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THE NORWEGIAN HERITAGE IN AMERICA:
RØLVAAG'S CONCERN FOR A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

BY

HAZEL L. HALVORSON

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
State University

1974

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To Dr. Ruth Alexander I express my sincere appreciation for her guidance in the completion of this project, and to my family I repeat my thanks for their patience and encouragement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

Ole Rølvaag has been acclaimed as an interpreter of the Norwegian immigrants, particularly those who settled on the Midwestern prairies. In his probing of the psychological side of pioneering, he added a new dimension to what Henry Commager calls the "two grand themes of American history"--immigration and the westward movement.¹

The central purpose of Rølvaag's life was two-pronged: the interpretation of his countrymen's experience in the New World and the preservation of Norwegian heritage in America. The latter cause he championed for two reasons: 1) to help the immigrants make their adjustment to the new land, and 2) to enrich the culture of America. The significance of his central purpose was not limited to his lifetime. Much of his philosophy is applicable in present-day America. His sympathetic understanding of his particular kind of minority group, the Norwegian-American, is helpful in establishing attitudes toward minority groups that are currently clamoring for recognition. There is still validity to his persistent pronouncement

¹Henry Commager, "The Literature of the Pioneer West," Minnesota History, 8 (December 1927), 327.

that a man needs roots in order to be a whole person, and that these roots convey to America a wealth and stability that rightfully belong in its culture in order to counteract a tendency toward shallow materialism.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the relationship between the novels of Ole Rølvaag and the author's central concern. The analysis will be accomplished by 1) focusing on the immigrant at each stage of his experience and 2) determining the place of his cultural tradition in his experience in the New World.

The thesis is divided into five principal chapters, followed by the summary and conclusion. In chapter two, the entire predicament of the immigrant is explained as it is set forth in the Fourth of July oration in The Third Life of Per Smevik and as it relates to Rølvaag's own life. Chapter three concentrates on the plight of the emigrant as he leaves Norway, as revealed in The Third Life of Per Smevik and The Boat of Longing. Chapter four is devoted to the cost of transplantation of the immigrant onto the prairie, based primarily on Giants in the Earth. Chapter five probes the problem of assimilation into American life by members of the second generation. The basis of the study is Peder Victorious and Their Fathers' God. Chapter six looks at a sidetracked second generation immigrant as revealed in Pure Gold and returns to Rølvaag's central

theme by examining Reflections on a Heritage, considered "Rølvaag's pronunciamento on the possible significance of the ancestral heritage."²

Review of Pertinent Literature on the Topic

Two full-length studies have been published on Rølvaag. The most definitive and complete source of information is Ole Edvart Rølvaag: A Biography, written by two of his colleagues at St. Olaf College, Theodore Jorgenson and Nora Solum, in 1939. The volume gives a complete analysis of his life, his political and cultural ideas, and his literary accomplishments.

Paul Reigstad of Pacific Lutheran University has written a more recent volume, published in 1972, entitled Rølvaag: His Life and Art. This book focuses on Rølvaag's accomplishments as a novelist.

Norwegian-American Studies, the annual publication of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, has printed numerous critical articles dealing with Rølvaag from the viewpoint of the social scientist as well as of the literary critic. Volume twenty-six, 1974, for instance, contains an article by Raychel Haugrud, entitled "Rølvaag's

²Julius E. Olson, "Ole Edvart Rølvaag, 1876-1931: In Memoriam," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 7 (1933), 128.

Search for Soria Moria." Several articles by Einar Haugen have proved extremely helpful in the preparation of this paper.

The winter 1972 edition of the Minnesota English Journal was devoted entirely to articles on Rølvaag, including one written by his daughter, Mrs. Ella Valborg Tweet.

All of Rølvaag's major works were originally written in Norwegian. Not until the publication in Norway of the two volumes which became Giants in the Earth did Rølvaag consider translating his works into English. Quite by chance a free-lance journalist and short story writer from the East, Lincoln Colcord, saw a news story about the Norwegian novels. He impulsively wrote to Rølvaag, urging him to have the books translated into English. The Rølvaag papers in the archives of the Norwegian-American Historical Association in Northfield, Minnesota, contain the correspondence between the two writers, which led to Colcord's work in translating the novel and making contacts for its publication by Harper and Brothers.

The translating involved several people in addition to Colcord and Rølvaag. Colcord worked from a rough English version prepared by the other translators. After rewriting the material in his own way, Colcord submitted it to

Rølvaag, and then together they worked to get as close to the original intent as possible.³ Rølvaag's daughter has explained the task as "an independent artistic work, just as demanding and difficult as writing a book itself," aimed at preserving the "innate feeling, the subtleties of meaning."⁴ Comparable care was exercised in translating his other novels. All of his works of fiction originally published in Norwegian have now appeared in English translation except an early "apprentice" novel entitled Paa Glemte Veie (On Forgotten Paths).

Omkring Fedrearven (Concerning Our Heritage), a collection of essays in which Rølvaag sets forth his cultural philosophy, was published in 1922 but has not been printed in English. However, a translation is currently being completed by Brynhild C. Rowberg, who recently retired to Purcellville, Virginia, after a career in the Foreign Service. Chapter by chapter, copies of the translation, entitled Reflections on a Heritage, have been forwarded for use in this paper.

Another valuable source of information was the Rølvaag

³Roy W. Meyer, The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 58.

⁴Ella Valborg Tweet, "Recollections of My Father, O. E. Rølvaag," Minnesota English Journal, 8 (Winter 1972), 15.

Symposium held at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 28 and 29, 1974, in connection with the centennial observance of the college. Papers on Rølvaag's novels were presented by Robert L. Stevens of Northern Arizona University, Barbara Meldrum of the University of Idaho, Raychel Haugrud Reiff of Texas A & I University, and Paul Reigstad of Pacific Lutheran University. These papers, together with the addresses of Robert Scholes of Brown University and Einar Haugen of Harvard University, will be published.

Background information on Norway was obtained from two sources: T. K. Derry's A History of Modern Norway 1814-1972 and G. Gathorne Hardy's Norway. Theodore Blegen's two-volume Norwegian Migration to America provided a thorough survey in this area. Finally, Einar Molland's Church Life in Norway and The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans by E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene Fevold supplied important information concerning this aspect of Norwegian immigration to America.

CHAPTER II

REJECTION OF THE MELTING POT

Out of Ole Rølvaag's concern for the Norwegian-American immigrant in the Midwest grew the conviction that the Norwegian heritage should be preserved and inculcated into American life. Rølvaag firmly believed that the retention of Old World culture would ease the newcomers' painful adjustment to a foreign environment. Even more significant was his conviction that the pure strains of Nordic culture would add richness and stability to American culture.

In his concern for the Norwegian immigrant, Rølvaag exhibited wisdom and sympathy that could be emulated today by those working toward a genuine understanding of the various ethnic groups that make up America. In his insistence on the need to remember the racial past and to be proud of exhibiting and developing the best in ethnic culture, he has a contribution to make to contemporary multi-ethnic America. Rølvaag anticipated the future. In fact, he looked on himself as a modern-day prophet.¹

Rølvaag's emphasis on the validity of racial

¹Erling Dittmann, "The Immigrant Mind: A Study of Rølvaag," Christian Liberty, 1 (October 1952), 11.

backgrounds was prophetic of the current theory that America is not a melting pot in which the immigrant sheds his cultural peculiarities and emerges as a homogenized "new man," but an ethnically diversified nation.

The melting pot theory was expressed early in American literature by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman who became an American citizen in the late eighteenth century. In the essay "What Is an American?" from his Letters from an American Farmer (1782), he writes:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.²

Crèvecoeur's attitude reflects the thinking of the eighteenth century enlightened man, who sees man as a part of an orderly, rational universe. To put aside all traces of homeland seems a simple process for one who emphasizes external reality and reason rather than the imagination or the feelings. Since reason governs all things, man can devise a method for establishing harmony with the world about

² Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, "What Is an American?" from Letters from an American Farmer, in Larzer Ziff, The Literature of America: Colonial Period (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 370.

him. Crèvecoeur says: "We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment."³ Typical of eighteenth century reasoning is his emphasis on the economic advantages of the New World. To him, the unifying factor for the immigrant is "Ubi panis, ibi patria"--Where there is bread, there is the fatherland.⁴

The romantic notion of the new American race from the melting pot suffered setbacks as history proved that the anticipated blending was not taking place.⁵ Foreigners retained their racial and cultural identity. Fear and suspicion of foreign elements led to agitation against immigrants during World War I. Like other foreign-born Americans, Rølvaag responded with intensified pride in his ethnic background and became adamant and articulate in urging that his people hold onto their language and customs.⁶

³Crèvecoeur, p. 371.

⁴Crèvecoeur, p. 370.

⁵Robert E. Spiller and others, eds., Literary History of the United States, rev. ed. in 1 vol. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), p. 677.

⁶For a discussion of the effect of the war years on Rølvaag, see Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum, Ole Edvart Rølvaag: A Biography (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), pp. 214-35.

In recent years there has been a growing concern for minority cultures in the United States, perhaps because the designation "American" usually has meant the Anglo-Saxon white race. Lloyd Hustvedt recently called attention to the changing mood in the country, resulting in an "ethnic renaissance," given impetus by minority elements who are searching for self-identity and dignity.⁷ Awareness is growing that every human being has dignity, and his race and culture have as much worth as those of the founding fathers of America.

Along this same line of thinking is the introduction to A Nation of Nations, in which Theodore L. Gross has pointed out the obvious but often overlooked fact that "America is a nation of immigrants."⁸ Only the Indians were on hand to greet the Mayflower, with its load of immigrants, seeking the same things as later comers--freedom, opportunity, and adventure. It follows naturally that America's history cannot be computed from the year 1776 or even from the period of colonization. America had its beginning in the early cultures of all the nations out of

⁷Lloyd Hustvedt, "Ethnic Renaissance," Norwegian-American Historical Association News Letter, No. 45 (March 1972), p. 3.

⁸Theodore L. Gross, ed., A Nation of Nations: Ethnic Literature in America (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. xiii.

which the immigrants have come, as well as the culture of the native Indians.

In his dedication to the cause of one minority group, the Norwegian immigrants in the Midwest, Rølvaag speaks a word of counsel pertinent to present-day America. In his writing and throughout his entire life, Rølvaag emphasized that Norwegian-Americans should remain firmly rooted in their Norwegian heritage. However, as Hanna Astrup Larsen has pointed out, "He was not a mere propagandist for his own race; he was an interpreter of the entire problem of adjustment as it presents itself to all immigrant groups, but naturally he saw the problem through the people in whose welfare he was most intimately concerned."⁹

Rølvaag was able to interpret the immigrant's situation because he himself was an immigrant, living among his own countrymen in America, yet looking back to his home in Norway.

Ole Edvart Rølvaag was born on April 22, 1876, in a small settlement on the island of Dønna, in the district of Helgeland, far north in Nordland.¹⁰ Einar Haugen has called

⁹ Hanna Astrup Larsen, "Ole Edvart Rølvaag," American-Scandinavian Review, 20 (January 1932), 9.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information is based on Jorgenson and Solum, Rølvaag, and Einar I. Haugen, "Ole Edvart Rølvaag," DAB (1935).

the island "a small fleck of land."¹¹ The crescent-shaped isle, with its many bays, inlets, and fjords, is located within five miles of the Arctic Circle.¹² It is a land of contrasts, as Rølvaag's daughter has pointed out. "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."¹³

In his early years, Rølvaag gave little promise of the man he was to be.¹⁴ His parents were poor but respected fisherfolk, hardworking but nonetheless interested in books and music. Rølvaag's family for generations had been fishermen, spending summers in nearby waters and winters on long, hazardous trips to the Lofoten Islands. Ole was always overshadowed intellectually by his older brother, Johan, who seemed destined for distinction as a writer. Thinking that the younger boy was unfit for further education, the father withdrew him from school at the age of

¹¹Einar I. Haugen, "O. E. Rølvaag: The Man in His Work," Address given at Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 29, 1974.

¹²John Heitmann, "Ole Edvart Rølvaag," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 12 (1941), 145.

¹³Tweet, "Recollections," p. 4.

¹⁴Haugen Address.

fourteen. Ole joined a fishing crew, becoming a skillful sailor. Until he was twenty years old, he continued to spend his winters on the Lofoten fishing grounds, where life was hard and dangerous. In 1893 his fishing boat was one of the few that escaped destruction in a storm that took the lives of thousands of fishermen on the Lofoten banks. That experience induced him to consider leaving home in search of a more fulfilling life. He realized that he could not achieve his sought-for goals in Norway.¹⁵ After obtaining a ticket for America from his uncle in South Dakota, he embarked for the New World, leaving behind him a new fishing vessel, the girl he might have married, and the family he loved. "Not because he wanted to," observed Haugen, "but because he must."¹⁶

The Third Life of Per Smevik picks up the biography at this point, recounting the trip to New York and thence to Elk Point, South Dakota (disguised as Clarkfield in the novel), where he worked as a farmhand. Although it had technically been closed in 1891, the frontier was a living reality in South Dakota at the time Rølvaag arrived.¹⁷

Having learned English and having saved some money,

¹⁵Haugen Address.

¹⁶Haugen Address.

¹⁷Haugen Address.

Rølvaag began his preparatory study at the Norwegian Lutheran school, Augustana Academy, in Canton, South Dakota, in 1899. In so doing, Rølvaag rebelled against the wishes of his father, who believed that this son was not worth educating. The elder Mr. Rølvaag stubbornly clung to this opinion, even after his son had attained fame. At one time Mr. Rølvaag was being congratulated for his son's success, and his reply was: "Oh, well, it isn't anything to be ashamed of, but it doesn't amount to much. But then, I couldn't expect much more of Ole. He didn't have much sailing equipment." At another time he commented, "It doesn't take too much learning to become a teacher or a preacher in that country."¹⁸

Haugen indicated that Rølvaag's decision to return to school was crucial, because from then on he lived in an academic world. By choosing Augustana Academy and later St. Olaf College, he made the decision to stay with his own people--the Norwegian-Americans of the Midwest.¹⁹ Their predicament and welfare in the new country became the burden of his writing, teaching, and speaking.

After finishing the academy at the head of his class, Rølvaag enrolled at St. Olaf College. His daughter, Ella

¹⁸Heitmann, p. 160.

¹⁹Haugen Address.

Valborg Tweet, has recounted that he helped finance his education by working in the dormitory kitchen and carrying wood for stoves in Old Main.²⁰ During his junior year he wrote a novel, Nils and Astri, which was rejected by the publisher. Years later he rewrote parts of it, but it was never published. Reigstad calls it "an immature, moralizing, and melodramatic effort."²¹

Rølvaag was graduated with honors from St. Olaf in 1905, at the age of 29. Then followed a year of study at the University of Oslo and a summer at his home in Nordland, after an absence of nearly ten years. Once again he was exposed to the grandeur of the mountains and fjords and sea, so majestic when compared to the flat Midwestern prairies. During his year in Norway he suffered periods of serious illness that recurred during his life and caused periods of depression.

Rølvaag began his teaching at St. Olaf College in the fall of 1906 and continued until just before his death in 1931. When suitable textbooks were not available for his courses in Norwegian, he prepared them himself--a dictionary, a grammar handbook, and a series of readers. Through

²⁰ Tweet, "Recollections," p. 10.

²¹ Paul Reigstad, Rølvaag: His Life and Art (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 34.

a course in immigration which he introduced, he attempted to enlighten his students concerning the contributions that their forefathers had made to American culture, and which they, too, could make.²²

Rølvaag became a moving force in organizations formed to promote knowledge of his people's ethnic background, such as the Norwegian-American Historical Association, for which he served as corresponding secretary until his death. His daughter sensed the importance of his work in this area. She commented: "Ahead of his time, he was helping to develop an ethnic center in the Midwest."²³

Jorgenson observes that "Rølvaag often said that he was a novelist by choice and a teacher by necessity."²⁴ His courses in Norwegian literature were formative in his apprentice years of writing. His favorite author in early years was Jonas Lie, a Nordland writer who was "a man of the sea, a dreamer, and an idealist fundamentally related to Ole Edvart himself."²⁵ Bjørnsterne Bjørnson influenced Rølvaag's style, but the greatest influence was exerted by

²² Tweet, "Recollections," p. 12.

²³ Tweet, "Recollections," p. 13.

²⁴ Theodore Jorgenson, "The Main Factors in Rølvaag's Authorship," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 10 (1938), 144.

²⁵ Jorgenson, pp. 144-45.

Henrik Ibsen, during the last decade of Rølvaag's life. Brand was a favorite play, and elements of Brand's determined idealism can be found in Rølvaag's characters--Per Hansa and Peder Victorious, for example. Rølvaag often quoted Brand's words to the peasant in Act I:

But help is useless to the man
Who does not will save where he can!²⁶

From the quotation he chose his own motto: To will the impossible!²⁷

With single-minded purpose, Rølvaag attempted in life to carry out his motto. However, although he was a forceful, dynamic man who dared to stand alone, Rølvaag also was a tender father who took time to play with his children.²⁸ Home was important to Rølvaag. He was married to Jennie Berdahl of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1908. Of their four children, two died when very young. The tragic drowning of his youngest son, Paul Gunnar, in 1920, had a far-reaching effect on his philosophy of life. Rølvaag is reported to have said, "I think it changed my entire view

²⁶The closest approximation to this translation is found in James Walter McFarland, ed., The Oxford Ibsen (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), III, 81.

²⁷Einar I. Haugen, "Ole E. Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 7 (1933), 73.

²⁸Ella Valborg Tweet, "My Father As I Remember Him," Speech given at Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 28, 1974.

of life. Prior to May 18, 1920, I had looked upon God as a logical mind in Whom the least happening in this and in all other worlds was planned and willed. Gradually I began to see that much of what takes place is due to chance and to lawbound nature."²⁹

During his lifetime Rølvaag struggled against poor health but continued to work to reach the goals he had set for himself. He did not consider himself a courageous hero, however. Toward the end of his life, he commented on the ailment which eventually claimed his life--angina pectoris. Rølvaag observed that he was proud of its impressive name but not of the disease itself. "It is necessary for me to live a 'quiet, godly life,' free from sin. And a person who can't sin now and then is most certainly to be pitied!"³⁰

During his lifetime, recognition came to Rølvaag as a literary artist and as an interpreter of the Norwegian immigrant pioneers in the Midwest. Giants in the Earth was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month the year it appeared. In 1926 Rølvaag was created a Knight of the Order of St. Olaf by King Haakon of Norway.

Ole Edvart Rølvaag died on November 5, 1931, at the

²⁹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 252.

³⁰Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 73.

age of fifty-five. He was buried on a hill with a westward view of the college. Even in death he wanted to identify himself with Per Hansa and the pioneer spirit. Shortly before he died, Rølvaag said, "Well, if there is anything deeply true in what I have said, it will some day prevail."³¹ His commitment to the cause of his people in the New World informs his novels. In them he expresses ideas that have become increasingly relevant to American society.

In his first published novel, Amerika-Breve (Letters from America, later translated into English as The Third Life of Per Smevik), Rølvaag introduces the theme which he picks up and examines from various angles in later works: the Norwegian immigrant is a special kind of American.³² His adjustment to the new land is unique because his background is unique. He is an individual, not a stylized product of the melting pot. Contrary to Crèvecoeur's theory, the Norwegian immigrant is not transformed into a completely new person--an American--who spontaneously becomes contented and fulfilled. Rather, he goes through a

³¹ Jorgenson, p. 151.

³² Ole E. Rølvaag, The Third Life of Per Smevik, trans. Ella Valborg Tweet and Solveig Zempel (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, Inc., 1971). Page references in the text are to this English translation.

difficult adjustment to the New World. He does not readily adapt because he brings with him memories and traditions and a culture that continue to bind him to Norway.

novel According to Spiller's Literary History of the United States, immigrants in general have always brought along to America "an invisible baggage of cultural tradition: folklore, crafts, religions, patterns of the family and the community, foods and drinks." Some items were discarded during Americanization and others were absorbed into the new way of life.³³ Rølvaag advocated that this "cultural baggage" should not be shed, for it can help the immigrant adjust to America and can make him into a good American.

of In this early novel Rølvaag, himself an immigrant, sets out to interpret his own particular kind of immigrant and challenges his adoptive country to understand this new American and to accept the dowry which he brings. He uses the form of letters written from 1896 to 1901 by a young immigrant, Per Smevik, to his father and elder brother back in Norway. Rølvaag uses a double pseudonym, since the letters supposedly were written by a Norwegian immigrant, P. A. Smevik, and later were collected and published by Paal Mørck. Rølvaag gives as his reason for thus cloaking his identity: "Letters from America are of

³³Spiller, p. 644.

so personal a character that I do not have the courage to put my own name on them."³⁴

The Third Life of Per Smevik, like Rølvaag's other novels, was written in Norwegian. Rølvaag mastered the English language soon after coming to America, but he believed that only in the native tongue could he express the inner feeling, the very soul of the words. To Rølvaag, language was more than a vehicle of practical communication; it was an access from one soul to another.³⁵ Unfortunately, for this reason Rølvaag's works had a limited circulation, restricted to Norwegian-Americans. The Third Life of Per Smevik has significance as an authentic picture of immigrant experiences, as an evidence of developing literary art, and as an exposition of the themes to be explored in Rølvaag's later novels.

Amerika-Breve was his first novel to be published in Norwegian (1912) but the last to be published in English. In 1971 a translation by Rølvaag's daughter, Ella Valborg Tweet, and his granddaughter, Solveig Zempel, appeared under the title The Third Life of Per Smevik. The origin of the title becomes evident in the first letter, dated August 26, 1896, in which Per Smevik writes to his father:

³⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 146.

³⁵Jorgenson and Solum, p. 397.

It is as if I have already lived two lives here on earth: the first was in Smeviken, and that lasted almost twenty-one years. The second one I lived through on the trip from Smeviken in Helgeland to Clarkfield, South Dakota. Now I am about to begin a third. (p. 1)

This "third life" is Rølvaag's own, because Per's experiences parallel those of the author. As Einar Haugen has observed, the letters reveal the subtle, gradual changes in point of view of an immigrant.³⁶ Three stages are apparent in Per Smevik's development. During the early stage on the farm, he reacts superficially, with no reflection. During the second stage, his school years, Per's letters reveal deepening powers of discernment about America. The third stage is apparent in the Fourth of July oration, which gives evidence of clear, mature convictions as he enunciates his understanding of his own people's problem of transplantation into an alien culture.³⁷

These convictions are expressed in a Fourth of July speech on the theme "What is gained and what is lost, upon exchanging the Fatherland for the new land," supposedly delivered by an orator whom Per greatly admires. In reality, the address was one which Rølvaag delivered at Winger, Minnesota, on July 4, 1911.³⁸ Later it was published

³⁶Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 58.

³⁷Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 151-52.

³⁸Jorgenson and Solum, p. 156.

separately as "Country and Fatherland."³⁹ In it Rølvaag summarizes the plight of the Norwegian immigrant. The speech marks the climax of The Third Life of Per Smevik. However, its significance is not apparent at once, because the speech is buried within the letter and lacks preliminary development. In spite of flaws in style, however, the novel is important because it clearly expresses Rølvaag's awareness of the central problems of the immigrant's life--his dualism and his alienation.

The speech points out that the immigrant has a dual nature, looking backward at what he has left in Norway and forward to future life in his adoptive country. He has given up the ennobling influence of majestic mountains, fjords, forests, valleys, and seas for the flat, barren prairies of Midwestern America. This loss is significant, considering the powerful influence of nature on inhabitants of Norway.

Spiritual contact with the Fatherland has been severed. It is hard to give up family ties, and bonds of loyalty to a country whose long and proud history has become a part of one's heritage from childhood. It is heart-breaking to lose touch with the religion of one's people. Furthermore, can another language supplant the intimacy of one's native

³⁹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 149.

tongue? A whole way of life has been sacrificed in leaving the homeland.

On the other hand, what does the immigrant gain when he is adopted by America? He gains freedom, both civil and religious. Opportunities of every type beckon to him. Furthermore, material gain is almost certain for the immigrant who works hard. In the process of assuring his success, he adopts a whole new set of attitudes--efficiency, ambition, and hard-headed practicality. These new values are certain to insure him continued prosperity.

These inducements resemble Crèvecoeur's depiction of America's economic promise: "If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee; if thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee--ease and independence."⁴⁰

In the Fourth of July speech, the orator balances the gains and losses, and the latter are more serious. Rølvaag knows that the hard, practical material gains cannot compensate for the intangible losses to mind and spirit. The speech points out that "life is more than food; earthly happiness is more than civic freedom, and God's greatest gift to man is not first and foremost great opportunities" (pp. 122-23). The real tragedy is that the immigrant is

⁴⁰ Crèvecoeur, p. 385.

rootless. He is an alien, torn loose from Norway, not belonging to America.

Rølvaag indicates here the need to retain ethnic consciousness. The immigrant honors his adoptive country by being true to his heritage.

Let our homage be such that she will understand more clearly that noble blood flows in the veins of the children she took to herself from the Northland-- and let us prove to her that her family has been enriched by much good human material. (p. 118)

According to Jorgenson and Solum, "More and more the conviction grew that the people of his own race would lose their identity and the finest qualities of their souls if they betrayed the culture which was native to them and therefore genuine."⁴¹

All of Rølvaag's later novels amplify the ideas which he expresses in the Fourth of July address, and all of them articulate the need for remaining conscious of and true to the Norwegian heritage. This theme became the central concern of Rølvaag's writing for the remainder of his life.

⁴¹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 146.

CHAPTER III

THE BREAK FROM THE HOMELAND

Rølvaag's concern for the Norwegian-American begins back in the Old Country, where the emigrant since birth has been collecting his "invisible baggage" of cultural traditions to carry with him to America. Two of Rølvaag's novels involve the departure from Norway: The Third Life of Per Smevik and The Boat of Longing. In the former, the experience of emigrating is recounted rather briefly through Per's letters; in the latter, the emigrant's home life in Norway and his leave-taking have greater significance.

The Boat of Longing was published in Norwegian (Laengselens Baat) in 1921 and did not appear in English translation until 1933, two years after its author's death. Of all of his books, Rølvaag is said to have liked The Boat of Longing the best, for he put more of himself into it than any other. Einar Haugen indicates that Rølvaag's grief over the untimely deaths of his two small sons inspired the deep emotion in the book.¹ The central character, Nils Vaag, is a sensitive young boy who is lured across the Atlantic by romantic tales of America. Cut off from his

¹Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 62.

homeland, he is unable to adjust to the materialism of the Midwest.

The main figures in the two novels represent two types of temperament--the buoyant, robust Per and the sensitive, introspective Nils--in reality two aspects of Rølvaag's own personality. Their goals constitute two basic reasons for emigrating from Norway--the realistic desire to improve one's economic situation and the search for artistic fulfillment.

In accounting for the vast outpouring of emigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century, Theodore Blegen says that tales of boundless expanses of fertile, inexpensive land captured the imagination of the people. "Norway in the period when emigration took its rise was the scene of stir and change; new political and religious forces were making themselves felt; the time was one of growth and transition; but Norwegian economic life did not keep step with other aspects of the scene."² Land holders, experiencing economic difficulties in Norway, hoped to better their financial situation in the new country.

Rølvaag agrees that the economic reasons were predominant, but he indicates that another inducement to

²Theodore C. Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America 1825-1860 (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), p. 160.

emigrate was the romantic notion of finding one's ideal in America. To a class in immigration history at St. Olaf College in 1920, Rølvaag said, "There is a young good-for-nothing fellow, a sort of Askeladd. He comes to America. Here he wakes up, because he has the choice of either doing that or starve."³

The term Askeladd appears in many of Rølvaag's novels, either in direct reference or by inference. In his collection of essays Reflections on a Heritage, Rølvaag explains the fairy tale figure, Espen Askeladd, who is a type of male Cinderella, scorned by his two worldly-wise brothers.⁴ The three set off to win a princess and half the kingdom. To do so they must overcome trolls and accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. The two older brothers meet failure, but Espen Askeladd succeeds in doing what was impossible for others because of his irrepressible intellectual curiosity, his shrewdness, and his kindness. He appears in nearly all Norwegian fairy tales as a very human, delightful young lad, "always as clever without seeming to be so, as

³ Jorgenson and Solum, p. 299.

⁴ Reflections on a Heritage, unpublished translation by Brynhild Rowberg of Ole E. Rølvaag, Omkring Fedrearven (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College Press, 1922). References in the text are to this unpublished translation, by chapter and page number. Other writers refer to the book by its literally translated title, Concerning Our Heritage.

great-hearted in his goodness, as indefatigable in his journey toward his goals. He always does the impossible" (ch. I, p. 6).

In an article written in 1929, Rølvaag indicates that the idealistic urge of the Askeladds to emigrate can be traced to the romantic spirit that swept northern Europe after 1800. Then the word "America!" stirred the consciousness of the Norwegians with notions of emigrating--"Not for conquest. Not intent upon spoils. But to do mighty deeds and build for a greater human happiness!"⁵ This attitude is expressed by Walt Whitman:

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor
and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!⁶

Rølvaag stresses the importance of the romantic movement in northern Europe because it gave impetus to immigration, which in turn gave momentum to the entire westward movement of pioneering.⁷

Whatever the reasons, economic or idealistic, Norway

⁵Ole E. Rølvaag, "The Vikings of the Middle West," American Magazine, 108 (October 1929), 46.

⁶Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" In American Life in Literature, ed. Jay B. Hubbell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), p. 91.

⁷Rølvaag, "Vikings," p. 46.

was struck by "America frenzy," as the poet Wergeland characterized the urge to emigrate.⁸ "America letters" and newspaper articles helped to persuade the restless Norwegians to leave their country. When emigration achieved alarming proportions, efforts were made to stop the flow out of the country through sermons, government warnings, and newspaper accounts of suffering in the New World, but these efforts did not inhibit the movement.⁹

"The Vikings of the Middle West" appeared as an article in American Magazine in 1929, after being presented in lecture form to audiences in Norway and America.¹⁰ In it Rølvaag speaks glowingly about the pioneering venture of the Norse immigrants who were full of the spirit of Askeladd. This optimistic view is uncharacteristic of Rølvaag, because he seldom concentrates on the romance of the immigrant experience to the exclusion of the realistic cost of settlement. Jorgenson and Solum provide the explanation:

Some editor's scissors have slashed about fifteen pages of the interpretative matter, evidently because they seemed less desirable than the romantic narrative and historical elements of which the rest of the lecture is made up.¹¹

⁸Blegen, Norwegian Migration 1825-1860, p. 155.

⁹A thorough discussion of causes of emigration is given in Blegen, Norwegian Migration 1825-1860, pp. 154-76.

¹⁰Jorgenson and Solum, p. 394.

¹¹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 394.

Then Jorgenson and Solum print the material missing from the article so that by combining the two texts it is possible to perceive Rølvaag's full intent. This edited material echoes the question asked in the Fourth of July speech in The Third Life of Per Smevik: What is the cost of transplantation?

Man, especially the Nordic, cannot tear himself loose from the soil he has rooted in for centuries and move to a new land . . . without paying a great price. . . . Transplantation of human souls, even under the most favorable conditions, is a difficult process. There are many adjustments to be made. That of acquiring a feeling of home in an alien wilderness is certainly not easy. And the more sensitive the soul, the more dangerous the experiment.¹²

In The Boat of Longing, Rølvaag gives a picture of a sensitive young man who is poised in "psychological uncertainty between two worlds."¹³ Rølvaag could interpret Nils' aching sense of yearning because he, too, was an Askeladd figure in search of something beyond the harsh reality of a fisherman's life. Throughout the book, Rølvaag expresses a sense of longing for the homeland, "a fairyland of unforgettable charm and splendor, a land that to him is beauty and life and soul, for it is one with the

¹² Jorgenson and Solum, p. 394.

¹³ Neil Eckstein, discussion of "Rølvaag as Cultural Leader," Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 29, 1974.

beating sea-gull wings of his own heart."¹⁴ Einar Haugen claims that all of Rølvaag's work evidences the "indelible imprint" of Nordland, not only the specific memories of people and occurrences, but the spiritual essence of this far northern land.¹⁵

Nature is a personal force to the dwellers in the land of the midnight sun. Legends and myths pertaining to nature infuse the thinking of the people and affect every aspect of their lives. One tale of the far North concerns a legendary "Boat of Longing" that appears on the horizon off the Nordland coast from time to time. It is usually seen by people whose hearts are full of misery or longing. In The Boat of Longing the vessel is a symbol of the heartache of emigration--the yearning of the ones who leave and the grief of those left behind.¹⁶

Against the background of Nordland's natural enchantment and folklore, Rølvaag tells the story of young Nils and his parents, simple fisherfolk who resemble Rølvaag's own parents. Old Jo is a humble, quiet man whose principal failing is that he does not understand his artistic son, even though he loves him deeply. Nils' mother, though a

¹⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 278.

¹⁵Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 55.

¹⁶Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 61.

simple and uneducated woman, has a deep understanding of her son's yearnings and a profound capacity for love. The family has always calmly accepted the hardships and sorrows of life, along with the simple joys of working together.¹⁷

Then a young girl, Zalma, lone survivor of a shipwreck, is taken into the Vaag home. She is more a symbolic figure than a real one. With her arrival, Nils becomes aware of a vague stirring of the creative spirit. When he plays his violin, Zalma embraces him. It is as if Nils embraces his creative soul, says one critic.¹⁸ Nils' response to the girl is more the soul's response to art than an awakening of physical love. After her departure to return to her own people, Nils thinks that he sees the "Boat of Longing" on the horizon.

Nils' restlessness brings about his decision to emigrate. He believes, like Rølvaag, that America offers a life more fulfilling than that of a fisherman. He tries to explain his yearnings when he tells his mother his decision to emigrate to America: "Life is not in this place--not for me--no, not the whole of it. . . . Not yet at least.

¹⁷Ole E. Rølvaag, The Boat of Longing, trans. Nora O. Solum (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933). Page references in the text are to this translation.

¹⁸Raychel Haugrud Reiff, "Nils Vaag: Human Soul in Search of the Perfect," paper presented at Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 28, 1974.

That's why I must go out after it. For it is that which one must find" (pp. 69-70).

A little later his mother asks what he is going to become, and he replies: "Oh--that which is highest of all. . . . And I want to see the most beautiful. And live that, too" (p. 70). Nils looks forward to artistic fulfillment in the romantic New World, just as Askeladd dreams of reaching his idealistic goal.

Nils' farewell to his parents is one of the most poignant scenes in Rølvaag's writings. In it the author seems to express the emotions of all parents and sons separated by emigration.

Nils held her until her crying, having stilled himself, came more easily, like a child's.

Then with a wrench he tore himself loose and went.

Having got a little way off, he had to look back. This he had not wanted to do, but he couldn't help it.

And there through the shrieking storm and driving rain he saw the figure of his mother, plain as could be against the murky sky; but not his father's. The mother was holding her right hand high. . . . He walked on, only to turn again. The figure had not moved. . . . stood there as before, pointing skyward. The gloom and the rain were now so thick that the hand could no longer be distinguished. . . . only the arm reaching up into the darkness. (p. 78)

Later, on board the boat, he notices a forlorn figure, that of his father, "up on a crag, square in the face of the

west-wind storm . . . a hunched figure, leaning forward" (p. 81).

The Boat of Longing tells of the double heartache--for the young emigrant and for the parents left behind. The mother's arm upraised in farewell is seen as a symbol of all emigrant farewells.¹⁹

In his Diary, which he kept from the day of his departure in 1896 until 1901, Rølvaag reveals his own struggle between the call of creative talents to be fulfilled in America and the love of homeland and family. In his early entries he writes,

It is done; it is done. I have left home. . . . And now I am going out into the world to seek my fortune, my happiness. . . . Strange it is indeed how consuming this longing for a better existence can be. I hope that God in His great mercy will count me as one of His children for the sake of Jesus Christ. Then, yes, then I shall obtain the true happiness. Then too shall my yearning be satisfied.²⁰

A more buoyant, jovial side of Rølvaag's nature is revealed in his partly autobiographical The Third Life of Per Smevik. But even for the less sensitive emigrants, parting is sad. Per has said his farewells and is now embarking on his trip to South Dakota. After the first lap of the trip he writes,

¹⁹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 281.

²⁰Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 26-28.

But, there I stood on the pier and stared after the boys and the boat until they had completely disappeared behind Skarvholmen on the other side of the fjord. When the last corner of the square sail was gone, I felt as if a door closed within me and a room was locked forever. (Per Smevik, p. 4)

A feeling of more intense loss overwhelms him as the ship leaves the coast of Norway.

Then we set out to sea. . . . The mountains sank lower and lower into the horizon as the day waned. When nothing more could be seen but a low, rugged cloud bank, I went below, crept into my bunk and bawled like a whipped child. That was my farewell to the Fatherland. (Per Smevik, p. 20)

Rølvaag reveals another aspect of emigration in The Boat of Longing. The book closes with a glimpse of old Jo and Anna Vaag back in Norway, grieving for their son, and waiting in vain for his letters. Finally Jo scrapes together enough money for a ticket to America, hoping to locate Nils. Lacking necessary papers, however, he is denied entry at New York and is forced to return to Norway on the next ship.

On the return trip, Jo meets a woman who intimates that she might have seen Nils in an elegant hotel in Minneapolis. Around this slim possibility, Jo spins a yarn to reassure Anna, about their son's happy life in the New World. That night Jo Vaag rows off into the sunset, in the direction of the "Boat of Longing," never to return.

Rølvaag knew from experience that the breaking of ties

binding one to home and Fatherland could not be accomplished with one swift stroke, and it often inflicted the deepest heartache on the family left behind. Those who set out for the New World, whether the buoyant youths like Per Smevik or the more gentle ones like Nils Vaag, had one thing in common. They shared the hope of fulfilling their dreams in America.

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CHAPTER IV

THE COST OF TRANSPLANTATION

Per Smevik plods along the long, lonely country road, searching for his uncle's farm. Nils Vaag timidly mingles with the indifferent crowd on Nicollet Avenue. Per Hansa strides confidently through the sea of tall grass ahead of the wagon in which Beret cowers, silently weeping. All are moving toward their goals in the New World--Per Smevik toward a better life than he experienced as a fisherman, Nils toward artistic fulfillment, and Per Hansa toward his kingdom on the prairie. Rølvaag gives a penetrating picture of these immigrants in The Third Life of Per Smevik, The Boat of Longing, and Giants in the Earth.

The characters in Rølvaag's novels have in common a dualistic predicament--looking backward to the old country and forward to new life in America, yet belonging to neither land. Rølvaag himself evidenced this duality. As Haugen says, "His love of his race established two fixed poles between which his thoughts were forever oscillating: his devotion to the past in Norway, the heritage of his people; and his concern about their future in America, the fate of the Norwegian immigrant."¹

¹Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 53.

The newcomer's fate is determined partly by his own temperament. Rølvaag said in a speech to the University of Oslo Ibsen Festival in 1928: "Transplantation of human souls, even under the most favorable conditions, is a difficult process. There are many adjustments to be made. That of acquiring a feeling of home in an alien wilderness is certainly not easy. And the more sensitive the soul, the more dangerous the experiment."² Per Smevik, for instance, finds the adjustments difficult but not insurmountable, because his attitude is receptive to new experiences.³ Threshing machines and modern methods of farming delight him, and he does not give up until he learns the new tasks.

Per expresses a fundamentally American attitude when he says, "Life would be much simpler for me if only my nature were a little different, so that I could take things easier and not always have to do everything faster and better than anyone else" (p.36). His chances of survival and success seem rather promising.

Another determinative factor in making the adjustment to the new country is the type of goal being sought. Per's early goals are quite uncomplicated: "I can't afford to

²Jorgenson and Solum, p. 396.

³Following page references are to Rølvaag, The Third Life of Per Smevik.

spend two weeks doing nothing," he says, "I have come to America to make money!" (p.2). However, as he matures, he realizes what he later expresses in the Fourth of July address in a later letter: "But life is more than food, earthly happiness is more than civic freedom, and God's greatest gift to man is not first and foremost great opportunities" (pp. 122-23).

As he becomes disenchanted with his farm chores, he writes, "What pleasure will I get from these few dollars I'm saving when I have to work so desperately hard for them, and then be miserable and unhappy besides?" (pp. 54-55). Gradually Per Smevik accommodates himself to new and difficult conditions and to a hectic way of living, but he does not accept them as his own philosophy. "Little by little I'm beginning to get used to conditions over here and so I feel more at home," he writes. "One can get used to most anything, I guess." Then he adds, "The greatest joy in life lies not in saving up money. . . . It is to be satisfied with what you have. . . . The more I see of the drudgery here, the more I'm convinced that I am right." (pp. 63-64)

Restless, he contemplates joining the army to fight in the Spanish-American War. Then he makes the decisive move that shapes his future--he enrolls at Augustana Academy in Canton, South Dakota, thus embarking on an academic life.

Furthermore, he casts his lot with his fellow immigrants at this Norwegian Lutheran school. Per Smevik has learned that achieving economic success in America is possible but that it does not satisfy the longings of the soul. "Life is more than food"

On his lonely walk from the railroad station to his uncle's farm, Per looks back in loneliness and ahead in fear. Even the immigrant whose disposition is optimistic cries in homesick misery in an alien environment.

Per Smevik addresses his letters to his father and to his brother Andreas, but each letter expresses love and concern for his mother. "Be good to mother," he often urges his brother. Though Per's adjustment is relatively smooth, his letters reflect uneasy loneliness and gnawing homesickness for his family and for his former way of life.

Morning and evening when I go about my work in the barn, I can't help thinking about Andreas and the other fellows; how they are now getting their equipment ready for the Lofoten trip, and will soon be sailing northward along the channel in a driving wind. . . . Then I feel a lump in my throat, and I often find myself speculating on how I could ever have left that life which I liked so well. (p. 37)

He compares his beautiful homeland with South Dakota: "And there is nothing out here but flat plains and fields, and myriads of milk cows and pigs" (p.46). News from Norway makes him ill with longing, but still he hungers for letters from home. "Rolls the billow broad and bright, in

and out along the shore," is a strain that recurs as young Per recalls happier days in Norway--unhurried, satisfying days in sharp contrast to his hectic existence in America. American farmers spend no time reading or enjoying themselves but concentrate on material goals. He muses, "If only there were time to stop and think things over a little. But no, everything has to go with the speed of lightning" (p. 48).

Underlying his great disillusionment is a feeling of estrangement--of not belonging, even among his own countrymen. "I just can't understand how it has happened that the Norwegian young people here in this country and those in Norway have drifted so far apart, almost as if they were of another race" (p. 53).

Although Per Smevik adapts to new circumstances, he does not succumb to the lure of materialistic goals in America, but rather expands his goals to more ultimate ones. He will survive, and he will have something to contribute to his new country because he does not renounce his homeland..

However, if Per Smevik, whose nature is adaptable, weeps for his lost life in Norway, what of the sensitive souls like Nils Vaag and Beret Holm?

Nils' goals are more idealistic than those of

Per Smevik, and his disposition is more delicate. Consequently, his adjustment to America is more painful. The central section of The Boat of Longing shifts to Minnesota, where Nils has come in search of "the highest" and "the most beautiful." He is an Askeladd who has come to Minneapolis to find artistic fulfillment--the ideal. Without a specific plan for achieving his goals, Nils settles for menial jobs in order to make a living. The slum section and the cheap rooming house where Nils lives are not pictured as convincingly as the scenes in Norway in the first and last parts of the book. However, Rølvaag claims that he did not intend to give a realistic picture of immigrant life in the big city but was merely trying to show "the great pity of it all, the utter tragedy of a sensitive soul making an effort to adjust itself in a new land" ⁴

A sense of tragedy pervades all of Nils' experiences in America. As he stands on street corners, watching the indifferent crowds surge by, he realizes that nobody actually is aware of his existence. Lonely and homesick, he is stranded between two worlds--Norway to which he cannot return and America where he does not belong. ⁵

⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 284.

⁵Following page references are to Rølvaag, The Boat of Longing.

In the noisy city nobody appreciates his love of music. At one time he plays his violin in a railroad station and gets carried off into a private world of his own. Suddenly an attendant brings him back to reality by saying, "Your fiddle sounds right smart, lad, but this is no concert-hall! Better put it up!" (p.232).

However, Nils discovers two compatible spirits in the city. Elderly Kristine Dahl, a Nordlander like Nils, has withdrawn to the flats of the river, where she quietly nurtures her dreams and memories. She shares Nils' yearning for music and for the old country. Like Nils, she claims to have seen the "Boat of Longing."

The other kindred soul is Nils' roommate, Mr. Weismann, a poet. Since his creative offerings have been rejected by insensitive Americans, he finds consolation in drinking. He and Nils have endured the same indifference to their talents. Through the poet, Rølvaag levels an attack on America's materialism and lack of artistic sensitivity.⁶

Nils' companion on the trip to America, Per Syv Hansen, has come because of a purely economic motive--to make money and to spend it selfishly. He makes a splendid adjustment to America. Nils has promised to look after

⁶Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 64.

Per Syv in the New World. When he can no longer account for his irresponsible compatriot, Nils stops writing to those back in Norway. Kristine Dahl's death causes another break with his homeland.

In vain Nils searches for fulfillment in a North Woods lumber camp. Although he makes an external adjustment to the arduous work of lumbering, he still wanders on the outskirts of life. Nils resembles Per Smevik, who manages to adjust to strenuous farm work in South Dakota. Both Per Smevik and Nils Vaag have accommodated their bodies to harsh physical labor and both receive adequate pay. However, both realize that just succeeding financially is not enough. Nils continues to dream of becoming a musician; Per Smevik dreams of attending school in the pursuit of his goal.

In The Boat of Longing Rølvaag tells in fiction what he expresses in the Fourth of July oration in The Third Life of Per Smevik. America gives to Per Syv what he seeks--money that can buy material things and surface pleasures. America's opportunities are for the Per Syvs, not for the sensitive, idealistic immigrants who are searching for "the highest." Obviously there is something wrong with a society that frustrates people like Nils, says

one critic.⁷ Rølvaag passes judgment on a country that has no place for the Nils Vaags, the Poet Weismanns, and the Kristine Dahls. Theirs is a pure Nordic Strain that should not be melted down into mediocrity.

What becomes of Nils is a matter of speculation. When Kristine Dahl dies, she bequeaths Nils her violin, a symbol of the creative spirit. This act could indicate that Nils remains true to his vision, as Reigstad believes.⁸ The story of Nils Vaag closes when he leaves Minneapolis to join a railroad crew. He drifts out of focus, reappearing from time to time on some street corner on a Saturday night, "and there he would stand searching and searching, like a lone gull perched watchful on some bold headland round which the ocean current runs swift" (p. 243).

Nils drifts about without roots because he lacks the resilience and persistence that enable Per Smevik to adjust to his new life. Transplantation proves difficult for Per Smevik, but it is devastating for Nils Vaag. [The novel in which Rølvaag probes even more deeply the cost of the Norwegian immigrant's transplantation in the New World is

⁷ Charles Boewe, "Rølvaag's America: An Immigrant Novelist's Views," Western Humanities Review, 11 (Winter 1957), 6.

⁸ Reigstad, p. 77.

Giants in the Earth.⁹ At the time of its publication in English translation in 1927, [this novel was heralded as "the fullest, finest, and most powerful novel that has been written about pioneer life in America."¹⁰

Giants in the Earth interprets the struggles of the immigrant settlers in terms of more than physical hardship. The real cost of empire building can be computed in terms of psychological and spiritual adjustment to the prairie. Commager has called the novel "the most penetrating and mature depiction of the westward movement in our literature," because it combines the physical and the spiritual experience, just as the story of America itself is "not the story of physical and material development and expansion to the utter exclusion of spiritual and psychological."¹¹

This contrast of physical and spiritual aspects of the immigrant's transplantation on American soil is one of the dualisms in the novel. Another is the backward look to homeland and heritage and the forward look into the future in America. Per Smevik and Nils Vaag are stranded between

⁹Ole E. Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth, trans. Lincoln Colcord and O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927). Page references in the text will be made to this edition.

¹⁰Unsigned review of Giants in the Earth, Nation, 13 July 1927, in Rølvaag papers.

¹¹Commager, p. 319.

two worlds, longing for Norway and groping for a place in this country. This same duality is experienced by Per Hansa and Beret in Giants in the Earth.

The opening scene reveals the contrast between the pioneer couple. The broad-shouldered man strides confidently ahead of the forlorn caravan that crawls along through the tall grass toward the setting sun. Driving the wagon is a sunburnt woman, silently weeping, holding a child on her lap. Beret has reluctantly left her homeland to follow her husband across the ocean, through many towns, and on into the wilderness of Dakota. She cannot share her husband's buoyant optimism at the prospect of establishing a home in the wilderness. Instead of looking toward the future, she looks backward. She has torn herself away from home and country, not because she seeks adventure but because she loves Per. Only this love has sustained her.¹²

Per Hansa, on the other hand, has no regrets for having left Norway, and little fear of the future. His strength and endurance are coupled with boundless enthusiasm. Per represents "America at its most American."¹³ He

¹²George Leroy White, Scandinavian Themes in American Fiction (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), 101.

¹³Joseph E. Baker, "Western Man Against Nature: Giants in the Earth," College English, 4 (October 1942), 21.

dreams about his future kingdom on the prairies of South Dakota and puts his dreams into action by hard work. Per Hansa is an Askeladd figure, eager to attempt the impossible and clever enough to accomplish it. Rølvaag has created an unforgettable combination in Beret and Per Hansa-- "the empire builder in union with the refined but unadaptable woman dependent upon an age-old civilization."¹⁴

In a sense, Per Hansa is the hero of the pioneering experience in America. Without his type of conquest, the prairies would not have been subdued and the settlements would not have flourished and grown into towns and cities. Per Hansa's Viking qualities are readily assimilable into American culture. Self-reliance is a major characteristic of the Nordic race, developed by the very nature of the country. Per Hansa was accustomed to battling the storms of the North Atlantic before coming to America. His strong will and power to fight are a heritage from his Nordland past.¹⁵ Per Hansa is proud of his new land and is eager to establish his kingdom. He is willing to adjust to his new land. As Dittmann says, he has the right

¹⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 326.

¹⁵Dittmann, p. 23.

spirit.¹⁶ Beret at times fears this spirit.

Now it had taken possession of him again--that indomitable, conquering mood which seemed to give him the right of way wherever he went, whatever he did. Outwardly, at such times, he showed only a buoyant recklessness, as if wrapped in a cloak of gay, wanton levity; but down beneath all this lay a stern determination of purpose, a driving force, so strong that she shrank back from the least contact with it. (p. 41)

Beret seems to fear what Per Hansa is doing to the prairie as much as what the prairie is doing to the settlers. She wonders if Per Hansa's lust for land is right in God's sight. Beret recognizes Per Hansa's materialistic motives and fears them.

While Per Hansa exultantly works toward the founding of his kingdom, Beret cannot see the future except in fear. The silent, empty prairie fills her with small fears that multiply and grow until terror lurks in every cloud and in the stillness of the deep night. To shut out the terror of the darkness, she hangs heavy clothes at the windows.

Beret thinks that the wilderness that surrounds them on all sides is uncivilized, unfit for human beings. The sod house which her husband has built with such ingenuity disturbs her. "Man and beast in one building? How could one live that way?" (p. 53). She realizes that the sod house will not be their permanent home. Nothing seems to

¹⁶Dittmann, p. 25.

have continuity on the prairie, while back in Norway, homes remain in the family for centuries.

Beret needs an ordered civilization, a place where people respect old laws and customs. She cannot adjust to the casual free interpretation of law on the prairies. For instance, when Per pulls up and destroys the stakes of the Irish claim jumpers, he senses no guilt because his motive is irreproachable--the protection of his friends' property. Beret, on the other hand, deploras any act of tampering with landmarks because it is considered a terrible crime in Norway, according to old legal tradition.¹⁷

Any deviation from established order bothers Beret. She reacts against adopting new names in America, for instance, because she sees the custom as symptomatic of a casual attitude toward established law and tradition. "Well, now they had discarded the names of their fathers, soon they would be discarding the sacred things" (p. 279). She especially deploras giving her newborn son the name Peder Victorious, since children should be named with reverence for family tradition.¹⁸

¹⁷ Wayne F. Mortensen, "The Problem of Loss of Culture in Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, and Their Fathers' God," Minnesota English Journal, 8 (Winter 1972), 44.

¹⁸ Einar I. Haugen, "Language and Immigration," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 10 (1938), 13.

Beret's troubled mind longs for symbols of security.

She instinctively recalls her church in Norway.

Often, now, she found herself thinking of the churchyard at home. . . . The churchyard was enclosed by a massive stone wall, broad and heavy; one couldn't imagine anything more reliable than that wall. . . . In the midst of the churchyard lay the church, securely protecting everything round about. (p. 222)

As she looks back, Beret is overwhelmed by homesickness for her family, for her church, and for the land itself. She is unable to substitute the never-changing prairies for the rhythmic, moody sea, or the flat fields for the mountains and fjords, or the open, treeless plains for the forests. Rølvaag, himself, never overcame his longing for the homeland, and especially for the sea. In a speech reprinted by Jorgenson and Solum, Rølvaag defends Beret's reaction to pioneering.

In Beret, the wife of Per Hansa, I have tried to picture such a character. Some people get out of patience with her, and I in turn with them because of their lack of understanding. For generations Beret's forbears had lived on the shore of the restless North Atlantic. They had been lulled to sleep by the swash of the sea; they had awakened to the same sound. Small wonder that the song of the sea should live in her blood. And the mountains stood near by. What could be more natural than that Beret, after coming into the flat, open reaches of the Dakota Territory should miss them and experience the feeling of being lost--here she could find nothing to hide behind?¹⁹

¹⁹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 396.

Beret clings to her grandfather's immigrant chest as a means of security. It becomes a symbol of continuity, a bridge between the Old World and the New. In every crisis, she goes to the chest. When she is afraid, she moves the chest in front of the door. When she dreams of returning to Norway, she begins to pack the chest. Believing that she will not survive childbirth, she pleads with Per Hansa to use it as her coffin.

The next summer, when the grasshoppers descend like a horde of demons, Beret hides within the chest. "Down in the depths of the great chest lay Beret, huddled up and holding the baby in her arms. . . ." (p. 338). However, it is this same chest that helps to restore her to sanity, when the pastor uses it as a communion table. The chest continues on into the experiences of the next generation. "Like an umbilical cord, the chest provided a vital link for Beret in the transplanting of culture," says one critic.²⁰

2 { Brooding in fear and homesickness, Beret turns more and more to a religion in which God is an angry judge who is punishing her for her double sin--giving herself to Per Hansa before their marriage, and turning her back on her family and homeland in coming to America." She feels

²⁰ Neil T. Eckstein, "The Social Criticism of Ole Edvard Rølvaag," *Norwegian-American Studies*, 24 (1970), 116.

isolated from God, seeing him not in the goodness of nature but in the forces of evil that press around her. In terror, she hides, "but the arm of His might had reached farther still. No, she could not escape--this was her retribution!" (p. 216).

Certain that she will die during childbirth, Beret urges Per Hansa, "You must take the boys with you--and go away from here! . . . How lonesome it will be for me . . . to lie here all alone" (p. 227). She fears that even in death she must be alone on the prairie, instead of near her kinfolk in the family cemetery in Norway. Her sense of isolation has reached its limit. She cannot share her terrors even with Per Hansa, whom she loves. The evil about her grows until even the clouds take on the appearance of monsters. When evil descends in swarms of grasshoppers, the final terror nudges her over the brink into darkness.

Beret's reaction to pioneering is dramatic but not beyond probability. Blegen quotes a Scandinavian writer who claims that "insanity seems to be especially frequent among immigrant women, probably because they have less power of resistance" both physically and mentally. The writer observes that in general the pioneer women suffered more acutely than men from "the lonely life in poorly

settled districts."²¹ Blegen, however, believes that the pioneer women did not lack the resistance, actually, but that the strain was greater on them--"the carrying on of innumerable bleak activities amid child-bearing, loneliness, anxiety, and primitive conditions of medical care and treatment."²² In this regard, Vernon Parrington has aptly observed, "The epic conquest of the continent must be read in the light of women's sufferings as well as in that of men's endurance."²³

Rølvaag's depiction of the immigrant pioneer is penetrating and authentic because he was an immigrant himself. He had come to America as a young man, and he continued to live among his fellow Norwegian-Americans. Jorgenson and Solum observe that Rølvaag's entire life was a preparation for writing Giants in the Earth.²⁴ Rølvaag chose to write about the immigrant in South Dakota because it was here

²¹Ørnulv Ødegaard, Emigration and Insanity: A Study of Mental Disease among the Norwegianborn Population of Minnesota, 192 (Copenhagen, 1932), as quoted in Theodore C. Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America: The Transition (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940), pp. 64-65.

²²Blegen, Norwegian Migration: Transition, p. 65.

²³Vernon L. Parrington, "Introduction," Ole E. Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929), p. xviii.

²⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 324.

that he had come after leaving Norway. Furthermore, he had married into pioneer history. After the Civil War, his father-in-law, Andrew Berdahl, had moved with his parents and brothers from Fillmore County, Minnesota, across southern Minnesota, along the same route that Per Hansa and Beret follow. The Berdahls settled in Minnehaha County, South Dakota. Rølvaag knew where to go for accurate information about pioneering in the area near Colton, which is the locale for the fictitious Spring Creek settlement in Giants in the Earth.²⁵

Blegen discusses the importance of the frontier settlement for the Norwegian immigrants, who usually settled down in compact groups from the same district or valley in Norway. Giants in the Earth identifies the original Spring Creek pioneers as Helgelanders, while a group of Trønders settled eastward on the Sioux River. Other distinct groups are mentioned throughout Rølvaag's novels. Associating with people who shared the same local history, traditions, and social ideas and used the same dialect gave the settlers a sense of community in the New World.²⁶ Being part of a settlement put off the time for

²⁵Jorgenson and Solum, p. 326.

²⁶Blegen, Norwegian Migration: Transition, pp. 74-75.

reshaping life and personality and slowed the shock of transition into American life.²⁷ The little settlement of Spring Creek is typical of many such compact groups which sprang up during the surge of immigrants into the Dakota territory in the 1870's.²⁸ The families in the settlements sustained each other and helped insure survival during the difficult pioneering years.

In the Spring Creek settlement, sharing of suffering and hardship helps to preserve the sanity of everyone except Beret, whose sensitive nature cannot adjust psychologically and emotionally to the prairie. Even though she regains her reason, she turns to a legalistic religion which is concerned principally with preparing for eternal life. Her relationship to Per Hansa becomes platonic, because in her pietistic attitude she considers sexual love a sin. Her fanatical religion alienates her from her husband and ultimately drives him to his death. During a blizzard, Beret persistently urges Per Hansa to fetch the

²⁷Einar I. Haugen, The Norwegians in America: A Students' Guide to Localized History (New York: Teachers' College Press, Columbia University, 1967), p. 14.

²⁸Blegen has pointed out the surge of Norwegian immigration during that period. Between 1866 and 1873, over 110,000 Norwegians emigrated to America, whereas only 77,000 had come before 1865. Many pushed westward to farm-lands in Dakota. By 1880 there were 2,776 Norwegian immigrants in the Missouri-Big Sioux region. (Blegen, Norwegian Migration: Transition, pp. 454-500.)

pastor so that their dying neighbor can be reconciled to God. Per Hansa does not return. The next spring his body is found, leaning against a haystack, facing westward.

Even Per Hansa, the conquering Viking, loses the battle against the prairie. He is defeated by forces of nature--physical nature and Beret's ailing human nature. However, even though Per Hansa dies, his seed survives to inherit the promised land. The pioneer settlement triumphs, but the cost of transplantation is high when reckoned in terms of human suffering.

Rølvaag's deep understanding of the emotional side of the pioneer experience raises the quality of Giants in the Earth above the writing of other Norwegians who dealt with American pioneers.

One of Rølvaag's contemporaries was Johan Bojer, the most popular writer of his generation in Norway. His The Great Hunger, written for and about Norwegians, was a success among his countrymen on both sides of the ocean.²⁹

In the spring of 1923, news from Norway announced that Bojer was planning to make a trip to America in order to prepare for writing a novel about immigrant life. This information aroused Rølvaag to action, since he had long

²⁹ Harold Beyer, A History of Norwegian Literature, trans. and ed. Einar Haugen (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p. 291.

contemplated this very project.³⁰ Bojer's novel, Vor egen stomme, translated later as The Emigrants, appeared at about the same time as the Norwegian volumes that later were translated into English as Giants in the Earth. Percy Boynton has summarized the differences between the two immigrant novels thus: Bojer wrote as a European about emigrants; Rølvaag wrote as an American about immigrants. Furthermore, Rølvaag had lived the things that Bojer had just heard about.³¹

The westward movement has been a popular theme in American fiction; however, as one critic has commented, "Compared with Giants in the Earth, most novels of the frontier are thoughtless romances."³² Two writers whose works do not belong in such a category are Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather. Van Wyck Brooks has said, "And how odd it is that anyone could write of Rølvaag and his pioneers without associating these with Hamlin Garland's or with Willa Cather's pioneers in the further West, considering

³⁰Jorgenson and Solum, p. 324.

³¹Percy H. Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 230.

³²Carl Van Doren, "Revolt from the Village," in The American Novel, 1789-1939, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 302.

how mutually illuminating all of them are."³³

Garland's depiction of the frontier precedes in time that of Rølvaag, because Garland writes of life in the bleak countryside of northeastern Iowa or western Wisconsin after the Civil War. He treats the farmer realistically, emphasizing the struggle with the economic structure of society that was at variance with the farmers' interests.³⁴ In his Main-Travelled Roads, he depicted life without romance, only poverty and despair.³⁵ Garland's pioneer women have a hard life, but they seem to be worn out by pain and weariness rather than by loneliness and fear.

Willa Cather's best novels deal with the frontier, the land of the West. [Her pioneers do not aim at conquest of the land in order to make money but in order to build a civilization.] My Ántonia has been considered Willa Cather's outstanding prairie novel, the one which expresses most clearly the author's deep attachment to the land of the Nebraska plains.³⁶ In the novel Willa Cather realistically

³³Van Wyck Brooks, The Writer in America (New York: Avon Books, 1953).

³⁴Meyer, p. 57.

³⁵Hamlin Garland, Main-Travelled Roads (New York: Harper and Brothers, c1899).

³⁶Willa Cather, My Ántonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

acknowledges the harshness of the elements for the settlers of the plains in the 1880's, but she dwells on the heroic aspects of man against nature, not on the devastation of human spirit. In spite of deprivation and ugliness of surroundings, Antonia senses a feeling of joyous freedom and oneness with nature. Willa Cather glorifies the land more than Rølvaag does. From the land man gets his strength and courage and nobility. Willa Cather loved the land itself, not what land represented materially. There is a similarity between Beret and gentle, cultured old Mr. Shimerda in My Antonia. Beret loses her sanity; Mr. Shimerda takes his life. Both long for the Old World and cannot adjust to the deprivation of the New.

Giants in the Earth has been anthologized on the basis of its literary excellence. Vernon L. Parrington indicates that apart from its artistic value, the novel is an important historical document because it is the first fictional work which adequately analyzes the settlement of the prairies in terms of emotion.

We have been used to viewing the frontier in broad and generous perspective and have responded most sympathetically to the epic note that runs through the tale of the conquest of the continent. It is the great American romance that gives life and drama to our history. . . . But the emotional side, the final ledger of human values, we have too little considered--the men and women broken by the frontier. . . . The cost of it all in human happiness--the

loneliness, the disappointments, the renunciations, the severing of old ties and quitting of familiar places, the appalling lack of those intangible cushions for the nerves that could not be transported on horseback or in prairie schooners; these imponderables too often have been left out of the reckoning in our traditional romantic interpretations.

³⁷ Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), III, 387.

CHAPTER V

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

" . . . His face was ashen and drawn. His eyes were set toward the west" (Giants, p. 453). Thus Per Hansa takes leave of his prairie kingdom. The westward look indicates that the conquest of the prairies will continue. One could expect that the next book in the trilogy would reestablish the kingdom under the continuing leadership of Peder Victorious, who seems destined for great things. What Rølvaag reveals in Peder Victorious and Their Fathers' God, however, is the deepening tragedy of immigration. In the frozen, ashen countenance of Per Hansa are reflected not the optimistic hopes of America but the death and disintegration of the dream.¹

It is Beret who senses the tragedy of the American experiment. "Human beings cannot exist here!" she cries. "They grow into beasts" (Giants, p. 228). Although she senses the insidious erosion of old values, she is helpless to deter the process. It is apparent to her that there has to be some continuity from the old life to the new. Changing from a rooted life to a rootless existence,

¹Kristoffer Paulson, discussion of "Rølvaag as Cultural Leader," Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 29, 1974.

from a world of order to one of change can be tragic for the individual and also for the emerging community.

Peder Victorious continues the saga of the Norwegian settlers of Spring Creek down into the second generation.² Against the background of the developing community, the novel traces Peder's growth from childhood to maturity. Lincoln Colcord, one of Rølvaag's translators, applauded the author's "fine honest sex-psychology of adolescence" in the relating of Peder's maturing.³

Peder's religious attitudes reflect change, too. As a small child, he trusts and loves his friendly heavenly Father, until the day Per Hansa's body is brought home. "Henceforth no power on earth could make him believe that God, who had killed his father in this way, could be only goodness" (p. 9). God still is very real to Peder, but He is a monster to be feared instead of a friend to be trusted.

Not only Peder has developed, but also Beret. During the months of waiting, after Per Hansa's disappearance, Beret grieves and agonizes over her sin of sending her

²Ole E. Rølvaag, Peder Victorious, trans. Nora O. Solum and O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929). Page references in the text are to this edition.

³Letter from Lincoln Colcord to Eugene Saxton of Harper and Brothers, September 26, 1927, included in the Rølvaag papers in the archives of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota.

husband out to certain death in the blizzard. The old pastor who helped her regain her sanity a few years earlier now helps her to realize that her sin consists not in her involvement in Per's death but in her critical attitude toward other people. He tells her,

No, your worst sin does not consist in what you did to your husband that day; rather it lies in your discontent with God's special creatures, with your fellow men. For that reason you can experience no real happiness. . . . That is a grievous sin, Beret Holm! (p. 169)

Grieving and lonely, she longs to return to Norway.

On warm nights, when she found it difficult to sleep . . . old scenes would come back to her, the mood of the prairie night round about her being strangely reminiscent of them . . . a lazy sea billowing listlessly in a quiet cove, washing up against kelp-covered rocks . . . inland mountains dozing in a lazy sun . . . the call of the gull in the meadows. (p. 170)

However, the thought of Per Hansa in the churchyard and the realization that his job of founding the prairie kingdom must now be hers, help her accept the fact that here must be her home. As she assumes Per Hansa's task, she emerges a strong, courageous woman. One aspect of her personality does not change, however, and that is her resistance to the process of Americanization going on about her. In Beret's stubborn insistence on retaining ties with Norwegian culture, Rølvaag demonstrates what he expresses in a speech given in Nordland in 1906:

There is an emptiness and hollowness in a degree that must surprise every person capable of deep emotions. . . . Although the Americans have shown a mechanical ingenuity greater than that of any other people, they have not yet discovered the art of living. . . . Neither the Yankee nor the Norwegian American has been able to determine the proper relation between earning money and using it in the interest of human wellbeing.⁴

Beret's concern for cultural continuity centers on her family. Peder, especially, she wants to save from shallowness and rootlessness. If he is to be a whole person, he must not erase all that went into his being from the culture of his parents.

Because of her conservative views, Beret becomes isolated from other people in the community. The settlement has grown into a community of Norwegians and Irish. As it seeks to establish its identity, it finds it expedient to slough off the past and to look upon itself as a purely American group of people. At the same time that the community is finding its identity, so is the territory. Political discussions regarding the division of the territory into North and South Dakota are swirling about the settlers, and the location of the capital of the prospective state is a major issue. Eager to become real Americans, both the Irish and the Norwegians throw themselves into the political squabbles. In the midst of the excitement, people have

⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 100.

little concern for any commitment to their past culture. Beret is ridiculed for her resistance to Americanization.

Peder Victorious is caught between the two opposing attitudes. He respects his mother but is excited about the changes taking place about him. His normal youth rebellion against the older generation is accentuated by the unique situation in which he is caught. Once again a type of dualism emerges, this time between Beret, who adheres to the old ways, and the advocates of easy Americanization.

In his early childhood, Peder senses no need to rebel, but when he begins school, he encounters Irish children who make him realize that to be the son of a Norwegian mother like Beret means to be "different." He begins to rebel against those things which seem to set him apart from other children and which seem to hold him back--his language, his religion, and Norwegian culture in general.

Beret's insistence on using the Norwegian language in the home irritates the children, particularly Peder. He cannot understand his mother's inability to speak English.

English--the easiest language in the world to learn. And she wouldn't even try--didn't care. "Talk Norwegian!" she would burst out all of a sudden whenever any of them talked English at home. She would even say it right out before people who didn't understand Norwegian, so that Peder was often ashamed when strangers came. (p. 3)

As the children more and more substitute the English language for the Norwegian, she feels shut out of their world

of ideas. "At times, as she listened to their talk she would fall to wondering whether she actually was their mother--their language was not hers" (p. 179).

To appreciate Beret's insistence on the Norwegian language, one must understand that Rølvaag felt keenly that the native tongue was an integral part of the culture of the fatherland. In a speech given in 1907, Rølvaag urged Norwegians in America to learn "the language of their fathers" at the same time that they learn English, "the language of their country."⁵

The Norwegian language is a rich and beautiful language. From its depths in the hidden recesses of our kin, strange and beautiful vistas open to us. . . . It is the language of father and mother, of grandfathers and grandmothers. . . . And least of all can we afford to discard the language which carries within it the entire riches of their mental and spiritual life.⁶

Instinctively Beret realizes that discarding the language is symbolic of discarding the entire heritage of Norway.

In addition to rebelling against his mother's language, Peder rebels against her religion. The religious turmoil in Spring Creek during Peder's childhood is typical of the situation in other Norwegian settlements in the Midwest. For one thing, the immigrants no longer feel the restraints

⁵Jorgenson and Solum, p. 115.

⁶Jorgenson and Solum, p. 116.

of the State Church of Norway. Furthermore, the Norwegian-American churches reflect the church situation in Norway.

The nineteenth century was a time of awakening in political life, economy, national unity, education, literature, and religious life in Norway.⁷ The dogmatic views of the State Church were challenged by Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824), whose efforts for a more personal Christianity within the State Church had an impact on all aspects of life. His followers have been called "the puritans of Norway."⁸ In the 1850's and 1860's another revival under Professor Gisle Johnson of the University surpassed the Hauge movement. Johnsonian revivalists sought to separate the worldly from the faithful by church discipline.⁹ The resulting tension between the State Church and the awakened churches reflected itself in the immigrant communities in America. Some congregations followed the traditions of the Norwegian State Church. Other congregations which claimed to reflect a more awakened laity took a competitive position and at times became an opposing force even though they

⁷Einar Molland, Church Life in Norway 1800-1950, trans. Harris Kaasa (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1957), p. 2.

⁸Molland, p. 19.

⁹Molland, p. 36.

remained within the fold of the Lutheran Church.¹⁰

In Peder Victorious, the tensions within the Spring Creek church erupt when a young girl is forced to make public confession after giving birth to an illegitimate child. The pharisaical treatment of the girl and her subsequent suicide confirm Peder's doubts about the church as an agency of God's mercy. His misgivings are furthered by the ensuing split in the congregation. Gradually he drifts away from the church. He resents the pastor's urgings that he enter the ministry. By not answering questions at confirmation, he silently rejects his mother's Norwegian Lutheran faith. Leaving the church is part of his rebellion against his mother's cultural heritage and also a reaction against the ineffectiveness of the church in their midst.

Another aspect of Peder's rebellion involves Beret's intense loyalty to Norway that causes her to mistrust people of other national backgrounds. She does not feel superior to them, but she has a distinctly separatist attitude. Peder's growing friendship with Charles and Susie Doheny alarms Beret because she foresees problems arising from involvement with their Irish neighbors. Peder argues

¹⁰A thorough discussion on the subject is given in E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, The Lutheran Church Among North Americans: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), pp. 69-119.

that in America race does not matter, but Beret replies, "You can't mix wheat and potatoes in the same bin" (p. 104). When she realizes that Peder's involvement with Susie is picking up momentum, she warns, "If the day should come that you get yourself mixed up with the Irish, then you will have lost your mother--that I could not live through!" (p. 236).

Almost alone Beret attempts to stem the tide of Americanization. She believes that only in the home can she keep her family true to its national traditions. Her older children express embarrassment and open resentment at their mother's obstinacy, and they go their own ways as soon as they can become independent. Peder's irritation turns to hatred for his Norwegian background. He declares, "When I am grown up I am going to go so far away that I'll never hear the word Norwegian again!" (p. 142).

Peder's reaction is not abnormally vehement. Marcus Hansen in The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant has called attention to the two worlds of the second generation immigrant.

As soon as he was free economically . . . the son struck out for himself. He wanted to forget everything: the foreign language that left an unmistakable trace in his English speech, the religion that continually recalled childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories. He wanted to be away from all physical

reminders of early days, in an environment so different, so American, that all associates naturally assumed that he was as American as they.¹¹

Peder's desire to break with his Norwegian past has been furthered by the local school. Beret senses that in trying to make Americans out of immigrant material, the school has been guilty of erasing all traces of Norwegian culture. Whether unconsciously or not, the teacher tends to discourage any ethnic pride among the students. Subject matter is strictly American, and written on the blackboard is the constant reminder: "This is an American school; in work and play alike we speak English only!" (p. 141).

The teacher considers herself a crusader in the cause of Americanization. She berates Peder for his Norwegian accent, warning him that it will prevent him from becoming a great American. In her zeal for converting the "children of immigrants from foreign lands" into Americans, Miss Mahon preaches the gospel of American history.

It remained to be seen whether she had sufficient strength to instil in them the very spirit of America--that mighty force which had brought their parents out of bondage in the Old World, had flung wide the doors to this great land, and thereupon had invited the poor and the downtrodden to come and be happy in the beauty and promise of the New World. And hither they had come, all the unfortunate and the oppressed of the earth. Here they bought, without pay, wine and milk; here they had built, happily confident of the perfect existence

¹¹Marcus Lee Hansen, The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Historical Society, 1938), p. 7.

to come! All previous history was finished, worn out like an old garment and discarded because no longer usable. (p. 73)

It is obvious that Rølvaag has little patience with the short-sighted policies of the schools and teachers in immigrant communities. However, Jorgenson and Solum point out that the school systems in the Midwest had to conform to those in the rest of the country. There was no place in the curriculum for transmitting cultural traditions. Without realizing it, the educational policy deprived the ethnic groups of a chance to explore their past.¹²

Beret's concern is typical of the consternation of immigrants who resented the policy of the school system. Their open criticism touched off a controversy that raged in the Midwest around 1850 to 1875.¹³ The main issue was whether parochial schools should supplant the common schools. Church dignitaries from Norway feared that the Lutheran faith and the Norwegian language and heritage would be lost in the all-English common schools. However, Blegen says, "The average Norwegian immigrant quietly

¹²Jorgenson and Solum, p. 169.

¹³An interesting account of the controversy is given in Kenneth Bjork and Arthur C. Paulson, eds. and trans., "A School and Language Controversy in 1858: A Documentary Study," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 10 (1933), pp. 76-106.

accepted the public schools through all the years that the Synod ministers denounced them as 'heathen.'¹⁴

Rølvaag, considering it a tragedy to exclude all aspects of Norwegian culture from schools, suggested as a possible remedy more attention to Scandinavian affairs in the common schools, the offering of Scandinavian language courses in high schools, and strong departments in those subjects in colleges and universities in the Midwest.¹⁵

Recent additions of ethnic studies to curricula in high schools and colleges indicate that Rølvaag was ahead of his time in suggesting some of the measures intended to insure that all ethnic groups in American society shall have a chance to discover their identity and to accept it as a worthy part of American culture.

Not only the schools, but also the organized church received Rølvaag's criticism. Rølvaag believed that the Lutheran church was uniquely qualified to mediate between the external forms of American life and the Norwegian immigrant's inner life of tradition. It could be an instrument for promoting cultural creativity and retention of old values, including the Norwegian language.¹⁶

¹⁴Blegen, Norwegian Migration: Transition, p. 274.

¹⁵Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 169-70.

¹⁶Jorgenson and Solum, p. 170.

In his early novels Rølvaag expresses criticism of the church among Norwegian-Americans because of its pettiness, self-interest, and lack of idealism and noble goals.¹⁷ Per Smevik records his observations about the church in his letters. For instance, he says,

. . . it isn't all bright and glorious within the Norwegian Lutheran Church here either. Ever since the early '80's, there has been a storm of dissension hanging over it, and this storm has sometimes raged so hard that it threatened to tear the whole house to pieces. . . . it ate into the very marrow of the people; and the whole community became like a huge, festering boil full of all kinds of malice and ugliness. (Per Smevik, pp. 105-06)

In The Boat of Longing also, Rølvaag inserts a comment on the ineffectiveness of the church in helping the immigrant make his adjustment to America and in encouraging him to perpetuate his ties with the homeland. He depicts the church representatives who call at the rooming house where Nils lives as a sorry lot--"dandy apostles," in the poet's sarcastic terms. (Boat of Longing, p. 213)

Rølvaag's criticism of the clergy is especially apparent in Peder Victorious. Instead of guiding the settlement into a wholesome process of assimilation in which the best of its culture is kept and blended into American life, the church concentrates on trivialities. Pastor Gabrielson considers it his duty to dissolve Norwegian traditions in the

¹⁷Jorgenson and Solum, p. 150.

church and to discourage the use of the Norwegian language among his people, claiming that "twenty years from now not one word of Norwegian would be heard in America, no doubt about that" (Peder Victorious, pp. 201-02). The rival pastor straddles the fence by defending the use of the Norwegian language while promoting the American cause in every other way. The church, Rølvaag intimates, should give stability to the community in order to make its Americanization solid and effective.

It is the meddling pastor who alerts Beret to Peder's involvement in a theatrical performance, considered by pietists a sinful, worldly venture. Beret spies on the rehearsal in which Peder and Susie are embracing. It is not only Peder's participation in a play, but his open display of affection for the Irish girl that causes Beret's temporary derangement. She unsuccessfully attempts to burn the vacated schoolhouse because it "embodies the forces prying him away from her and from the Old World culture, her mainstay in life."¹⁸

Agonizing over what to do, Beret seems to hear Per Hansa urging her to let Peder marry Susie. The story ends as Beret and Peder start out for the Doheny home to arrange for the wedding.

¹⁸Reigstad, p. 135.

Giants in the Earth ends as Beret sends Per Hansa off on a mission which ends in his death. In Peder Victorious Beret arranges for her son's marriage, which promises to end in a different kind of tragedy. As one critic has suggested, Peder is on his way to his undoing.¹⁹

Peder's marriage represents the culmination of his rebellion against his mother, his faith, and his Norwegian heritage. Peder wants to be completely American, and he thinks that he has achieved this goal when he marries Susie, an Irish Catholic girl.²⁰ However, he has not yet realized that identity as an American is not sufficient. In the words of one writer, he must discard the "ego-comforting delusion that he is 'an American,' identical to millions of other wonderful beings who, by a series of miracles, constitute a unique species."²¹ In America's pluralistic society, the ethnic ties which Peder has severed are essential to his discovery of what he is and what he is not. Their Fathers' God relates the story of

¹⁹Paulson, Rølvaag discussion.

²⁰Haugrud, p. 115.

²¹Katharine D. Newman, The American Equation: Literature in a Multi-ethnic Culture (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), p. 1.

Peder's continued search for identity.²² It also tells the story of conflict.

Spring Creek has grown from a handful of Norwegian immigrants banded together by common background and common needs, into a settled community, with churches, schools, and places of business. The town recognizes itself as a unified part of a county, a state, and a nation. Along with political awareness has come conflict. In the background of this conflict between men's attitudes and beliefs is the age-old and continual conflict of man against nature.

At the opening of the novel, drought is desiccating the South Dakota prairies.

Fair weather and a dead calm.
 Molten sun and a quivering sky.
 Day after day the same. All alike. . . .
 Not a sign of rain in the whole dried-up sky. (p. 1)

The individual families respond variously--hanging on or giving up in despair.

Yesterday a canvassed wagon, on its way East, had passed through the Spring Creek settlement, now following the same trail it had taken three years ago when the course lay on Sunset Land. In huge yellow letters on the canvas the owner had painted his defiant farewell:

Fifty miles from water
 One hundred miles from wood
 To hell with South Dakota,
 We're leaving you for good! (p. 3)

²²Ole E. Rølvaag, Their Fathers' God, trans. Trygve Ager (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931). Page references in the text are to this edition.

Or the farmers respond collectively. Man alone avails little against nature, but together as a community, they can fight. At the center of a conflict within the community is a rainmaker. With his promise of producing rain for a fee, Mr. Jewell raises the hopes of despairing people. Peder reacts against the swindler on the basis of rational thinking. He realizes that the mob is being swayed by false application of scientific jargon and by superstition, expressed primarily by the Catholic priest, who interprets Mr. Jewell as an agent of God's divine intervention, the rejection of whom might bring even more disastrous judgments.

In openly declaring Mr. Jewell an opportunist and a swindler, Peder courageously stands out against the mob. He is reminiscent of Ibsen's Dr. Stockman, who in his stubborn stand against the folly of the crowd is declared An Enemy of the People. Peder cannot compromise his stand, nor can he lose gracefully. Whereas old Gjermond Dahl accepts defeat calmly, immature Peder gets thoroughly drunk.

Part of Peder's antagonism against the community has resulted from his marriage to Susie Doheny, an Irish Catholic girl. Peder senses that his marriage is the subject of discussion, speculation, and community gossip. The marriage has also caused friction between Peder and his

brother Hans, who complains, "Every place I go people pounce on me, asking how the Nordlaending is getting along with his Irish wife . . . want to know how it feels to be related to a lot of Catholics. . . . You've disgraced the whole family" (p. 20).

Within the home of Susie, Peder, and Beret Holm lurk tensions that are ready to flare into open conflict. These tensions revolve around differences in religion, culture, and personality and are so interwoven that they are difficult to isolate. One writer has summarized the situation as a "conflict among Peder who is liberal and non religious; Susie his wife, who is Irish and Catholic; and Beret who is traditional orthodox Lutheran."²³ Peder and Beret's Norwegian background should also be listed as a factor.

Beret's early superstition and later fanaticism have matured into an orthodox but unbending faith. "Beret stands apart from both the older people's spiritual turmoil and the second generation's indifference, for her suffering and her discovery of religious certainty have earned her spiritual peace."²⁴ Susie's religion is a "naive Catholicism," based to a large extent on superstition and fear.²⁵

²³Mortensen, p. 48.

²⁴Boewe, p. 10.

²⁵Jorgenson and Solum, p. 416.

She depends on her rosary and icons for assurance. When she neglects the formal outward acts of worship, she fears God's displeasure. Peder recognizes her fears and he believes that they can be uprooted by tearing out the basic cause--the superstitions of her religious faith. He does not understand that to destroy Susie's faith would mean to destroy her life.²⁶

Peder is indifferent to religion. In his youth he rebelled against his mother's faith and he continues to scoff at any outward show of religiosity. After drifting away from the church, he embraces the ideas of free-thinkers like Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll, who propose rational explanations for all aspects of life. Peder defends the right to interpret the Bible as he wishes, or to disbelieve it.²⁷ He despises Susie's religion and Father Williams. Susie's deepest hurt in marriage comes from Peder's rejection of and scoffing at her religious beliefs. Peder directs his antagonism not toward the Catholic church as an institution but toward ignorance, superstition, and fear that are involved in Catholic worship.²⁸

Thus there is a triangle of conflict involving Beret,

²⁶Reigstad, p. 142.

²⁷Boewe, p. 10.

²⁸Jorgenson and Solum, p. 419.

Peder, and Susie. Beret and Susie are equally loyal to their religious faiths, but their beliefs conflict. Susie's faith clashes with Peder's agnosticism; and Peder opposes his mother's religion.

The antagonism is heightened by the birth of a child. Now Beret and Susie fight for the child's soul. Beret tries to convince Peder that he should have the baby baptized into the Lutheran faith and that he should give the child a decent name--Peder, to carry forward the father's name. Peder scoffs at the idea that the baby needs any religion. Unable to convince Peder that baptism has any value, Beret persuades her friend Sorine that she should administer the sacrament secretly, and she calls the child Peder Emanuel.

Susie also struggles with the problem of the baby's baptism, aware of Peder's displeasure at the idea. At the insistence of her father and the priest, Susie furtively arranges for the ceremony. The baby is baptized Patrick St. Olaf.

Einar Haugen has made the comment that the conflict in Their Fathers' God is religious in form but not in fact.²⁹ Rølvaag uses the clash between the Lutheran and Catholic religions because it is a type of conflict common to the

²⁹Haugen, "Rølvaag: Norwegian-American," p. 72.

Midwestern scene and to immigrant life.³⁰ Jorgenson and Solum emphasize that "The book is not a contribution to the literature of ecclesiastical controversy."³¹ The basic problems involve cultural differences related to religion. Peder and Susie at first claim to be modern second generation Americans who are not concerned about their ethnic backgrounds. However, their differences soon surface.

Meyer points out that Rølvaag in this novel is concerned with "consequences of efforts at cultural amalgamation and rejection of old cultural patterns."³² Some of the problems in this "amalgamation" derive from the personality conflict between the couple. Although Susie and Peder share a deep, spontaneous love, they are incompatible in outlooks, interests, and temperaments. Peder is an intellectual person, while Susie is primarily sensual--"luxuriantly fertile," in the words of Jorgenson and Solum.³³ Much of the conflict results from Peder's faults. Reigstad calls him a "supreme egotist," because of his pride and his intolerance.³⁴

³⁰ Reigstad, p. 136.

³¹ Jorgenson and Solum, p. 419.

³² Meyer, p. 66.

³³ Jorgenson and Solum, p. 416.

³⁴ Reigstad, p. 140.

Peder fortunately has inherited some of his father's joyfully optimistic response to life. "He went about his work intoxicated by the fragrance of sprouting, bursting life and of dank, living earth. He had dreams of wondrous things to be, felt them more than saw them. Great to be alive!" (p. 92). But Peder is immature. After his humiliating defeat at the hands of the pro-rainmakers, he goes out on a colossal drunk. Then, however, it is a sense of affinity to nature that brings him back to reality:

The strong odor of the barnyard, the friendly breathing of the cows, the squirting of the sweet-smelling milk into the pail, and the song of a meadow lark calling its mate today affected him strongly . . . life was good and kind. (p. 66)

Per Hansa had his frontier to conquer, and his son Peder Victorious has his--politics. During his life, Per Hansa accomplished the physical settlement of the prairies. Beret is still fighting to keep this kingdom firmly rooted in the old culture while it grows into a part of America. Now Peder anticipates conquest in public service. He senses a call to serve as county commissioner: "Tonight the Call had laid a hand on his shoulder and spoken clearly, unmistakably, determining his course from now on. . . . And this was only the beginning!" (p. 214).

As Peder senses his mission, he begins to realize that his marriage is not satisfactory. He and Susie do not share interests and ideals. She shows no involvement in

his reading or in his plans for the future.

Occasionally . . . he tried reading aloud to her. But she was always so tired after the day's toil that she listened only with ears full of drowsiness. Although he did not say it, her lack of interest in new ideas vexed him. (p. 91)

When he enthusiastically tells her about his plans to improve the farm, "She looked at him absently, as if she had not heard what he said" (p. 197). Susie is afraid of the new ideas in liberal politics that excite Peder. Like the young Beret in her first experiences on the prairie, Susie is afraid of new ways. She relies on familiar patterns.³⁵

The conflict in marriage resulting from incompatible personalities is further complicated by Peder's mother, Beret, into whose home Susie has come to live. Having been unable to dissuade Peder from marrying Susie, Beret stoically accepts the outsider into her home, but it still remains Beret's home. Susie, accustomed to a casual form of housekeeping, does not feel at home in the atmosphere of austere cleanliness. She is painfully conscious of the contrast between Beret's orderliness and her father's carelessness. For instance, when Peder offers to help her clean up the kitchen in her father's house, Susie flares up. "'Oh, leave those dishes alone, you fool!' she

³⁵Reigstad, p. 142.

exploded, her body trembling with anger. 'I've heard enough about the sloppy Irish. You Norwegians needn't come around here rubbing it in'" p. 105).

Susie feels like a guest in her husband's home, since her mother-in-law is completely in charge of housekeeping. However, when the baby arrives, Beret and Peder are shut out of Susie's and Petie's world. In subtle ways, Susie makes Peder feel unnecessary. She delights in Petie's fear of his father and his obvious preference for his Grandpa Doheny. Susie resents Beret and Peder when they take Petie into their enchanted Norwegian world, and she feels threatened by Beret's grandmotherly tenderness toward the baby.

After old Doheny's serious accident, Susie thinks it her duty to take care of her father, believing that he needs her more than Peder does. In her old home she feels secure.

Here she sat among her own people, snug and sheltered in the age-old faith of her fathers. She was theirs and they were hers. Countless, unbreakable bonds held them together. Around them were the great things of life, the things that really mattered, secure and never-failing. (p. 120)

Although she misses Peder, as is evident from their passionate reunions, she is tormented by a sense of love and duty toward her father. Torn thus between love for Peder and for her father, Susie is a pathetic person.

Involvement in the ailing marriage situation is Beret. In her wisdom, she urges Peder to share his dreams and plans with Susie because "two horses that don't drive evenly make a poor team" (p. 184). Sensing Peder's need for Susie, Beret offers to take care of old Doheny and his house so that Susie can return to Peder. Doheny's sneering rejection reveals his crassness: "I've got to do my own courting" (p. 193). Then Beret realizes more than ever that a "gulf deeper and wider than all eternity had opened between her and this house and these people." Never could the gulf be bridged over" (p. 194).

Beret "mellows into old age," says White, in his evaluation of her. "The fearful, almost too sensitive Beret, who had become the masterful, forceful farm woman, now becomes the quiet, modest grandmother. . . . Her character is complete."³⁶ On her deathbed Beret emerges in all her humanity and dignity. Even crotchety old Dr. Green recognizes her stature: "And there was a dignity over this worn-out farmer woman that, for once, made him keep his temper" (p. 243).

In the formulation of the will, Beret exhibits rare wisdom. The farm is to go to Peder, but not as a gift. It will cost him much in money, even as it cost Per Hansa

³⁶White, p. 102.

and Beret much in suffering. Peder must continue building his kingdom. Conscious of the need for continuity, Beret stipulates that the farm must remain in the family, handed down from Peder Victorious to Peder Emanuel.

After settling her business affairs, Beret puts her personal matters in order by confessing to Susie the secret baptism of her grandchild. Then she quietly takes her leave. Reigstad has called Beret "too great a soul to be encompassed by the bounds of any argument--in death as in life . . . a person of dignity and beauty."³⁷

Susie's primary response to Beret's death is resentment over Beret's confession that Petie was baptized a Lutheran. She has no room for sorrow or compassion for her grieving husband, but she takes for granted that certain rituals must be performed in time of death. Susie is confused and terrified by the matter-of-fact acceptance of death and by the lack of concern for a wake. The night of Beret's death, Susie's fears and superstitions climax in a hysterical scene that brings on a nearly fatal miscarriage.

Antagonisms are put aside temporarily during Susie's recovery. However, Peder, who has desired complete freedom from his Nordic past, begins to realize that freedom to marry Irish Susie has meant greater bondage. He perceives

³⁷Reigstad, p. 147.

more clearly the shortcomings of his marriage after he meets Nikoline Johansen, a girl from Norway. Reigstad calls her the "proper mate for Peder."³⁸ Instinctively Peder and Nikoline sense a bond of mutual aspirations and similar attitudes. She understands his desire to achieve something worthwhile, and she urges him to continue striving, in spite of discouragements. Too late he comprehends that what he snatched at in marrying Susie is hildur, a reflected image in the sky that lacks reality and substance.

Differences between Peder and Susie are irreconcilable. The final conflict comes when Peder discovers that Susie has lied and has betrayed him in his bid for public office, choosing loyalty to the opponent on the basis of nationality and religion. Peder believes that the center of the conflict is his wife's clinging to her old superstitious faith. In a cold fury he destroys her religious trinkets, methodically picking the beads from the rosary, breaking the crucifix, and grinding the broken pieces under his heel. "Here's the root of all evil," he mutters. "Now we're through with the idols in this house, Susie!" (p. 337). The next morning Susie returns to her father's house, taking the child with her.

At the beginning of Their Fathers' God, Peder stands

³⁸Reigstad, p. 145.

alone against the mob who are looking for an easy solution to the drouth. Now he stands alone in his home after the climactic emotional storm that has cost him his marriage. Where does he go from here?

On the one hand, he has indicated that he is making his way back toward an acceptance of Beret's values. He has been helped toward identifying himself in terms of his past by two people. One is Nikoline, who attracts him because of their similar interests and outlooks. Peder realizes that their mutual Norwegian background has influenced their affection for each other.

The other person who helps Peder understand the value of his heritage is Pastor Kaldahl. It is not enough to be just an American, he indicates. "If we're to accomplish anything worth while, anything at all, we must do it as Norwegians. . . . If this process of levelling down is allowed to continue, America is doomed to become the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth Soon we will have reached the perfect democracy of barrenness. . . ." (pp. 209-10). He urges Peder and others in the community to value their traditions and to pass them on to those coming after them, not only for their individual enrichment, but for the good of their adoptive country.

The Norwegian Lutheran pastor's advice is sound, but what about Susie's traditions? Does Peder have the right to crush out the "symbols and soul of another's spiritual and cultural beliefs"?³⁹ Rølvaag leaves many questions unanswered. Perhaps he wants to indicate that finding one's own identity in terms of ethnic heritage is only half of the problem. The other part is the acceptance and appreciation of all other ethnic groups in pluralistic America.

³⁹ Paulson, Rølvaag discussion.

CHAPTER VI
REFLECTIONS ON A HERITAGE

At the end of Their Fathers' God, Peder Victorious stands alone, having severed his ties with his parents' cultural past and having destroyed his marriage by seeking to uproot his wife's faith and traditions. His mother is dead, his wife and child have left him, and his political hopes have been demolished. His destiny looks bleak. In spite of his predicament, however, Peder possesses a long, rich tradition to fall back on, and there are indications that he has begun to see himself in relation to these deeper values. Furthermore, there is Petie--Peder Emanuel--who, in spite of his red hair and Irish temper, belongs in the line of Peder Victorious and Per Hansa.

Rølvaag indicated his intentions of writing a fourth and final volume of the Peder Victorious series. According to Jorgenson and Solum, "he intended to bring Peder 'home.' He was to find himself in terms of his racial heritage and in terms of the new nation he wanted to bring forward and upward."¹ The relation of Peder Emanuel to his cultural backgrounds would be interesting to speculate upon. A lively concern for his Irish and Norwegian

¹Jorgenson and Solum, p. 427.

traditions could emerge, according to Marcus Hansen's "principle of the third generation interest," which asserts that what the son wants to forget the grandson wishes to remember.²

In one of his early novels, Rølvaag looks at the second generation immigrant from an angle different from that of Their Fathers' God. Just supposing that a second generation couple did not have parents who appreciated their cultural past--and there are more of that type in America than there are Berets. Supposing this couple had no children--what is the outlook for them? Pretty grim, says Rølvaag in To Tullinger (Two Fools), which he published in 1920. The novel was largely rewritten before it appeared in English translation in 1930 as Pure Gold.³ During the years preceding its publication, America had struggled through a world war that was marked by bigotry and hysteria. Rølvaag referred to the period as "The Day of the Great Beast."⁴ This unfortunate time is the background of the story that traces the moral deterioration of a husband and wife who make money their sole purpose in life. Lars and Lisbet Houglum (Louis and Lizzie) are "second generation

²Hansen, p. 9.

³For a discussion of revisionary changes, see Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 402-06.

⁴Jorgenson and Solum, p. 213.

Norwegians who have cut themselves off entirely from the old-world culture and have acquired little of value from the new."⁵

The theme for the novel comes directly from the Fourth of July speech in The Third Life of Per Smevik, in which the speaker points out that a benefit promised by America to immigrants is prosperity achieved through hard work and clear, practical thinking. In the speech, the promise is tempered by the reminder that "life is more than food, earthly happiness is more than civic freedom, and God's greatest gift to man is not first and foremost great opportunities." (Per Smevik, pp. 122-23) That warning goes unheeded in Pure Gold.⁶

Three patterns are discernible in the novel: the growing attachment of the principal characters to money; the gradual alienation of the couple; and the final tragic futility of their lives.

Louis and Lizzie Houglum start married life as normally as most young couples, proud of each other and optimistic about the future. Although Louis has less than average intelligence, he displays strength and virility to compensate. Lizzie boasts superior business ability. They share

⁵Boewe, p. 5.

⁶Ole E. Rølvaag, Pure Gold, trans. Sivert Erdahl and O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930). Page references in the text are to this translation.

a practical urge to get ahead by purchasing their own farm. As time goes on, their praiseworthy habits of good management develop into thriftiness, then frugality, and finally stinginess.

Louis precipitates a turning point in their lives when he gives his wife a ten dollar gold piece, which casts a strange spell upon her. From this time on Lizzie loves money itself, not the value of money as a purchasing agent. It becomes a substitute for friends, for a place in society, and especially for children.⁷ Needing something to love, "they choose gold, not realizing that it can never bring them true love and joy."⁸ Louis and Lizzie remain childless, and they reject the pastor's suggestion that they adopt an orphan. Their affection for their money seems parental. They play with it and refer to the various types of money by pet names--babies, brats, shillings. "Both bills and silver were dear to them, but most precious of all was the heap of gold." (p. 81)

The bank failure hastens the process of degeneration. They grieve over their loss as if it were a personal bereavement. Saving to compensate for the loss becomes a

⁷ Robert L. Stevens, "Pure Gold: An Appreciation," paper presented at Rølvaag Symposium, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, October 28, 1974.

⁸ Haugrud, p. 112.

'religious practice, with money as their god. Finally the Houghlums sell their farm for an exorbitant price. The fifty thousand dollars joins the other bills in their money belts. Now moving to town, they rent two rooms over a store, existing on meager meals and using a minimum of fuel.

As Louis and Lizzie tighten their grasp on their purses, they loosen their hold on personal ties with family, church, homeland, and community, and finally each other. Lizzie's normal affection toward her parents deteriorates to a greedy concern for financial benefits from them. She borrows money from her father without interest in order to pay off the mortgage. After all, she reasons, "What does he need more money for? He only wastes it, on missions and orphan homes and such foolishness" (p. 47). Finally, gossip circulates "that they had plucked old Tom Oien clean of practically everything he possessed, save the farm" (p. 68).

Church contributions are difficult to collect from Louis and Lizzie. On one occasion they hide under their bed in order to avoid the pastor as he makes the rounds of his parishioners to collect his salary.

Lizzie is contemptuous of her Norwegian background. First she insists on disposing of foreign-sounding names. "Lars" is changed to "Louis," and "Lisbet" becomes "Lizzie." Even though Louis has enjoyed his Norwegian newspaper for

many years, Lizzie decides that it is a needless expense.

Alienation proceeds as Lizzie's hard business deals cost them their few friends in the community. Eventually, they dispose of their hired man in order to save money. A final wedge is driven when the couple refuses to contribute to the Liberty Loan drives. Infuriated patriots accidentally burn down the misers' home during a demonstration against them.

While Louis and Lizzie have isolated themselves from society, they have enjoyed harmony in their home. "They lived happily together, these two human beings--at least tolerably so. Both were strong, in the best of health; they slept well at night, and their savings increased from year to year" (p. 77). However, Lizzie's unquenchable thirst for money propels her into a deal with a swindler, and this mistake precipitates a crack in the couple's close relationship. Now mistrusting each other, they divide their resources and begin to cheat a little.

After moving to town, they remain rootless bystanders instead of involved citizens. "Before very long visitors came to see them. . . . One day the Methodist minister and his wife called, he urging them to attend his church and his wife inviting them to a get-together lunch in the church parlours the next evening. The Houglums declined

both" (p. 274). With the sale of their farm, they sever their last ties with the outside world. As they sit in their miserable rooms, they realize that money has lost some of its enchantment.

The full impact of isolation strikes Louis, who sits alone in the dingy rooms or tramps the streets while his wife works in a restaurant. "By twilight-time he would be back at his rooms, sitting with his coat on, by the window. A chill was trying to get at his bones, working from his feet up. The room was like an ice box . . . wood eleven dollars a cord . . . coal twelve dollars a ton" (p. 287).

Louis' feeling of alienation increases when he overhears a rumor of impending doomsday. The pastor to whom he goes for reassurance scolds him; Lizzie scorns him as a coward; and others ignore him. Finally he walks eighteen miles to see his horses, and they recognize him. "At the sound of the voice of their old master the horses whinnied lustily; throwing their heads back and pulling at their halters, they rolled their eyes so that the whites showed. Their neighings set the quiet of the barn afire" (p. 320). Miserly old Louis sobs. He starts the long trek back to town in the bitter cold.

As evening grows into night without a sign of Louis' return, Lizzie suspects foul play and worries about her money. Fearing robbers, she bars the door and waits

fearfully in the cold room, armed with an ax. She hears fumbling steps groping up the stairs, rasping sounds, and jerkings at the door, then silence. Three days later the frozen bodies of Louis and Lizzie are discovered, one on either side of the closed door. Because of the fear that influenza has caused their deaths, their shabby clothing is removed and burned, including the queer belts next to their bodies.

After all the people had left the store the smoke from a small bonfire back of Jenkins' Drygoods & Groceries curled itself lazily up through the frosty air of the cold star-night. The paper which had been wrapped around the clothes and the clothes themselves gave a cheerful flame. The belts went more slowly. But gradually they too changed into slender columns of blue smoke which mingled with the calm, deep night and was gone. (p. 346)

The retrogression to complete miserliness has been accomplished. Lizzie and Louis Houglum have changed from normal young people to pitiable wretches who in life and in death are completely alienated from society and from each other.

In a sense, the couple have brought about their own destruction. Many theories have been advanced to explain their deterioration. Reigstad suggests that they are defeated because they do not love the land.⁹ They merely exploit it to achieve their own selfish ends.

However, Louis and Lizzie are not villains. They

⁹Reigstad, p. 74.

elicit a feeling of pity, not hatred. As one speaker has pointed out, they seem helpless to prevent their degeneration. They have been converted into "two fools" by a money-mad society.¹⁰ The community participates in the destruction of the Houghlums. According to one writer, they are surrounded by "materialistic ministers, by dishonest bankers, by power-mad bond-drive organizers, by barbaric terrorists."¹¹

American culture is insipid and shallow; the community lacks worthwhile ideals; and the individuals like Louis and Lizzie drift helplessly toward futile ends. Rølvaag's implications are clear. No individual or society or nation can exist purposefully without roots. In relatively new communities, such as those in the Midwest, the danger of rootlessness and shallowness is especially evident. Rølvaag emphasizes that the church has missed its opportunity to be an agent for promoting depth in individual lives and in society. He criticizes the clergy who are either ridiculously helpless or pompously pro-American, so caught up in the "froth of wartime Americanization" that they are not interested in the souls of immigrant parishioners.¹²

¹⁰Stevens, Rølvaag paper.

¹¹Erling Larsen, "The Art of O. E. Rølvaag," Minnesota English Journal, 8 (Winter 1972), 21.

¹²Jorgenson and Solum, p. 258.

If Rølvaag seems unduly pessimistic in this novel, it must be remembered that he had lived through a war which he considered "a calamity to the nation as a whole and a particular misfortune to the cultural and religious interest whose furtherance he regarded more important than the preservation of his own life."¹³ The depressing picture of war hysteria in Pure Gold is authenticated by historical accounts.¹⁴ Pro-Americanism caused the second generation immigrants to turn their backs on the traditions of their parents' homeland in their eagerness to declare loyalty to America. Such rejection of cultural ties in the interests of superficial patriotism is as deplorable as relinquishing them for materialistic reasons, intimates Rølvaag.

The conclusion of Pure Gold is certainly grim. The thin column of blue smoke curling skyward conveys the feeling of finality and utter futility. In this novel, the warning issued to Peder in Their Fathers' God resounds more intensely: "A people that has lost its traditions is doomed!" (Their Fathers' God, p. 207).

¹³Jorgenson and Solum, p. 235.

¹⁴See E. Clifford Nelson, Lutheranism in North America 1914-1970 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), pp. 2-10, for an explanation of the pressures exerted on the Lutheran church during the war years. His discussion makes Rølvaag's position clear and also explains the reasons for some of the apparent ineffectiveness of the clergy.

Rølvaag aims this warning at his own countrymen who are so absorbed in making a living that they neglect other values. In their eagerness to pursue the "American Dream," they too eagerly cut loose from Old World culture and standards. Louis and Lizzie win the battle for material success but lose their own souls,¹⁵ and this possibility exists in a culturally poor, materialistic society.

Although Rølvaag admonishes and scolds his countrymen, he does so without bitterness and satire. Out of deep concern for his adoptive country, as well as love for Norway and his fellow countrymen in America, he enunciates his cultural philosophy. At one time Rølvaag said that he never wrote a novel just because of a good theme but that everything was directly connected with the central interest of his life.¹⁶ This interest, expressed in simple terms, was "the preservation of Norwegian culture and its inculcation into American life."¹⁷ This goal issues from a concern for the individual's welfare as well as for America's cultural future.

In an address to the Symra Society in Decorah, Iowa,

¹⁵ Addison Hibbard, "Analysis of Pure Gold," Contemporary Reading: Discussions in Current Literature, 15 February 1930, p. 154.

¹⁶ Jorgenson and Solum, p. 256.

¹⁷ Introduction to Information File, Rølvaag papers.

on October 4, 1927, Rølvaag said, "I cannot be at one with those who think that in two or three generations all difficulties will be overcome and will give way to a new and happy order."¹⁸ He looked on his task as a continuing one if America were to find its own peculiar identity.

In his teaching of the children of immigrants at St. Olaf College, Rølvaag discovered that a lack of knowledge and understanding of their heritage made them feel insecure and inferior.¹⁹ They did not realize that their national culture was rich and worthy of being preserved. Rølvaag promoted the understanding of ethnic backgrounds through his teaching, speaking, writing, and work with organizations such as the Norwegian-American Historical Association, whose purpose was to collect and preserve the heritage of the Norwegian people in America, through its archives and its publications.²⁰ It was Rølvaag's demonstrated belief that no one could discharge his full duties as an American without knowing his own cultural background.

The Norwegian culture has qualities worthy of transmission. In The Third Life of Per Smevik, the Fourth of July speaker urges his countrymen to honor America by

¹⁸Jorgenson and Solum, p. 418.

¹⁹Tweet, p. 12.

²⁰Tweet, p. 13.

proving "that noble blood flows in the veins of the children she took to herself from the Northland" (Per Smevik, p. 118). This "noble blood" he explains in detail in Reflections on a Heritage.²¹ In the book, Rølvaag points out that every ethnic group has a contribution to make to world culture on the basis of racial traits, which he calls "christening gifts," given by parents to children (II, 1). To remove the special traits in order to achieve a standardized American culture would lead to impoverishment.

One of the traits that is characteristic of the Norwegian-American is an idealistic view of nature, reflected in noble attitudes (IV, 3). Another quality which Rølvaag intimates that America could well emulate is the Norwegian feeling toward home--a deep-rooted love for a place which is part of one's very life, a repository of memories and traditions. Rølvaag contrasts this Norwegian attitude with the American estimate of home as a piece of property that has good resale value (V, 4).

The Norwegian has a sense of self-worth which Rølvaag calls the "democratic-aristocratic attitude." As a human being, the Norwegian farmer has always felt himself equal

²¹References are made in the text to chapter and page of Reflections on a Heritage, the unpublished translation of Rølvaag's Omkring Fedrearven (Concerning Our Heritage).

to the first man of his country, but he places himself under the law of the land--a law which must be the same for all people (VI, 1). Closely connected with this trait is an inborn reverence for law and order. Even in pagan times, people lived according to the saying: "On law shall the nation be built" (VII, 1).

Rølvaag lists as one of the main characteristics of the Norwegian people "the passion for freedom, for the greatest possible rights for the individual under a common law" (XI, 3). Along with this trait is the ability to govern themselves (XI, 4).

The Norwegians are hungry for knowledge, says Rølvaag. He criticizes American schools which boast of good buildings but have no "solid fund of knowledge" (VIII, 5-6). His sharpest criticism is that the schools do not stress the fostering of ethnic consciousness so that the child can achieve a sense of self-worth. Rølvaag also points out that the Norwegian is by nature religious. This trait accounts for the importance of the church in immigrant life, he says (XII).

Rølvaag scolds his countrymen for neglecting their inherent love for the arts. He intimates that the reason for the abuse is "the stupidity and materialism which, like black rust, lies on our lives and threatens to erode them" (IX, 15).

In chapter ten of Reflections on a Heritage, Rølvaag gives special attention to the place of the Norwegian language in the keeping of national culture. Language is both a means of transmitting a culture and a part of the culture itself. His emphasis on retention of the Norwegian language was often misunderstood during his lifetime. He was accused of attempting to build a "Little Norway" in the Midwest. This accusation he shrugged off as ridiculous, because bilingualism could not possibly affect one's attitude toward America (X, 1-4).

In an introductory lecture in immigrant history, Rølvaag told his students: "I am an American first, last, and all the time. But racially I am a Norwegian. . . . I am an American. That means that my whole duty is toward America. But, on the other hand, I am intensely interested in my own race." Furthermore, he insisted that he wanted "every soul in America to feel that this country is the best in the world for him," and if it is not, he should make it so.²²

Rølvaag was proud of his racial characteristics. He made great claims for his national group. However, as Dittmann points out, he was not prejudiced against other nationalities.²³

²²Jorgenson and Solum, p. 298.

²³Dittmann, p. 146.

In the Fourth of July speech at the end of The Third Life of Per Smevik, Rølvaag mentions the gifts which the immigrant brings with him to his adoptive country. In Reflections on a Heritage, he gets specific, listing the qualities that prove that America has been enriched by good human material through adoption of the Norwegian immigrants. Reigstad observes, "Rølvaag's 'racialism' never evolved into a belief in the superiority of the Nordic strain; he asserted only that distinctive characteristics are irrevocably lost in amalgamation."²⁴

Many of the points which Rølvaag makes in Reflections on a Heritage have validity for the present generation. For instance, he notices that young people are gradually beginning to "look back to sources of their existence and to grope for new values," because the values hitherto subscribed to have failed (X, 8). He anticipates a renewed interest in ethnic background--a renaissance of interest in ancestral heritage. These ideas were expressed in 1922. It is significant to note that just half a century later, Lloyd Hustvedt, secretary of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, writes, "Our country is experiencing an 'ethnic renaissance.'"²⁵ In this matter, as in other related ones, Rølvaag was prophetic.

²⁴Reigstad, p. 146.

²⁵Hustvedt, p. 3.)

Knowledge of ethnic culture helps to make an American into an integrated personality, a more effective person who possesses a feeling of self-worth. This observation was made by a speaker at the Rølvaag Symposium, who further asserted that a knowledge of Rølvaag's philosophy as revealed in his novels increased effectiveness in dealing with Mexican Americans and Indians in the Southwest.²⁶ A feeling of self-worth is difficult to engender in those who lack a sense of belonging.

In his novels, Rølvaag explores the immigrant's feeling of alienation, of not belonging. Per Smevik searches for his place on the South Dakota farm; Nils Vaag wanders through the streets of Minneapolis and the lumber camp in the North Woods, looking for his niche; Beret and Per Hansa struggle to make their place on the prairie. For the second generation, the search becomes more complicated, as old and new values are balanced against each other. Some Norwegian-Americans, like Peder Victorious, give some evidence that they will find their identity; others, like Lizzie and Louis, have identity only in relation to false values.

This sense of not belonging is not reserved for the new immigrant in America or for the second generation immigrant. It is common to all minorities who feel excluded on

²⁶Stevens, Rølvaag paper.

the basis of established norms of White Anglo-Saxon America. Hustvedt indicates that in the current "ethnic renaissance," the most forceful thrust clearly comes from "minority groups who seek dignity and self-identity in terms of their past."²⁷ It is a tragic predicament for the immigrant who is separated from his distinctive people and his homeland and who does not feel at home in America. How infinitely more tragic it is for those whose past has been blotted out, ignored, or despised.

Rølvaag's emphasis on preserving ethnic culture as a means for establishing self-identity and for enriching American life was prophetic. Though he spoke to his own situation in his day, more and more he is beginning to speak to a wider audience. In this present generation there could be a fulfillment of his words: "If there has been anything deeply true in what I have said, it will some day prevail."²⁸

²⁷ Hustvedt, p. 3.

²⁸ Jorgenson, p. 151.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Out of Rølvaag's concern for the Norwegian-American immigrant developed his conviction that the Norwegian heritage should be preserved and passed on to following generations. These Old World traditions could help the immigrant adjust to his new country and also could enrich the fabric of American culture. This dual concern involving the Norwegian immigrant and the American culture was the central theme of his life.

The purpose of this paper has been to relate the novels of Rølvaag to the central theme. The relationship has been established on the basis of successive stages of the immigrant experience--his departure from Norway, his first struggles in the New World, his attempts to establish his identity as an American, and his failure to find satisfying goals. These experiences have been explored through the study of particular novels.

It has been established that the loss of cultural ties has resulted in temporary or permanent damage to the immigrant. Segments of society have become ineffective in direct relation to their attitude toward ethnic roots. Institutions in society, such as the school and the church, bear a close relationship to the same problem.

Through his writing, Rølvaag has established that ethnic consciousness is essential for the individual member of a minority group. It is to a greater degree essential for society as a whole in a pluralistic nation such as America.

Books in the Series: A Tale of Two Peoples. Translated by Rølvaag. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907.

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IX. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Collections on a Heritage. Edited by Rølvaag. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907.

Appendix B: Letters, Slips, Notes, etc.. Edited by Rølvaag. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907.

Appendix C: Manuscripts in Archives of Norwegian-American Historical Association, St. Paul, Minn.

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