The Immigrant in Giants in the Earth: Conflict and Resolution

by Melvin Storm

It will be no revelation to readers of *Giants in the Earth* to be told that Rölvaag uses the persons of Beret and Per Hansa to illustrate the two sides of the immigrant's character—that which harkens back to the old traditions, and that which looks ever forward into the future and the new. Beret is illustrative of the former, and Per of the latter. Throughout his life, Rölvaag was deeply concerned with keeping the traditions of the old country alive when they were transplanted to America, and he felt that only by a combination of the old and the new could America's melting-pot produce a truly alive and humanly rich society. My purpose here is to delineate the primary aspects of the Per-Beret conflict and to indicate the manner in which Rölvaag ultimately defines and dramatizes the resolution of that conflict.

It is clear, I think, that the author considers his theme to have significance beyond merely the situation of the Norwegian immigrant pitted against the Great Plains. He is concerned with the plight of man in the universe, itself, and we are very frequently given imagery of extension which draws the attention far beyond the immediate predicament. For example:

> Such evenings were dangerous for all life. To the strong they brought reckless laughter—for who had ever seen such moon-nights? . . . To the weak they brought tears, hopeless tears. This was not life, but eternity itself.•

> The wagon started creaking; the man, short and stooping, led the way; the family piled into the wagon; the two cows jogged behind. . . . They laid their course due west. . . . Banks of heavy cloud were rolled up on the western horizon—huge, fantastic forms that seemed to await them in Heaven's derision. (328-29)

I note this aspect of the book, if only in passing, for I think that it must not be ignored. The novel in this respect makes a claim to rising beyond mere topicality, giving a sense of universality to its characters and their struggle. Rölvaag, like so many other Norwegian writers of his time—one thinks immediately of Hamsun, Undset, and Bojer—

was eminently mindful of the larger context of heroic exploration, reaching back, in terms of their own culture, to the Vikings, themselves.

But to return to the more specific business at hand, let us examine the manner in which the psychological conflict is established. We first learn of the conflict between Per and Beret through their initial reactions to the prairie. Beret's first words in the book reflect her fear and pessimism. Expressing her apprehension that they may never find the wagons of the others who have gone on ahead, she concludes, "This seems to be taking us to the end of the world . . . beyond the end of the world!" (8) Finally arriving at the location of her new home, Beret is filled with the premonition that "here something was about to go wrong!" (28) Even worse, she is appalled that the open prairie

offers "no place to hide behind." (29) She feels the full unfriendly force of the prairie concentrating itself against her, and imagines a "magic circle" encompassing the little settlement of sod houses:

> The wagons had floated like grey specks in the dust; and all at once it seemed as if the whole desolation of a vast continent were centering there and drawing a magic circle about their home. She had even seen the intangible barrier with her own eyes. . . had seen it clearly. . . had had to force herself to cross it. (57)

But Per's reaction is directly opposed to that of Beret. To him it is all a land of wonderful promise:

> The caravan headed for the sky; it steered straight onward. Now, at last, Per Hansa had time to look about him and rejoice in what he saw. . . . And all he saw was beautiful! (168)

Yet her husband's boundless enthusiasm does little to lift Beret's depression. To her, "this formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched. . . or cared." (37) Per's enthusiasm and Beret's apprehension affect more than just their personal moods; they sympathetically extend their opposed emotions to others. Their two perspectives are clearly apparent on the occasions when they see new settlers coming across the prairie. Per is newly thrilled as he sees settlements springing up about them and farther into the west, while his wife feels it her duty to persuade these new wanderers to return east, back to "where people live." (191)

Thus the couple's reactions to the prairie are telling, but I believe we are given still deeper insight into their discrepant states of mind through the ways in which they respond to their past, to the memories of Norway and to the old Scandinavian superstitions. We notice that Per never reminisces about the old country except on one occasion when he talks with Hans Olsa about fishing. On the contrary, Beret returns to thoughts of her parents and home again and again. But, strangely and significantly, it is Per who seems to retain the closest touch with the powers of the old folk-lore. When the cows are missing, and when he finds the strange claim stakes, Per puts the responsibility on the trolls:

> By God! the trolls must be after him! It was only natural that he should meet them somewhere out here; but to think of their coming in just this dirty fashion! . . . Ah, well, trolls were trolls, no matter how they came!" (116)

Beret, though, blames nothing on the gnomes and trolls of Norway. All evil here, she feels, is engendered in the godless immensity of prairie. To the influences of her old home she will direct no blame.

The laws of the Old Country, too, provide a point of contrast. When Per removes and destroys the strange claim stakes, he feels no remorse, but Beret is appalled. Among the peasants of Norway, the removal of another man's landmarks was considered among the worst crimes possible, and following the morality of her native tradition, Beret reacts accordingly. The traditional taboo involved here troubles Per Hansa not at all, as he demonstrates again his break with the past. It is significant that Per considers his past traditions only when something has gone wrong. Thus, when evil arises, he blames the Old Country, while Beret blames the new. In legal or moral matters, Per considers the laws and sanctions of this country, while Beret is still bound by the old. So, predictably, even the change of names deeply affects Beret's peace of mind. When the immigrants find that they have to choose permanent family names, instead of keeping the Scandinavian system of surnames, Beret thinks this to be almost a sacrilege. Through repudiation of the names with which they were christened, she feels, they will lose almost the only permanent thing they had brought from Norway with them. Of all the settlers in the little colony, she alone shows concern over this.

I have tried, thus far, to sketch the dramatic material with which Rolvaag sets up his conflict. If we consider the dramatization of this disharmony together with the birth of Peder Victorious and with the novel's tragic conclusion, I believe we can surmise where Rölvaag's solution to the conflict lies—where we are to find the ultimate joining of Old and New World principles and traditions.

Since both Per and Beret were born in Norway, we notice first of all that the conflict presented in the book is a first-generation one. Further, this conflict is never resolved between the two of them. Beret is mentally unbalanced by it, and Per, in turn, is driven inadvertently to his death. We see, really, that neither and both are to blame. Early in the novel each is shown to be unable completely to overcome the other. Per possesses "a stern determination of purpose, a driving force, so strong that she shrank back from the least contact with it." (42) But on the other hand, "There was something in that sad resignation of hers that he was powerless against." (44)

Because he cannot perceive the effect that the country is having upon Beret, Per innocently permits insanity to overtake her, and even when she regains most of her stability, she is still left with a religious fervor bordering on the fanatical. And it is this religiosity that ultimately prompts her to beg Per to make the impossible trip through the blizzard to get a minister for the dying Hans Olsa. In the end, we cannot really blame one or the other, though it may be significant that it is Beret who survives, the personification of the Old World traditions.

The real harmonization of elements, Rölvaag seems to suggest, must await the second generation. A consideration of the two sequels, *Peder Victorious* and *Their Father's God*, is useful in this regard, but it is *Giants in the Earth*, alone, that shows us the child, Peder, representative of the second generation, through the perspectives of both his parents. At one point, while Beret is still carrying Peder within her, she has the notion (in her insanity) that they must all leave the colony and "go home." She begins packing her trunk, but suddenly the unborn infant begins twisting and kicking, and she feels that even he is against her and is protesting the move. The reader can scarcely avoid the feeling that the unborn Peder, the soon-to-be new American, is asserting the rights to his future by struggling against this threat to it. The second generation, carefully imbued with the old traditions as well as the new, must stay to see—indeed to become—the resolution of the conflict. It is only in the new babe in the new world that harmony will be finally achieved.

*O. E. Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, trans. Lincoln Colcord and the author (New York, 1964), p. 213. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.