1911, in which his beard and his deeply-set eyes give him a striking resemblance to Joseph Conrad, that Rølvaag might very well have felt the frustration that Conrad expressed - a frustration arising from the difficulties in attempting to achieve an artistic and literary success as well as a popular success. Neither man was willing to sacrifice the first for the second. But Rølvaag obviously wanted an audience. No man with a mission or a message can succeed without an audience. And the publication of Giants in the Earth in 1924 in Norway and in 1927 in the United States, which to many readers means the beginning of Rølvaag's career, Rølvaag saw not as a beginning but as a climax, as the culmination of a career. When Aschehoug accepted Giants in the Earth Rølvaag wrote, "This is the greatest day of my life." He knew that he had produced "a greater

literary work than had hitherto been produced by anyone of our people in the United States." And he wanted very much to "make myself believe that the responsibility involved in being a great man is nothing to worry about."

Only two of the early novels have been translated into English. In 1930, after the success of Giants in the Earth and Peder Victorious, the Two Fools of 1920 appeared with the new English title Pure Gold. It is of considerable importance to an understanding of Rølvaag the artist and the man to know that in 1930 he refused to operate in accordance with the standard procedure of publishing or republishing an hitherto almost ignored work on the strength of a later success. He insisted upon rewriting and reorganizing the text and, indeed, looked upon Pure Gold as something quite apart from Two Fools. He told his editor that he was "rewriting the whole book" and that it would "be a startling one when ready" with "much possibility to startle our literati." The differences between the earlier and the later versions are outlined with great care and in much detail by Professors Solum and Jorgenson.

The second of the early novels to be translated was The Boat of Longing, the Norwegian version of which was first published in 1921. The English version appeared in 1933, two years after Rølvaag's death. This book and Pure Gold are of great importance to the understanding of Rølvaag's major themes and of much criticism that has been written about them. The Boat of Longing concerns itself with a sensitive soul insulted and injured in an alien and unfriendly environment, a young immigrant cut off from his roots at home and depressed by the materialism and brutality he finds in the pioneer midwest. Nils Vaag, the main character, prefigures in his anguish and his unhappiness the travails of the Beret who was to very nearly dominate the action in Giants in the Earth, the tired and frightened and in some ways ignorant woman possessed of a "heart that dared not let in the sun." Pure Gold, on the other hand, tells the story of two people who are obsessed by a love of money and devote their lives to a mad pursuit of fortune, and who are destroyed not because they are "sensitive" but because they are greedy. This couple, Lizzie and Louis Houglum, stand as early versions of Per Hansa, the active empire-building husband of the frightened Beret. This argument over-simplifies the character of the complex Per Hansa, but it has the virtue at least of paralleling what is perhaps now the standard reading of Giants in the Earth.

Most readers have felt that the essential tragedy in the fictional world that Rølvaag created is that of the spiritual soul destroyed by a material environment. And during at least the first part of his career Rølvaag seemed to define the spirit-

ual in terms of a national and religious heritage: to forget the tradition, the language and the religion of one's forefathers is to invite destruction. Thus the Houglums fell prey to their materialism because they were irreligious and had no sound traditions to support them in times of spiritual need. They might have survived had they considered anything more important than financial success.

It may be that his simple dichotomy does lie at the root of Rølvaag's philosophy. His early novel, On Forgotten Paths, has as its main theme, according to Rølvaag himself, "the lethargy of the people." Solum and Jorgenson argue that On Forgotten Paths describes the second generation of Norwegians in America as a victim of its own "lukewarmness and artificiality, sleekness and dandyism, shallow and wordy idealism." Some of this may be a projection of the writer's self, a reflection of the bitterness felt by the neglected novelist. Nils Vaag, the hero of The Boat of Longing, comes to America for the purpose of realizing "his latent talents." He is characterized by an "inner sensitiveness," and he goes about this new world expressing "all his moods in wistful improvisings on the violin." Rølvaag himself said of The Boat of Longing that it was intended to express "the great pity of it all, the utter tragedy of a sensitive soul making an effort to adjust itself in a new land and a pioneering country."

The novels do not lend themselves to this simplistic reading ing. True, The Boat of Longing is written in an lush and almost overblown manner, while Pure Gold is told in a frequently harsh and almost invariably straight-forward voice. But even so it is not as easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys as some of the critics have considered it to be. In Pure Gold, for instance, Rølvaag sees all sorts of villains and, actually, not the greatest of these are the Houglums. They love money, they collect money, they hide money in mattresses and in old shoes, they caress their hundred-dollar bills and smooth them to a silken fineness, but they die pathetically and their money goes with them. They do not, as has been pointed out, have any racial or national memories or any traditions, but they do have the memory of hardship and poverty and the tradition of hard work. And they are as much destroyed by their surrounding community as they are by themselves.

The story of Lizzy and Louis Houglum opens with a fine scene of innocent rural sexuality from which the bloom is immediately removed by the jokes of the threshing-crew of which Louis is a member. After the two young people marry and begin to operate a farm, heavily in debt, and after they begin to save a little money in the local bank, the bank fails. Louis goes for advice and consolation to a minister who has just performed a marriage and who has wrapped about his finger the ten dollar fee while he tells Louis, "We must never put our trust in money." They resist the fine blandishments of a landshark who might have come straight out of a Sinclair Lewis novel. And they are plagued by one after another beggar for money to be used either for the church or for the Liberty Bond drive. Because they see no immediate value or long time gain to be had from the buying of Liberty Bonds they remain aloof from World War I. And when to teach them a lesson some of the local "boys" come out to the Houglum farm, getting drunk on the way, they succeed in frightening Louis but not Lizzie and also in accidentally burning their house down for them. Surely these two people have the singleness of purpose, the desire to "realize themselves," that marked Nils Vaag. And surely they are in as unfriendly an environment as is Beret later. They are surrounded by materialistic ministers, by dishonest bankers, by power-mad bond-drive organizers, by barbaric terrorists. The only indictment, and it is only implied, that Rølvaag makes against them is that their trust and their faith have been put in material things.

The anti-materialistic reading of Pure Gold depends in large part upon the reader's bringing to the novel the prejudices and the attitudes of the Lutheran church in the early part of the twentieth century. Rølvaag was always a member of the church, loyal, and certainly convinced of the importance and the validity of the church ideal. He was at one point in his career a very strict moralist and in The Boat of Longing, for instance, has much to say about the evils of the Demon Rum. At one time in his life he traveled for the Minnesota Anti-Saloon League, lecturing and organizing new chapters. (It is hinted at one point in his biography that he did this in order to make the ten dollars per weekend plus expenses that this kind of work then paid, but no evidence exists that he undertook the work in a cynical or hypocritical frame of mind.) And one of his great friends was a retired pioneer minister with whom he was always happy to talk even in the last days of his life.

It may be significant that he projected at one time the writing of a novel about a pioneer minister, and indeed did a great deal of work on it before abandoning it. His biographers suggest that he abandoned it because the kind of minister that he admired when he began work on this novel was not the kind of minister that he admired when he gave it up. Certainly he changed his mind about what he considered the proper role of the church. And as his fame increased he came under severe attack by certain factions in the church that objected to the profanities that some of his characters used, to the sexuality of some of the scenes in the novels, even objected to the story of the cow Rosie, who runs away to seek a male companion, on the grounds that it was obscene. This faction objected also to

the tragic and violent end to which he brought the novel Giants in the Earth. Rølvaag countered these attacks with the argument that many of the clergy were unlettered, ignorant of what was going on in the world and in literature, interested only in the most parochial aspects of their congregational work. When an anonymous letter-writer attacked Rølvaag on the ground that he had not written any book that a self-respecting minister could recommend from the pulpit, Rølvaag replied that Per Hansa could very well be considered a Christ-like character who gave his life for his friends. But his biographers point out, too, that this change in Rølvaag's attitude toward the church and the ministry was largely a change in emphasis rather than in allegiance. Rølvaag seems to have concluded his career thinking that the church's main function was educational and conservative, that the church should preserve and protect and advance the traditional culture of the Norwegian people and save it from being inundated by not only the worldliness of a material culture but from being corrupted by alien cultures whether Irish or German. And in his novels he portrays hardly a single minister that meets his ideal; all have fallen short of the Grace of God not only because of their original sinfulness but because of their acquired and prideful ignorance. As early as 1924, after a visit to his old home on Nordland, Rølvaag said of his own father that "religion has served to disturb the natural development of many people."

Pure Gold then, whether considered as an entity or as a part of a canon, is essentially ambiguous. The Houglums are victims of circumstances very like those that drive Beret insane. Yet they are the kind of people Beret would consider insensitive and materialistic. Giants in the Earth presents the careful reader with a similar problem.

Giants is a rambling, episodic novel that in form is of a class with Bojer's The Great Hunger and Hamsun's Growth of the Soil. In part it reflects a phenomenon of the Twenties and Thirties - the "peasant novel" that was appearing in Scandinavia and Poland and America. In part it exemplifies Rølvaag's own disenchantment with the well-made plotted novel and his conviction that "life" goes forward in a random and capricious way. That it became Rølvaag's most popular novel may have in part resulted from what seems superficially an abandonment of the preoccupation with religious and ethical concerns that had characterized some of the earlier works. Further, by going back to the beginnings, to a time long before the Norwegian-American culture had become as organized and established as it was even in Letters from America, it places its main emphasis upon the sheer physical anguish attendant upon the conquering of the prairie.

Giants in the Earth, as almost everyone must know by now, tells of how Per Hansa and his wife Beret with their children come into Dakota Territory to subdue the endless prairie that takes on an almost personally malevolent character and finally comes close to victory in destroying Per Hansa and drinking "the blood of Christian men." That is the surface story, the struggle against blizzards, plagues of locusts, Indians, and hunger. That is the story that leads reviewers to speak of the novel as an epic.

Giants in the Earth has perhaps two climaxes. The first is the birth of Peder Victorious, an agonizing and protracted birth that involves the entire settlement and almost results in the death of both mother and son. The second is, of course, the death of Per Hansa at the end of the story. It is important that both of these events, even though the main interest in the novel is in the physical struggle with the prairie, depend for their drama on religious and moral conflicts. Because family and friends think that the new-born boy may not live more than an hour or so, they persuade old Tønseten to baptise him. They argue that Tønseten has been elected Justice of the Peace and has a legal right to perform this sacrament. After he has acceded to their pleas, Tønseten for a long time fears that he has committed a mortal sin. Per Hansa, on the other hand, exulting in the fact that his wife and son are alive, decides to call the boy Peder Victorious. The choice of this name Beret thinks blasphemous, for she has long known that no one can ever be victorious over the prairie and that a Christian person should never have left Norway and come out into this wild and Godforsaken place.

The second climax, the death of Per Hansa, comes because an old friend, Hans Olsa, is lying on his death-bed and not quite sure whether he should see a minister or a doctor. A fierce blizzard is raging outside. Per Hansa knows that no one can survive in such a storm. But Beret, driven by her inflexible religious beliefs, lashes at him until without even saying goodbye he sets out to fetch the preacher - and perishes. His body is not found until the following spring.

In an attempt to explain this conflict of temperament, these differences between Beret and Per Hansa, Rølvaag makes it known why Beret feels as she does. She is, of course, the sensitive soul that had already been celebrated in The Boat of Longing. But she is also troubled in her conscience because at the time when she and Per Hansa were married she had already been pregnant. So she carries with her not only the fear of the prairie but also the conviction of being a great sinner in a country to which God and salvation will never come. During the course of the novel, these two great psychological troubles slowly drive Beret insane while Per Hansa, because of his concern

for her, ages before his time. In one sense, then, the novel is an account of the terrible price in human suffering that was paid for the conquest of the prairie. In another sense, however, the novel might be read as an argument that those who live in the ivory towers of religion and morality and sensitivity should never descend to sally forth on the great plains but should leave the work of the world to be done by those who have the strength and the courage to carry it forward. Per Hansa himself was caught on the horns of this dilemma, alternately dreaming his dreams of empire and regretting having forced Beret to accompany him to the edges of that empire.

Giants in the Earth was the first in a series of three novels about Per Hansa and his family. The last two, Peder Victorious and Their Fathers' God, are also open to various interpretations, partly because Rølvaag held a strong belief in the importance of separatism. If America were to become the melting pot that many wanted it to become and that many thought it inevitably would become then America would be without character and inhabited by Americans without personality or force. Rølvaag believed that all efforts should be made to preserve the Norwegian language in the United States, and was in 1913 admittedly very depressed when the editor of one of the church papers argued that Norwegian would eventually disappear from the churches and the schools. In Peder Victorious a minister who suggests the same thing is met with Beret's absolute contempt. Beret no doubt spoke for Rølvaag, or for one side of him, when she argued that a people forgetful of the language and religion of the forefathers is doomed to extinction. In a sense of course this is true, but the Berets in Rølvaag's world are curiously inflexible and refuse to recognize that some alloys might have certain qualities more desirable than certain qualities of pure gold. Beret refused compromise.

The novels contain many examples of this kind of separatism, but we are usually left in the dark as to what side is the right side. When a small group leaves the congregation to which Beret belongs, and sets up its own church because of some small argument about policy, Beret refuses to leave with it. Also, the union of three Lutheran synods into a larger church is looked upon as important and desirable. The Civil War is seen as a human tragedy, but we do not know whether the cause of it is the South's allegiance to its traditions or the North's insistence upon Union. Later, the South Dakotans urge the formation of two states from the Dakota Territory. And each of these political upheavals makes comment, sidelong perhaps, inconclusive perhaps, upon the central theme of the novels - tradition versus change, integrity versus compromise. The drama arises from the desire of people to retain roots in the homeland and its culture and from that culture's being inevitably religious, with the result that Irish Catholics and Norwegian Lutherans

are unable to exist side by side in peace or understanding. But so great is the pain caused by these separations and by the few attempts to bridge them or to heal them that, again, it seems almost possible to read the novels as propaganda on behalf of the abandonment of all linguistic and religious pride.

Certainly the young Peder Victorious moves toward freedom, but again the situation becomes obscure. Peder has the arrogant pride of his father, pride not in his Norwegian past but in his own intelligence and ability as a farmer and man of business. He too dreams of empire. But he learns that his pride is as dangerous and as destructive as he thinks his mother's pride is inhibiting. Rølvaag stacks the cards against him in Peder Victorious and especially in Their Fathers' God as he did against Beret in Giants.

Peder Victorious is subtitled "A Tale of the Pioneers Twenty Years Later." The settling is done. Schools and churches are organized. And the main story is of Peder's gradual sexual awakening and his gradual alienation from the faith and the language of his forefathers. We see Peder first as a schoolboy and last as a young man about to be married to Susie, Irish and Catholic, the beautiful and sensual sister of his best friend, Charlie Doheny. Peder is intelligent and adaptable. He learns English easily and speaks it frequently, with the result that his mother arranges that he move from the school which he is attending to another one farther away but attended mostly by Norwegian children. But Beret's efforts, her continual pleading for the past and for tradition, serve only to strengthen Peder's urge toward the "empire" and the amalgamation of nationalities and religions. In fact Peder, although his minister during the course of the confirmation studies has earmarked him for the ministry, says nothing when he actually has to answer the questions during the confirmation ceremony and is considered to be confirmed only on the strength of his past performance.

The emotional conflict between Beret and Peder reaches its greatest height in the last pages of the novel. Peder has had to have a horse and buggy for his trips to and from church and school, but he has of course used them for other purposes as well, frequently staying away from home until very late. Beret learns too that he has even become involved with amateur theatricals, which she considers immoral. Then one night she resolves to find out what actually is going on at the schoolhouse where Peder is busy in rehearsal for the play. She creeps through a cornfield to the school, where she sees through a window Peder embracing Susie, and where she suffers what may be a relapse into her mental illness. She piles cornstalks against a broken part of the school's foundation and tries to set them afire, but a heavy rain comes up and prevents her success in this. Upon returning home, she accidentally finds in Peder's

English Bible some papers on which Peder has been copying passages from the Song of Solomon, obviously for Susie. Beret, not recognizing the words, but being, as Professor Jorgenson has suggested in conversation, largely ignorant of the Bible, is aghast at what she considers an indecent poem. She burns the papers in the stove.

But the poetry has had its effect. Beret suddenly feels tired and "langourous" and goes to her bedroom where she looks long at the portrait of Per Hansa who looks "odd" and smiles "roguishly" at her. Then Per Hansa appears himself. He reminds her that she had "never paid any attention to what your parents said about it" and tells her to let Peder "have the girl he is so fond of," because it is "hard to tell how this business will turn out unless he gets" her. Beret agrees, and next morning demands that Peder take her to the Dohenys to arrange a wedding even though Peder says they had decided to wait until spring.

Beret's change in attitude may result from a resurgence of her own obviously strong sexuality, or from a sudden decision to accept the inevitable. Or it may be that Rølvaag, having established the grounds for and the nature of the basic conflict in the novels, is simply trying to keep that conflict aesthetically alive. Certainly Peder on his way to the Doheny farm is on the way to his ultimate undoing. This is a reversal, but also not a reversal, of the ending of Giants in the Earth. There Beret, inflexible, drives Per Hansa to his death. Here Beret, amenable and gracious, moved by a vision not of morality and truth but of her dead husband, gives Peder to Susie and starts him on the path to the tragedy of his next few years.

Their Fathers' God, as the name implies, deals with the difficulties that differences in religion cause in the marriage of Susie and Peder. But the novel is now obviously aimed at that larger audience. It opens and closes on a political note and with a bitter political defeat for Peder who, having abandoned the idea of becoming a minister, has dreams of becoming a politician and perhaps even the governor of South Dakota. Peder opens the action with an attack on the county commissioners. He attends a meeting at which opinions have been invited on the advisability of hiring a professional rain-maker to break the drought that has now for long afflicted the community. Peder's arguments for a rational and sensible approach to the problem are unheeded, and he celebrates his defeat with a colossal drunk. In the final pages he is defeated in his campaign for county commissioner, and Susie celebrates by leaving him. Between these two balancing episodes are two other balancing episodes of illness and of the enforced separation of Susie and Peder. The first separation comes when Susie's father is severely injured and requires her at home to help care for him, he being a widower. The second separation takes place near the end of the

novel when Peder goes out at the behest of the Republican party to campaign in the boondocks. A further balance is achieved between the injury to Mr. Doheny and a later injury to Beret. After Susie returns from her father's house she persuades Peder to take her to a New Year's dance even though Beret disapproves of the whole idea. Beret, when they are gone, hears a noise in the barns, walks out into the icy yard, slips and falls to break her hip. She lies out in the cold until Peder and Susie return home and find her. This injury and exposure result in her death not long after. So, although the novel is not plotted in the old way that Rølvvag did not approve, it is perhaps the most neatly and formally arranged of all his works. We even have, as we had in Giants in the Earth, the difference between the sensitive Beret and the practical Per Hansa, the differenc between the happy and sensual Susie and the intellectual and serious Peder. We have, then, conflicts enough: Democrats against Republicans with a sprinkling of Populists on the side; Irish against Norwegian; Catholics against Lutherans; sensualists and hedonists against moderates and pragmatists. We even have another pair of balancing incidents that echo the private baptism of Peder Victorious: Beret, fearing that Peder intends not to have his son baptised, insists upon a friend's baptising the little boy Peder Emmanuel, in secret, while Peder and Susie are away; Susie, in a desire to appease her father and to satisfy her own religious convictions, has the boy baptised Patrick St. Olaf in the Catholic church near her father's house while she is there as a nurse and separated from Peder.

And again we can have at least two readings of the text. In fact, the text of almost the entire novel is read ind interpreted by Peder's opponent in the campaign for county commissioner in a speech that he gives at the school-house and that Peder attends upon the advice of friends. Standing outside, Peder hears his opponent describe Peder's life and Peder's qualities in a way that he hopes will prevent any sensible Irish Catholic from voting for Peder. Peder hears his sensitive and religious mother describes as a "lunatic." He hears himself described as a Lutheran, only to learn that in his opponent's eyes he is a heretic and rebel, for everyone knows that Martin Luther himself had been kicked out of the true church by the Pope. Peder, who in deference to Susie had been married by a Catholic priest, learns that he had committed the great sin of being married not by the local priest but by one in another community. Peder learns that even within the Lutheran church he is known as a free-thinking heretic. Peder learns that while he and Susie had tended and cared for the crippled Beret she had actually been "held prisoner" on the farm. Peder learns that his love for Susie, and Susie's passionate nature, had led them into a scandal that is the common gossip of the Irish community; their child had not been born "in the fullness of time." And finally he learns about Susie's having "sneaked" his child away from

his own house to have it baptised by the priest, and that this had been done because of Susie's mortal fear that the child might die and be damned.

As if these were not enough ambiguities, Peder proceeds to indulge himself in the final ambiguity of the novel. Enraged, believing that Susie had told his opponent all that he had used in his speech, he rushes home and proceeds to tear from the wall a crucifix that Susie had been allowed to place there, to trample it under his feet, and to rip apart the rosary that lies on the dresser beside Susie's bed, crying that he will have no more "idols in this house." Next morning, as if nothing had happened, Peder gets up, having slept late, worries about Susie's having gone out to start the chores, but learns that she has left the house, taking the child, taking the horse and buggy, leaving a note saying that he will get the horse and buggy back.

This is almost as arbitrary an ending as that in Peder Victorious. In that book Beret changes her mind in the course of a few pages and reverses her entire life's thinking. In this book, Peder has just returned from his campaign trip of which Susie had been inordinately proud and about which she had bragged to her friends that it proved what a smart man she had married, and been welcomed with a passion that Rølvaag describes with one sentence. "That night Susie's wants were insatiable." Now we have, after the opponent's speech, Peder's decision to go into the school and beat the opponent by hand but being restrained, as Beret was restrained by the ghost of Per Hansa, by the ghost of Beret who advises him to go home. He does so, arguing to himself that "she who's to blame for all this is at home." There Susie, in what must be intended to be a symbolic play for power over Peder, pinches and slaps her baby until it cries and she claims that it has the cramps, tha same kind of cramps that "killed Mrs. Flaherty's baby," and insists that Peder go for a doctor. Peder succeeds, however, in calming the child, and then proceeds to his smashing of idols. It is almost as if Rølvaag were deliberately manipulating his characters in order to set up the action for another part of the farce or another part of the tragedy. Certainly he has allowed no one to come to any haven of rest or peace. Certainly, as in the other two novels in this series, he has wrenched the action into an unpleasant and unhappy turn just at the point when the possiblilty seemed to have existed that something good might have come out of the troubles preceding. It may well be that the ambiguities, the possibities for variant readings that we have seen, were the product of a deeply pessimistic and almost nihilistic soul.

On the other hand, we must admit the gay humor that infected large parts of these three books. A kind of humor exists even in Beret's arguing that her broken hip came because she went out to see about the troubles of a "bull-crazy heifer" and so making

an oblique reference to Susie. Rølvaag knew, as few novelists know, the importance and the force of the cliche and the truism. As Beret lies dying, for instance, Peder comes into her room and offers to read to her. She asks that he read a Norwegian hymn that she had long loved. "I know of a sleep in Jesus' name, a rest from all toil and sorrow ..." We must acknowledge the human love and understanding that, deeply buried as it may seem to be, infuses so much of Rølvaag's work.

C. 1928

An Experiment in Reading Giants in the Earth

by ELMER F. SUDERMAN
Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter

These attempts to change one form of literature--fiction--to another--poetry--were made in an effort to read Giants in the Earth more perceptively and critically. In some cases the transformation is nothing more than selection and a change of shape since I have merely rearranged Rølvaag's words on the page. But mere often the reshaping is more thoroughgoing, for I have often eliminated sections, changed the point of view (particularly in the last poem where I attempt to show the last scene of the novel from three different consciousnesses, and, finally, from an objective point of view), tightened the language, and narrowed the focus. I have not hesitated to juxtapose sections that in Rølvaag are not juxtaposed, or at least not as sharply. Thus I have tried to contrast in two poems ("We are Terribly Far From Home" and "Mine is the Kingdom") as sharply and concisely as possible Beret's first view of the new prairie home with Per Hansa's, and to continue in a series of poems that contrast. I have attempted in these poems to catch Rølvaag's essential vision of the prairie and men's response to it and hopefully to heighten it it--at the very least to isolate it--by a careful selection and reshaping of the materials.

These attempts at translation in order to read more perceptively and critically have three basic impulses behind them. The first is an attempt to mirror ficiton in a different but kindred art form. My attempt resembles in some ways translation from one language to another, only it is an effort to faithfully mirror the mood and spirit of one genre in another, a task that requires both understanding and interpretation and sometimes creation. Obviously not all aspects of the material can be reshaped with equal ease. Narrative (the story) cannot very well be reproduced in poetry and indeed need not be, for nothing is gained in the process. Summary in prose is the method of translation best suited for narrative. I have found it difficult to translate the characterizations of Per Hansa and Beret into poetry, though this is accomplished to some extent by using the first person point of view. But mood, feelings, atmosphere, and the manner in which these may be used to develop a sense of place can, I think, be successfully transferred to my other form and can be highlighted so that they can be viewed from another perspective and thus be given greater meaning and force.

It should be obvious that, just as in translation, reproduction is never precise. With the attempt to change the form, there is not only selection (which is itself criticism) but also judgment. Obviously I indicate in the very choice of materials what I consider important in the novel. The many attempts to focus sharply on the snow are a critical judgment that the snow (as well as sky, space, silence, time, grass, clouds, in short a sense of place) serves a major function in Giants in the Earth.

These reproductions indicate also my conviction that the emphasis in Giants in the Earth is not primarily on character. Per Hansa and Beret come alive but do not strike the reader as fully developed or vividly realized characters. They do change their minds about each other, about the prairie, and each undergoes a subtle change of values, but this is not of greatest importance to the reader of the novel. Nor is the emphasis on theme. The reader's views about the meaning of life are not significantly changed by reading this novel: Rølvaag does not work a moral change in the reader's reaction, or even make him more sharply aware of the moral consequences of his own action. He is not terribly concerned with moral freedom and individual responsibility, metaphysical questions or the condition of man. The novel, moreover, does not have a tightly knit plot, brilliant language, or perceptive style.

What one comes away with after reading Giants in the Earth are "little shimmers of consciousness" (to use Mary McCarthy's phrase) regarding man's response to the prairie, particularly the untamed prairie. Rølvaag is at his best in establishing a sense of place, in typing firmly to a clearly identified place men's feelings of awe, fear, hope, confidence, dread and exuberance. It is not so important that Per Hansa and Beret are not the most sensitively realized characters; the reader is introduced to feelings which he can contemplate, feelings bound up in and incarnated in the presence of the awe-inspiring prairie. And these feelings we all share whether we have ever known the prairie itself or have seen it only as it comes to life in Rølvaag's description of it.

I have tried to reincarnate these feelings in these poems, sometimes by using the exact words of the novel, sometimes by significant changes (as in Per Hansa's view of the prairie), sometimes by using the point of view used in the novel, sometimes by changing it (as I do in the last section of "The Prairie Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and is Satisfied" where the discovery of Per Hansa's body is objectively told rather than including the boys who found the body). All this is an exercise of critical judgment. I do not apologize for these judgments. I intended to make them.

Indeed one of the problems of criticism is to state in discursive language what can only be stated in artistic form. Thus the critic who is seriously concerned with art must attempt to describe, to define, to delineate what defies description, definition, delineation: the emotions which the novelist has communicated, not by direct statement but by the creation of perceptible forms expressive of those feelings. The critic often (perhaps always) fails, not necessarily because he is incompetent but because it is impossible to talk about, say Beret's feelings of fear, of perturbation, of overwhelming awe in the face of limitless unobstructed space, frightening in its emptiness. Perhaps an attempt to recreate that feeling in another perceptible form, to give it a different shape is a better criticism than a highly analytic discussion. I would hope that the attempt to put into the first person and to see from the inside how Beret feels, what emotions she experiences, is more perceptive criticism than pages of description and analysis, and that the implied difference in Beret's and Per Hansa's perceptions of the prairie as shaped in the following poems is more helpful than a comparison and contrast of their perceptions in discursive language.

Such criticism implies more than translation. At its best it is in itself creation, my final impulse in attempting these transformations. I am least certain about this last impulse. In some cases the material I was working with failed to remain anywhere near the original or was at least so different that it was neither mirror of the original nor a criticism of it, even though it sprang from the material and was related to it. In one sense such a production is a new thing, perhaps not as good as the original, but an effort, nevertheless, to create something new. The first poem--"Sun"--is an example. It begins with words found in the first two paragraphs of Giants in the Earth but then moves quickly in the second stanza to my own observations about heat. In the last three sections it returns, at least in part, to Giants in the Earth again, though even here at least one phrase is unabashedly borrowed from Willa Cather's My Antonia.

The purpose of these experiments in transformation, then, is to experience, if possible, a new reading of Giants in the Earth, to experience more fully the feelings which are shaped in the novel. I find that the exercise of trying to mirror, to criticize by finding a new but comparable shape, and, hopefully, to create new insights regarding the feelings expressed in Giants in the Earth offers a far greater opportunity to understand what the author was trying to convey, especially his attempts to see and seeing to feel the prairie, than traditional criticism. It helps, finally, to experience together with the author the act of creation. I hope that it will do the same for other readers of Giants in the Earth.

SUN

Bright clear sky.
And sun.

The heat drops in sere waves,
Wraps itself around hills and grass,
And then burrows into the ground
Until it is pushed back out
By night and cooler dirt below.

And still more sun!
It sets the heavens on fire in the morning.
It grows with the day
To quivering golden light
Emaciating the blue
Then softens into shades
Of red and purple as evening falls.

Underfoot the grass, breathed into life
By gusts of wind, is sunshine in motion.
Now and then a black wave races
Over the grass,
A cloud's gliding shadow
Swallowing the sun.

And then once more the sun
Stalks through the short grass.

THE GLORY OF THE LORD

The afternoon lay heavily on the prairie.
The southwest wind drove heavy rain clouds,
Hanging so low that the grass seemed
To bend as they swept over it where the
Plain swelled up to meet the sky.
The wind swept over the prairie
With chilly breath,
Now and then flicking a drop or rain
From the dense clouds,
At intervals a light rain falling.

Just as the day was nearly done
The cloud curtain was drawn aside and
A window appeared in the western sky,
All around it night and darkness
Hanging suspended like draperies.
The sun peeped through the window

To see what was going on down on the prairie;
He set the rainbow in the east
To show that he was well pleased.

MINE IS THE KINGDOM

"It lies high," Per Hansa thought looking
Across the boundless prairie. "There must be
A fine view from the top of that hill."
He climbed the hill. It was spacious and
Beautiful to stand high above the prairie
And look around, especially now with night falling.
"I will draw straight lines in the sky's circle,
Put fences around this emptiness--and roads.
I will tame space and make it tractable.
I will bust sod, plant wheat, hedge rows and
Fruit trees and enclose this space which now
Defies my eye to grasp any part of.
I will build a sod house first and then houses
For both chickens and pigs, roomy stables,
A magnificent storehouse and big barn,
Painted blood red, with cornices of driven snow,
And finally a royal mansion to shine in the sun,
To stand out far and wide and stop the eye
Which now looks unhindered into infinity.
This wind which moves the grass will move
My windmills. I will fill immense,
Immeasurable silence with quacking
And grunting, mooing and neighing.
I will solve the riddle of the prairies.
I will write my signature on its
Anonymity and people its solitudes.
This vast stretch of land is going to be mine--
Yes, mine--and no one can drive me away."
His heart beat faster. He threw his shoulders
Back, walking more erect. "Good God," He panted,
"This kingdom is going to be mine."

THE FIRST FURROW

Planting the share firmly in the ground,
Per Hansa spoke to the oxen: "Come now,
Move along, you lazy rascals."
Joy surged over him as he sank the
Plow in the fertile land for the first time.
The oxen stretched their muscles.
The plow moved, sank deeper.
The first furrow was breaking.

It was long. . .and crooked.
Tough of fiber, the sod which had
Slumbered undisturbed for ages
Would not give up its hold without a struggle.
Gleaming and glistening under the morning sun,
Its rich black mold gave promise of fertility
"This is not just ordinary soil
For oats or barley, or potatoes, or hay.
It is the soil for wheat, the king of grains.
I will plow many more furrows today."

FACING THE GREAT DESOLATION

A few white downy snowflakes
Headed for nowhere,
Following no common course,
Hang quivering in the air,
Float about and fall in great
Oscillating circles,
Finally reach the ground
And disappear.

The sun peeps out in the morning,
Gliding across the sky as always,
But without life and strength.
At evening the sun finally awakes,
Grows big and blushing and
Floods the western sky
With a wanton richness of color that
Runs up on streams to meet the coming night.

Then one morning--October nearly over--
The sun can not get his eyes open.
The heavens rest close
Above the plain,
Grey dense, and still.
Bleak, grey, God-forsaken empty desolation
Stretches out on every hand,
The prairie threatening to swallow up
People, cows, sod houses and all.

THE TROLL

In the west a dark opaque mass
Writhes and swells with life,
A giant troll belching up sooty smoke
All over the sky.
Under the rim of the on-rushing cloud

A bluish black shadow settles on the prairie,
A weird silence falls, the day swallowed in gloom.
High above the Troll hisses sharply,
Mingled with growls like thunder.
He howls and whines, enveloping all
In a grey black spume,
Making men's hands disappear
From in front of his eyes.
Men were afraid,
Helpless children in dark silence.

PETER VICTORIOUS

An endless plain stretches
From Kansas far into the Canadian North--
God alone knows how far--
From the Mississippi to the Rockies,
Miles without number,
Endless, beginningless,
A gray waste,
Empty silence,
Boundless cold and snow
Everlasting wind,
Nothing else to the ends of the world,
A universe of dead whiteness.
Blizzards from out of the northwest raged,
Swooped down and stirred up a grayish white fury.

Monsterlike the prairie lay there,
Sucked in her breath one week
And blew it out again the next,
Stretched herself voluptuously,
Giantlike, full of cunning, and
Laughed softly into the night,
Scornful of man,
Wrapping his huts in a thick
Wooly darkness, black and heavy.

But inside the sod house
A tiny newcomer
Wrapped in pink silks,
Tender flesh so fine and delicate
That men were afraid to touch it
With rude hands, held out the promise of life
Greater than storm or space or silence.

WE ARE TERRIBLY FAR FROM HOME

Sitting on the summit of a prairie hill,
Beret tries to fathom the riddle
Of the prairie, her eyes wandering
Aimlessly over this wind-swept void,
Stretching endlessly in every direction.
Choked by solitude of endless sky,
Fragile and impotent against the
Timless grass, she feels fear breathing vague
And intangible dread over her shoulders.
"No heart beats in this formless prairie;
It has no soul that can be touched or cares.
Silence lies heavier here than in church.
The grass, trembling in the slightest breath,
Stands erect and quiet, listening,
In the great hush of evening, for sound
Of man, or bird, or insect, but in vain."
Turning from the grim and awful darkness
Of the prairie, Beret looks up into
The stars. Darkness and infinity
Slowly creep with the shadows of night
Across the quiet sky.
"I am erased here; there is nothing
To hide behind; no landmarks show us where
We are, no roads lead us to a world
We know. We are terribly far from home."

WE MUST GO BACK

"We cannot stay here for the winter,
Per Hansa. We will be wild beasts if
We stay. Everything human in us will be
Blotted out. How can we be victorious
Out here, where the evil one gets all?
There is no wood for fire, no food,
Nothing human. Nothing real.
This is no country for civilized men,
Only beasts and savages.
There are unspeakable things
Out there in the limitless void.
The great stillness is life asleep;
We must go back to live.
Out here no one pays attention
To our tears. . . . It's too open and cold.
God is not in the silence, the space.
We must go back!"

WHERE WILL HE BURY ME?

A cold piercing wind from the northwest
Blew all day.
It moaned about the corners at night.
Snow flew.
More snow flew.
No sun, no sky,
The air grey, an ashen mist
Which breathed a deathlychill;
It hung around and above
The sod house, thick and frozen.
At night there was a full moon
Somewhere behind the veil and
The mist grew luminous and alive.
Now trolls are surely abroad.

"Here in the monotonous sameness
Grey sky, damp, icy cold
Snow falling, time has come
To a standstill.
Where will he bury me?
This land of wolves and snow,
Of utter desolation and solitude
Is a lonely land for a grave.

It would be pleasant to lie in the churchyard
At home, enclosed by a massive stone wall,
Broad and heavy, no wall more reliable,
Where I sat when I was still
My father's little Beret.
No fear dwelt in that place.
I jumped over the graves with the boys.
My family, generation after generation, rested
Comforted by the church in the middle,
The churchyard surrounded by a row
Of venerable trees, looking silently
Down on the peace and stillness.

But here, where will he bury me here?
Now, in the dead of winter,
The ground frozen hard!
How would he go about it?

He must dig deep,
I must tell him to dig deep.
The wolves howl so unearthly at night.
It is a lonely land for a grave."

THE PRAIRIE DRINKS THE BLOOD OF CHRISTIAN MEN AND IS SATISFIED

I. HANS OLSA

"It's the minister I need, Per Hansa.
Don't you think the weather will soon
Be better?" He lay perfectly still.
Then: "Don't you think so?
It is terrible to fall into the hands
Of the living God." The sick man groped
For Per Hansa's hand, and did not seem
To want to let it go. He acted like
A child who had teased and teased
Until he had finally got his way.
"I hated to ask you right out,
But I knew you would go as soon as it was
Possible--that has always been the way with you--
Now I can sleep in comfort."

II. BERET

"Now I have brought things to a sorry pass!
I know I said too much--but what could I do?
Some one has to go, and I had no one else
To ask." She saw Per Hansa coming back, quickly
Put the coffeepot on the stove and began to set
The table. "I'll put on a table cloth to make
Things nice for him. He mustn't think I hold
Hard feelings." In the kitchen window
Beret stood watching him; her soft, kindly eyes
Large and questioning. "Wasn't he coming in?
Surely, surely, he would come." She hurried
To the door, flung it open, ran out on the steps,
And tried to call him--he mustn't leave this way.
But he had already gone beyond the range of
Human voice; the westerly gusts, driving full
against
Her, snatched her words away. Her eyes filled
With tears. Furious blasts came swirling
Out of the grey, boundless dusk, sweeping
The snow in stinging clouds, whirling it, round
And round, dropping it only to pick it up again.
The cold penetrated the very marrow of her bones.
Per Hansa soon disappeared in the whirling waste.

III. PER HANSA

"No man can cross the prairie
On a night like this and come out
Alive. The world seems upside
Down today. Here is Hans Olsa,
Driving himself out of his mind because
He can't have a minister--
And no better man in all Christendom.
And Beret insisting that I leap right
Into the arms of death. By God it's a
Strange world we live in." He struck out
Westward, looking once at his home
In the dim distance. Whirls of snow flew
High over the housetop; sometimes the house
Itself disappeared. He sighed deeply,
Brushed his eyes with his mitts, and
Started on his way. "Perhaps it isn't so
Dangerous, after all. The wind had been
Steady all day. I'm sorry I didn't drink
The coffee Beret made for me. Now she'll
Go around feeling uhhappy, just because I'm
So touchy." His thoughts of home were
Tender and warm. He laughed softly at them.
"It would be fun to listen to Permand
Praying for me tonight." The swirling
Dusk grew deeper, darkness gathering fast.
More snow began to fall.
Whirls of it came off the tops of the drifts,
Circled about, and struck him full
In the face. No danger--the wind held steady.
At home all was well.
Beret was saying her prayers with Permand.
Move on! Move on!

IV. GIANTS IN THE EARTH

A cluster of low hills rises
Out of the warm May prairie.
Here and there a few stray settlers
Had begun to dig in.
On one of the hillsides,
An abandoned haystack
On the west side of which
Sat a man, his back to the mouldering hay,
Two pairs of skis near by,
One beside him on the ground,
The other tied to his back,

His heavy stocking cap pulled
Down well over his forehead
And large mittens on his hands.
On each he clutched a staff.
Sitting there,
He looked like he was resting awhile,
Waiting for better skiing,
His face ashen and drawn
His eyes set toward the west.

The Problem of the Loss of Culture in Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, and Their Father's God

by WAYNE F. MORTENSEN
Waconia

O. E. Rølvaag's trilogy, Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, and Their Fathers' God, appears on the surface to be simply a series of novels concerned with the physical settlement of the frontier. However, Rølvaag's trilogy does not primarily deal with the physical settlement of the land. Instead, its main emphasis is on the psychological experiences of the immigrant people involved and the effect of the physical settlement on their inner lives.

Rølvaag's immigrant pioneers are basically simple, sturdy people, but they are also portrayed as cultural heirs of Northern Europe. They are free men not accustomed to serfdom and so they cannot live as industrial workers bound to an industrial system. These pioneers, instead, choose to become land owners and live a life basically of their own making. (Theodore Jorgenson and Nora Solum, Ole Edvart Rolvaag [New York, 1939], pp. 394-395). It is this choosing of the land that gives Rølvaag a basis for his psychological study. These pioneer farmers could build homes to shelter them from nature, plant seeds and cause crops to grow and eventually force nature to yield them some tribute for their efforts. But the scars they inflict upon nature are nothing in comparison to the psychological scars which nature inflicts on their souls. Nature takes civilization from man through loneliness, silence and the lack of social intercourse and homely comforts. As Henry Commager, in paraphrasing Jesus, states: "What indeed shall it profit a man that he gain the world if he lose his soul." (Henry Commager, "The Literature of the Pioneer West," Minnesota History, VIII [December 1927], 324-326).

Rølvaag then, is dealing in his trilogy with the physical and the psychological struggles of the immigrant pioneer farmer, but he is especially concerned with the psychological struggle relating to the loss of native culture and tradition:

> There is an intimate kinship between soul and the soil in which it grows. Traditions are spun slowly: they can never be bought. To build a Fatherland is a long process ... Transplantation of human souls, even under the most favorable conditions, is a difficult process .... And

> the more sensitive the soul, the more dangerous the experiment...." (Jorgenson, pp. 395-396.)

Oscar Handlin further elaborates this same crisis in the lives of immigrants in his work The Uprooted. He states:

> The immigrants lived in crisis because they were uprooted. In transplantation, while the old roots were sundered, before the new were established, the immigrants existed in an extreme situation. The shock and the effects of the shock, persisted for many years; and their influence reached down to generations which themselves never paid the cost of crossing. (Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted [New York, 1951], p.6.)

It is, then,this inner struggle over loss of native culture and tradition that Rølvaag develops in Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious and Their Fathers' God. Rølvaag develops the struggle over loss of culture and tradition because of a fear that the struggle, if too demanding, can be fatal not only to an individual but also to a nation.

In Giants in the Earth, Rølvaag confronts the reader with two basically different personalities, Per Hansa and his wife Beret. Per is the independent spirit and self-rationalizing utilitarian of the Western World. He is, as Joseph Baker states: "America at its most American." (Joseph Baker, "Western Man Against Nature," College English, IV [October 1942], 21.) Per works hardest and lives most courageously. Nothing seems to be beyond his grasp. When there is land to be plowed, he plows twelve to sixteen hours a day. When the Indians come to the Spring Creek settlement, it is Per alone who is left to defend it. Per is optimistic and eagerly attempts to build his future. The past life in Norway, as a fisherman, was too constraining for him. It is here in the Dakota Terrotory that he will build his future, following his own inclinations. Rølvaag describes his independence as: "...the father never liked to follow an old path while there was still unexplored land left around him him...." (O.E. Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth [New York, 1929], p. 114.) It is basically this independence from the past and optimism about the future that brings Per, apparent physical conquereor of the prairie,into opposition with his wife Beret.

Beret is a delicate woman who yearns for her past homeland of Norway. She loves Per greatly, but lives in perpetual fear of God's punishment visited on her for having become pregnant before her marriage. She comes with Per to America because of his longings, not her own. Beret feels that: "if the Lord God had intended these infinities to be peopled, He would not have left them desolate down through all the ages...." (Giants, p. 188.) This feeling of vast desolation and evil in regard to

the land has filled Beret with the fear that she has forsaken all that is good in abandoning her parents and homeland. Her grandfather's trunk, brought with her from Norway, becomes her only source of safety and strength.

Beret's and Per's opposite feelings for tradition and the past are portrayed in various episodes. The first episode concerns the land markers. Soon after coming to Spring Creek, Per discovers land stakes belonging to O'Hara and Gill set in Hans Olsa's and Tønseten's (fellow Norwegian immigrants) land. Per worries about it but eventually digs up the stakes, taking great care to leave no trace of his action. Beret discovers the stakes in the barn and is horrified and frightened by his action. In Norway there is no greater crime than to meddle with another's land stakes. Later, when the Irishmen O'Hara and Gill come to claim their land, Per Hansa's rationalization for his act comes to light. The motivation for his action centers primarily in his interest in protecting his friends, Hans Olsa and Tønseten, from losing their land. In the end, however, his action becomes legally justified in his own mind, because the Irishmen have no legal papers on the land, as do his friends. Per, after the Irishmen leave, even tells Hans Olsa and Tønseten of his action. He feels no guilt, but Beret is shocked. She is convinced that the evil land in which they now live has so influenced her husband as to make him disregard all past tradition and law.

Beret's fears of the land grow worse and she is nearing complete mental collapse at the birth of her third son. The son's birth, however, does much to restore Beret, but again she and Per differ in regard to tradition. Per names the new boy Peder Victorious, a name completely foreign to Norway. Beret is convinced that Per is being too bold and confident in giving the boy such a name. Names again enter into the psychological conflict between Per and Beret when Per shortens the family last name from the traditional Peter's son to Holm. Per feels it is entirely appropriate for America, but Beret again senses that they are wrong in discarding the names of their fathers. It is a sign of disrespect for the past.

Beret's mental condition improves after the birth of her son, but it is the traveling Norwegian minister who eventually brings Beret back to a level of stability. The minister, who is never named, possesses understanding of the immigrant pioneer, for he is one of them. He does not simply expound dogma; instead, he attempts to heal souls and teach meaningful ethics.

As Theodore Jorgenson states:

> In the first sermon in Per Hansa's hut, the minister expounded cultural and ethical teachings that had been close to Rølvaag's heart for decades: the thought of being builders of a kingdom, of being the successors of earlier builders of their own kind, of the nobility that comes from the continuity of history and the sequence of race, and of the responsibility that falls upon those who build. (Jorgenson, p. 350.)

The minister views the settlement of America as a parallel to the actions of the ancient children of Israel. Of the American settlers he states:

> For the kingdom which they were founding here would be a work of praise, a blessing to coming generations, only insofar as they remained steadfast to the truths implanted in them as children by their fathers. There was no other foundation to build upon: indeed what other refuge did men have? ...would they do as the ten lost tribes of Israel did, and disappear out of the world, or would they do as the two tribes had done, and never perish among men? (Rølvaag, Giants, p. 374.)

Beret's mind is relieved to a certain extent by the minister's words, but she is not released from her very rigid and dogmatic views of guilt and tradition. In a sense the minister's words strengthen her position and show Per Hansa's extreme independence to be wrong. But Per and Beret are separated by more than just their beliefs regarding tradition. Beret is afraid of the joy of life itself and it is this very joy that Per attempts to live.

There are basically two demons in Giants in the Earth, the evil nature of the plains and the evil of man-instilled fear. Rølvaag entitles his last chapter "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied." It is Per whose blood is to be taken. Per grows somewhat haggard and gray after Beret's mental collagse, but he also comes to understand what will happen. When Per is driven by Beret to obtain a minister for the dying Hans Olsa in the face of a tremendous blizzard, he understands and accepts the death he will find in the nature of the plains. He also understands the fears that force Beret to ask him to go. Per dies in the storm optimistically facing the west.

Rølvaag presents Beret and Per Hansa as two people with contrasting views of tradition. Beret clings tenaciously to the past as an obsession while Per leaps optimistically into the future. Neither actually succeeds. Per has founded his home but dies in spite of his great physical and mental prowess. Beret lives on in an unhealthy mental state. It is interesting to note that it is the tradition-minded Beret who lives on to watch over the children whom Per has fathered.

Rølvaag presents in Giants in the Earth certain areas of conflict that revolve around the problem of a past culture placed in a new environment. In Peder Victorious, however, he presents the problem of being a Norwegian in America as the central theme. The struggle is not between man and nature but rather between man and man.

Pioneer settlements are by their very nature a mixture of the old and new. The Spring Creek settlement in Peder Victorious is no exception. For Beret, the old culture of Norway is the primary world. She has brought with her to America her native language, religion, and customs. Each is vital to her continued existence in America. Peder is also a part of this world in that, essentially, Beret provides the basis of his environment. But Peder does not know the importance of the old world for he is not fully aware of his own inner being. He is young and is growing up not as a Norwegian, but as a native-born American. Although Peder speaks the language of his parents and attends the church of their religion, he is also attending an American country school. The school provides him with a new language, new values, and a pride in a new culture. No real connection is ever made for Peder between the old and the new by either his mother or the school. It is a connection that Peder must eventually come to make for himself. Because of this lack of connection, Peder learns to live not in the world of his mother, but in the world he is constantly being confronted by -- the world of American culture. (Jorgenson, pp. 383-384.) Beret then, is again confronted with opposition. She is determined to retain for her family her native customs and language. Because of Beret's tenacity in remaining true to the old and Peder's desire to adopt American ways, the nature of Peder Victorious becomes one of revolt.

The nature of Peder's revolt takes several forms, primarily in the areas of the school, the church, and the family. (Roy Meyer, The Middle Western Farm Novel [Lincoln, 1965], p. 64.) Peder begins school at a mixed Irish-Norwegian school. While there he becomes a close friend of Charley Doheny, an Irish boy, and does at times accompany Charley to his home. Peder also is strongly encouraged by his teacher to speak only English and he comes to glory in its use. Because of Peder's growing friendliness with the Irish and his constant use of the English language, Beret transfers him to an all Norwegian school. Beret considers the Irish as outsiders and especially so since they are Catholic. As Catholics they represent for Beret a direct and immediate danger to Peder's Norwegian Lutheran religious background. Beret also considers the English language a danger, for through it Peder moves farther and farther away from her and her influence upon him. She does understand the language somewhat, but she maintains that the family should hold to the native Norwegian. Rølvaag himself comments on the difficulty of giving up a language:

> The giving up of one language and acquiring a new necessitates a spiritual readjustment far beyond the power of the average man. The old he cannot let go because that would mean starvation to his soul. The new he cannot master because the process is beyond human power. (Jorgenson, p. 396.)

Beret fights for the Norwegian language because it alone expresses the life she knows.

Peder's revolt from the past can also be found in the area of the church. In church Peder is attracted to Pastor Gabrielson, a minister who realizes that the English language will eventually replace the Norwegian. Because he realizes what is to come, Pastor Gabrielson conducts informal services in English and also gives Peder an English translation of the Bible. Peder is encouraged by him to become a minister and Pastor Gabrielson often uses Peder to read scripture in the English language. Beret again is in opposition to Peder for she maintains that to reject their native Norwegian would in the end lead to a loss of national identity. She is also unsure of Peder's willingness to place himself in the hands of God.

The final and most serious area of revolt for Peder comes within the home, for it also involves in a real way the other two areas of conflict. Peder is developing an intellectual skepticism, a skepticism that is in opposition to his mother's legalistic and traditional manner. He also is taking an avid interest in the politics of the Dakotas. Peder's growing skepticism and revolt take him away from the native language of his mother and family, and in so doing remove him from Beret's cultural and religious discipline. He is moving toward a personal freedom of body and spirit. Beret does influence him but her pessimistic view of life and her basic fear of this new land cause him to attempt to free himself from it all, as just so much excess out of the past. (Jorgenson, pp. 384-386.) Peder's primary revolt at home concerns his interest in Susie Doheny, the daughter of one of the Irish Catholic families in Spring Creek. Peder wants to marry Susie and this represents for Beret perhaps the ultimate revolt. Beret fights the proposed marriage until she believes she has seen Per, her former husband, come to her in a dream and instruct her to give her permission. Rølvaag's final description of Beret after her permission for the marriage is given, is perhaps strange: "Suddenly her face lit up into a bright smile, like that of a child who has fussed long and then unexpectedly gains his point." (O.E. Rølvaag, Peder Victorious [New York, 1929], p. 350.) Beret seemingly has lost her struggle for Peder's inner being, but according to Rølvaag Beret may smile because she realizes that Peder's revolt from the past must eventually lead him to a point of personal decision. Peder arrives at a point of decision, in regard to his marriage to Susie, where he must choose as a

complete and responsible person. But Beret smiles, because she hopes that Peder will eventually reach a point, in his development as an individual, where he can see the problems of being a second generation American, who has abandoned his cultural heritage. (Jorgenson, pp. 383-385.)

The story that Rølvaag develops in Peder Victorious is that of the crucial break between immigrants of the first and those of the second generation. Rølvaag describes it as a cruel and inevitable break in which the first generation must watch the second slip away. The second generation man "...grows into a man having no tradition , having no background; life begins, so to speak, with him." (Jorgenson, p. 397.) Life begins again with Peder in Their Fathers' God, Rølvaag's final book in the trilogy. It is in that final book that Peder must make his choice concerning his involvement with past traditions.

Their Fathers' God is a novel of human conflict. A conflict among Peder who is liberal and non religious; Susie his wife, who is Irish and Catholic; and Beret who is a traditional orthodox Lutheran, is the central area of concern for Rølvaag. It would seem that Rølvaag has set up a novel primarily revolving around the problem of religion, but actually, as Jorgenson states in Rolvaag's biography:

> Throughout his mature days Rølvaag was a cultural and racial purist. He believed that high values come into the human realm by way of personalization rather than through diffusion, through purity of strain rather than through any melting pot. He believed in cultivation rather than in leveling. (Jorgenson, p. 413.)

Rølvaag is actually concerned only with the cultural differences, rather than those concerning religion.

Peder and Susie are well matched biologically, according to Rølvaag, but in marrying they have ignored vast social and cultural differences in their backgrounds. Peder continues to show independence of thought and as a result of it is continually in opposition to both Susie's and Beret's religious inclinations. He also is beginning to take a more active interest in politics. After a long drought in the area, the local townspeople are in favor of hiring a rainmaker to bring rain. Peder organizes men to fight against this decision and eventually gives a speech at the council meeting against the rainmaker. Peder, with his skeptical mind, is actively fighting any form of superstition, whether it be the rainmaker or a mystical part of either Beret's or Susie's religion.

Susie and Beret although seemingly at odds, are actually quite similar in some respects. Both are instinctively filled with a sense of motherhood and religion. Susie has her son and her Catholicism, while Beret has Peder and her Lutheranism.

Each is by her very nature, filled with a deep sense of loyalty to her people.

Peder stands in the midst of this cultural conflict, attempting to set his own course. Much of the time he seems bogged down in materialism. It is not, however, until both Beret and Susie have secretly had his son baptized, and until after Beret's death that he begins to see his way more clearly. Peder begins to understand, through the women's struggle to baptize the child against his wishes and through Beret's death ritual, that there is some merit in transmitting a cultural heritage. Nikoline Johansen, a girl recently arrived from Norway, also inspires Peder to understand that he could be a great leader of men, but that he must have worthwhile standards to offer his followers. Reverand Kaldahl, the minister in Their Fathers' God, offers this advice:

> The great deeds of the past were made possible simply because the men who performed them remained true to their traditions and went on building and achieving as their forefathers had done before them. What do we want today?... We set higher value on aping strange manners and customs than in guarding our God given heritage .... We are ashamed of the age old speech of our forefathers; we lack pride in our worthy ancestry. Such an attitude can never, I tell you, no never build a nation. Like dead timber we will go into the building. We may harm; certainly we cannot be of much help! (O.E. Rølvaag, Their Fathers' God [New York, 1931], p. 208.)

Peder and Susie love each other but their love cannot encompass tremendous cultural boundaries. Peder chooses to lead and in leading will perhaps make use of his cultural heritage. He realizes that he cannot deny its existence, for it is out of his cultural heritage that his values and the values of the men who follow him come. But Peder will not live pessimistically and bound to tradition as Beret has. Susie, because she is bound to the past, cannot follow Peder. Peder commits himself to attempt to be the master of his cultural tradition and to use it to establish his freedom, while Susie is a servant to her culture and is bound tightly to it. As long as Peder remains at home with Susie, his goal to lead is obscured, but once out in the mainstream of political life he is unable to delay the inevitable. The inevitable for Rølvaag is that Susie leaves Peder to return with their son to her family and her tradition. (Jorgenson, pp. 423-424.) Peder accepts it, for he has reached the point that Beret in Peder Victorious had hoped for. He has reached the point where he sees the problems of a man with no cultural heritage. Peder finds himself lacking a cultural tradition.

Throughout his trilogy Rølvaag emphasizes the necessity of

the pioneers maintaining connections with their cultural past. He fears a cultural chaos if the old is completely abandoned without being replaced by something of equal value. In his presentation of Per, Beret, and Peder, Rølvaag has successfully illumnated his fears concerning cultural disorientation. Per and Beret represent the extremes. Per can abandon connections with the past and leap optimistically into the future, but he dies in the attempt. Beret, however, must maintain such a strong hold on her native culture in her attempt to survive that her life leads to mental instability.

It is in Peder's life that Rølvaag concentrates the problem of a loss of culture. For it is in Peder and his struggles with home, church, and state, that Rølvaag provides a man coming to a full awareness of the need in life for a cultural tradition. Rølvaag maintains in Peder that no person can accomplish any important creative tasks without a cultural heritage. In his trilogy Rølvaag states that physically the settlement of the frontier has been established. Per, Beret and Peder see to that. Nature cannot uproot them,even with death. The physical settlement is successful for society as a whole. Rølvaag, however, is not so certain that the settlement is advancing toward a purposeful cultural achievement or that the cost has not been too great for the individual involved. Concerning this problem, Roy Meyer states:

> Rølvaag's fears of cultural chaos if the old language were given up and intermarriage permitted may seem unjustified in the light of subsequent history, but there is no doubt that he understood and clearly depicted the tensions experienced by the immigrants and the first generation Americans, while the process was going on .... By including these problems in the story of pioneering and presenting them with unequaled insight and understanding, he adds a new dimension to the fictional treatment of the pioneer experience. (Meyer, p. 66.)

Rølvaag, as Meyer, notes, gives to the American Frontier experience a new dimension. But, in spite of Meyer's statement labelling Rølvaag's fears as perhaps being unjustified, the question Rølvaag raises at the end of Their Fathers' God -- what of Peder's and America's future? -- is still present. The land has been settled and Rølvaag's kingdom established, but America's cultural future remains a question mark.

From Left to Right:
PROF. P. G. SCHMIDT, PROF. FELLAND, PROF. CARL MELBY, PROF. O. E. RØLVAAG
c. 1911 at Lake Marion

minnesota council of teachers of english

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