

O. E. RÖLVAAG'S *GIANTS IN THE EARTH* AND THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY TELLING

by
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In its exploration of a Norwegian family's struggle against the hostile North American plains, the narrative framework of O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* resembles an epic poem. Per Hansa, the hero, is a fisherman by trade, but after receiving encouraging letters from friends in America, he decides to try his luck at farming, preferring to build his own kingdom in America rather than to live under one in Norway. Despite objections from his wife, Beret, he and his family leave Helgeland, Norway for the Dakota territories in the early 1870s. Soon after arriving and staking his claim, Per Hansa immediately shows signs of the first generation immigrant in his enthusiasm for American democratic capitalism, in his opportunistic behavior regarding material success, and in his competitive spirit.

Littered with Turnerian overtones, the novel not only depicts Per Hansa's heroic battle with the Great Plains but also presents his steadfast vision of finding economic and communal stability during the great migration westward. Rølvaag peppers his narrative with anecdotes illustrating Per Hansa's rugged individualism, including his healing of an "Indian chief," his breaking over 1.5 acres of land in a single day, and his super human effort in braving harsh weather to trade furs at a trading post some one hundred miles away. Per Hansa's exploits elevate him to legendary status and are often recounted among members of the community when they are feeling insecure in their decision to leave the Old World for the uncertainties of America. As noted folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett posits, "with the rupture in cultural and communal

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continuity brought about by immigration, reminiscence becomes essential to personal as well as cultural survival."¹ This is especially true for newly arriving Norwegian pioneers who come into contact with Per Hansa's settlement. Stories are often exchanged orally, heroic legends are established, and new pioneers are encouraged as to their chances of success in an unfamiliar land. In fact, Rølvaag likens Per Hansa's life to a fairy tale, where he is "both prince and King, the sole possessor of countless treasures," and informs us that many of Per Hansa's daring adventures survive time and are "still told about in the legends of [Spring Creek]."²

The folk tales and oral history of most cultures often emphasize great individuals who encourage the telling and retelling of daring adventures and amazing acts of heroism. Frequently, these stories become distorted and exaggerated from generation to generation or from constant repetition, but they are, nonetheless, important cultural landmarks. To some extent, the legend of Per Hansa acts as an acculturating agent for those Norwegians looking to assimilate America's rugged individualism and its survival-of-the-fittest ethic, but it also establishes roots for a community looking to create its own history. In other words, to adjust psychologically to feelings of displacement and isolation from the customs and traditions of their native land, the members of Rølvaag's small immigrant community use the art of story telling as a vehicle for building self-confidence, maintaining social continuity, and reconciling Old and New World differences.

The central conflict in the novel is the unstable marriage of Beret and Per Hansa. Werner Sollors, a leading scholar in immigrant literature and author of *Beyond Ethnicity*, believes the tension between the two is one of descent versus consent or rather Old World versus New World.³ Beret personifies the conservative, religious, and cultural beliefs of the Old World and views the hardships she and her husband confront on the prairie as God's punishment for deserting traditional Norwegian values to inhabit a land requiring a substantial amount of Social Darwinism to survive. Per Hansa, on the other hand, maintains an "indomitable, conquering mood," a "buoyant recklessness," and a "stern determination

of purpose, a driving force," a fitting demeanor for an adverse environment (41). Their marital problems become irreconcilable after Per Hansa finds and destroys Irish landmarks on his friend Hans Olsa's property. When the Irish arrive, they have no proof that they really own the land. A scuffle ensues, but the Norwegians force them to leave. When Beret discovers her husband's deception, she is repulsed, especially since Norwegian law deems destroying another man's landmarks a capital offense. Thus, Per Hansa's behavior not only coincides with the survival-of-the-fittest mentality of the typical pioneer, but it also contributes to his cultural deprivation. Even worse for Beret, the rest of the Spring Creek settlers, upon hearing of the act, agree that it was the best course of action. From here, Beret's ethnocentric dogma turns to religious fanaticism. In fact, the Per Hansa household becomes the community church, a transformation that tightens Beret's hold on Old World customs.

Harold Simonson, who is considered an authority in Norwegian-American Studies, believes Beret and Rølvaag can be linked ideologically because both "brooded over the cost of immigration, not just in lives but in souls."⁴ He further points out that Beret, like Rølvaag, knew

that making a place truly habitable requires more than house and barn and money. One needs roots that link one's habitation to axial truths. Desolation is the absence of such roots, and disorientation happens not only on empty prairies but in homes lacking cultural and religious continuity.⁵

Simonson's point may be valid, but Rølvaag also theorized immigrants could bridge the gap between Old World traditions and New World demands. Beret often resurrects old Norwegian hymns and stories in the novel as a way to remain close to her heritage, while Per Hansa creates new ones for future Norwegian-Americans.⁶ Per Hansa may be, as literary critic Philip Coleman-Hull notes, "as pagan as a saga hero" preferring to "manufacture his own religion on the prairie, worshipping the land," but he never abandons completely his Norwegian heritage.⁷

Feeling guilty about bringing his wife to a land and life that she cannot accept, Per Hansa braves a winter storm and sacrifices his life at the novel's close to appease Beret's request for a preacher. She hopes to save Hans Olsa's soul before he dies, but Per Hansa knows his chances of survival, let alone finding a preacher, are slim. His sacrifice represents a reunification with what is very important in Norwegian culture--marriage and family.

In a land where "there is nothing to hide behind" (221) and where the vast plains dwarf humanity, the settlers of Spring Creek, not surprisingly, resort to an intracultural existence, even to the point of erasing in America all secular boundaries between two feuding tribes from Norway. Though a Helgeland, Per Hansa often turns to the neighboring Trønders not only for provisional assistance but also for companionship. From the beginning, Rølvaag injects images of isolation and loneliness into the novel's narrative structure. Per Hansa and his family, while traveling from Minnesota to South Dakota, appear to be swallowed whole by the prairie:

The caravan seemed a miserably frail and Lilliputian thing as it crept over the boundless prairie toward the skyline. Of road or trail there lay not a trace ahead; as soon as the grass had straightened up again behind, no one could have told the direction from which it had come or whither it was bound. (6)

This scene accentuates the epic spirit and grandeur of the novel, but more importantly, it demonstrates the eventual need for strong social ties when the settlement is established.

To overcome a fear of the boundless prairie and of ethnic dislocation, the habitants of Spring Creek participate in history making and draw upon personal experiences as a way to create models of fortitude, perseverance, and success. For instance, one incident often mentioned in Spring Creek is Per Hansa's first contact with the Native Americans in the region. He uses what medical knowledge he learned as a sailor in Norway to comfort a tribesman stricken with blood poisoning in his right arm. Per Hansa

stays with him throughout the night and nurses him until he can resume traveling. Before leaving, the man gives Per Hansa a pony as a token of his gratitude. We never learn the fate of the man, but we do know that the arm was “still bad enough” (81). Nonetheless, Per Hansa’s good deed is hailed as an act of heroism and becomes a permanent part of Spring Creek’s oral history. Though Per Hansa embraces American rugged individualism, his charitable action reflects his Lutheran upbringing in Norway.

Legendary episodes such as Per Hansa’s constitute a large portion of the oral history of this first generation community and become the foundation upon which rests its hope of survival and its eventual prosperity. Per Hansa does nothing that should elevate him to legendary status in this particular incident, but the circumstances surrounding his adventure are greatly exaggerated and illustrate a typical constituent of first-person reminiscences:

It seemed nothing short of a miracle that Per Hansa had been able to bring back to life an Indian chief with one foot in the grave—those were the very words Kjersti had used to her husband. Tönseten swore that he had never heard anything so strange; by George! it was more exciting than any storybook ever written!
(84)

Later, Per Hansa boasts of not having “any courage to spare” against a band of Indians “thirty strong or more,” especially since he “stood alone with three crazy women” (85)! First, nothing in the novel indicates that the tribe member Per Hansa assisted is an Indian chief, and second, the tribe was hardly hostile and definitely not thirty strong. In fact, Per Hansa’s insouciant manner throughout the incident differs from his retelling of the event. One explanation for the greatly exaggerated, if not colorful, recounting of the story is that it unifies a community terrified of its vast surroundings and teetering on the edge of failure. Per Hansa’s success in standing alone against an environment that all of them feel apprehensive about proves the community can persevere and prosper.

The story assumes mythical proportions by the end of the novel. Only then it is Per Hansa's son, Store-Hans, who recites the tale to newly arriving Norwegian settlers. His account of the story departs further from the truth than his father's and is filled with enormous ethnic pride:

He related how the pony had come to be his, giving the story a picturesque turn whenever he saw the chance. He and his father, he told the stranger, had rescued an Indian chief--well, it was the highest chief over all the Indians out West. This chief was dying; he was *almost* dead when they found him. (300)

At this point in Spring Creek's history, the story has become less of a morale booster and more of a testament to the community's strong will and courage. To newly arriving pioneers, however, the story proves that ethnic pride and continuity can be maintained in a foreign land, even if it means negotiating Norwegian and American values.

Another more humorous story involves Tönseten's encounter with what he has convinced himself is a bear. After slaying the animal, he informs the skeptical Store-Hans and Ole of his "great battle," noting how it required all the strength he could muster to do in the "bear." The brothers believe him after viewing the large chunks of meat taken from the carcass, and on Tönseten's advice, take some of it home to Beret. At the dinner table that night, they discover that the "bear" is merely a badger. Both become violently ill. This story also transcends time, but more importantly, Tönseten's tall tale alleviates some of his own insecurities about surviving in an unforgiving environment; bravely confronting something that is a part of the Great Plains only builds Tönseten's self-confidence. Fittingly, the occurrence appears under the chapter heading, "Facing the Great Desolation."

When hardship befalls Spring Creek, members of the community often huddle together for security and reassurance. At one point in the novel, their cows, which are a major source of sustenance, disappear mysteriously. Interestingly, the Helgelanders respond by gathering

around the Indian grave discovered on Per Hansa's property and recollect privately tales they heard as children in Norway:

The evening brought memories to them--memories of half-forgotten tales which people had heard and repeated long, long ago, about happenings away off in a far country. There it had been known to have actually taken place, that man and beast would be spirited away by trolls. (93)

Where they gather is significant since it most likely reminds them of Per Hansa's successful healing of the tribesman, a remembrance that would be both encouraging and comforting. If they can nurse an "Indian chief" back to life in his own environment, then they can surely survive this crisis together. Moreover, the disappearance of the cows may remind them of bleak Norwegian superstitions, but the recollection of these cultural myths amidst the creation of new ones in America illustrates how Old and New World oral traditions can coexist peacefully.

Ethnic studies scholar William Boelhower observes in the first generation immigrants "a self-conscious sense that the immigrant undertaking is a mythological or epic exploit, that it is a history-making act."⁸ Most will agree with this observation, but he also mentions how novels devoted to the second generation often contain a narrative plagued with conflict and division, thus disrupting the once homogenous community.⁹ Boelhower, however, never acknowledges those scenes where Per Hansa can be found at the dinner table reciting to his sons Store-Hans and Ole, in fairy tale fashion, his adventurous journeys across the prairie, including his treacherous trip to the trading post some one hundred miles away. Both repeat these same stories in the same fashion to other second-generation members in the community. These stories will likely survive many generations and will solidify the ethnic cohesion originating from the settlement's continuation of Old World oral traditions.

Granted, Peder Victorious (Per Hansa's third son) becomes engaged to an Irish woman in the second novel of Rølvaag's trilogy, *Peder*

Victorious, and thus separates himself from the Norwegian community and its cultural heritage. Nonetheless, Boelhower's second-generation paradigm never accounts for Peder's brothers and their allegiance to the Norwegian community, for they keep the story telling tradition from the Old World alive in the New World. Rölvaag illustrates in several passages how this oral tradition begins and evolves. After the violent encounter with the Irish over the landmarks, Per Hansa relates the experience to his sons, who, at breakfast the next morning, can be found trying to piece together the stories they hear from their father: "Ole, however, laughingly began to repeat some of the crazy stories his father had told them the night before; Store-Hans remembered more of them, and helped his brother out when his memory failed; the boys were still highly excited" (145). Throughout the novel, the stories are repeated with Viking-like vigor, greatly exaggerated, and sounding very much like the Norwegian fairy tales Rölvaag uses as models for his chapter headings and as a model for Per Hansa. Critic Paul Reigstad notes that Rölvaag patterned his hero after Ash Lad, "a kind of male Cinderella, [who] is a familiar hero in Norwegian folktales. He accomplishes almost impossible feats of cunning or strength to the great surprise of his adversaries."¹⁰ To take Reigstad's point one step further, we can see a definite connection between the Old and New Worlds, for Per Hansa can also be linked to any of Horatio Alger's heroes, who practice a hard work ethic and maintain a self-sufficient mannerism in the pursuit of success.

Moreover, witnessing the prosperity of the older, more established Trönder settlement a few miles away provides optimism and confidence for the Helgelander community. In one particular visit to this settlement, Per Hansa befriends several of its members and learns of their early struggle to survive the Great Plains. Per Hansa liked to listen to these stories, for "there was about them a certain flavor of genuineness and reliability, as of human experience, and at the same time something that stirred his heart and made his cheeks burn" (271). Here, Per Hansa not only witnesses first hand the rugged individualism and resolve needed to find success, but he also learns how important it is for a community to remember its history and pass it on to future generations. Per Hansa's

“heroic” actions and his daring but often successful adventures furnish the Helgeland community with enough material to begin its own oral tradition. True, Per Hansa dies at the end of the novel, but by that time, the community has firmly established its ethnic and historical roots.

To advance social and ethnic continuity in the Helgeland settlement, the members establish a crude but effective school, where all of the children, including Store-Hans and Ole, are taught old Norwegian hymns and stories in both English *and* Norwegian. Since the school lacks paper and writing instruments, students must rely upon telling the stories orally, and because the stories are not always told in the native tongue, the fusion of American and Norwegian customs is almost guaranteed. Furthermore, the school provides “a refuge for them all” (249) and becomes a place that binds “subtly and inseparably together the few souls who lived out there in the wilderness” (250). The school does not exclude the adults in the community; rather, it encourages social interaction with the children and becomes a “debating society. . . a singing school, a coffee party, or a social center” (250). Here, Helgelanders participate in story telling and folk songs, thus closing the gap between first and second generations and insuring the continuation of such ethnic solidarity for generations to come. As one noted folklorist, Stephen Sterns, posits, “expression of ethnic lore enables individuals to be ‘adequately’ socialized into the ethnic group and presents formulae by which the ethnic can interpret ongoing social experiences and occasions for ethnic interactions.”¹¹

To some extent, Per Hansa essentially becomes a Norwegian forefather in America by the end of the novel and is an individual whom later generations can remember with ethnic pride. He and the other members of the Helgeland community have not forfeited completely their cultural integrity just because they have acquired some Algerian qualities often associated with America. As multi-culturalist Barbara Meldrum observes, “Rølvaag believed that immigrants could contribute to the creative life of their new nation only by working with and through their own national heritage, their racial and ethnic past.”¹² Consequently, Per Hansa and his clan act as a linchpin for Norwegian and American traditions, always emphasizing the importance of story telling within their

community but keeping those stories in tune with Norwegian folklore customs.

NOTES

1. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Studying Immigrant and Ethnic and Ethnic Folklore," *Handbook of American Folklore*, eds. Richard Dorson et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 41.
2. O.E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harpers, 1911), 107 and 280. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
3. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 149-168.
4. Harry P. Simonson, *Prairies Within* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 21.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Philip R. Coleman-Hull, in his article "Breaking the Silence: Hymns and Folk Songs in O.E. Rølvaag's Immigrant Trilogy," examines how the settlers of Spring Creek, especially Beret, rely heavily on old Lutheran hymns and Norwegian folk songs as a means to combat their feelings of isolation on the Great Plains. I believe the use of storytelling can be seen in the same light.
7. Philip R. Coleman-Hull, "Breaking the Silence: Hymns and Folk Songs in O.E. Rølvaag's Immigrant Trilogy," *Great Plains Quarterly* 15 (1995): 108.
8. William Boelhower, "Ethnic Trilogies: A Genealogical and Generational Poetics," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 165.
9. *Ibid.*, 167.
10. Paul Reigstad, "Rølvaag as Myth-Maker," in *Ole Rølvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), 53.
11. Stephen Stern, "Ethnic Folklore and the Folklore of Ethnicity," in *American Immigration & Ethnicity: Folklore, Culture and the Immigration Mind*, ed. George E. Pozzetta (New York: Garland, 1991), 262.
12. Barbara Meldrum, "Fate, Sex, and Naturalism in Rølvaag's Trilogy," in *Ole Rølvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), 48.