

NOVEL AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Giants in the Earth, A Saga Of The Prairie narrates the *tour de force* of a group of Norwegian immigrants in South Dakota—focusing on the story of Per Hansa, and his wife Beret and son Store-Hans—that represent those who reached the Prairies in the last third of the previous century, and is an emotive testimony of the colonization in the Heartland. The text is significantly intriguing, for *Giants in the Earth* is, in the artistic sense, a historical novel, but also serves as a historical document that describes all the particulars about the daily life and customs of the first people who settled in this particular area of the United States. It can certainly be understood as a specimen of the Frontier myth, of the struggle of European men against the—for them—unknown and threatening American wilderness, in the region with the most extreme climatic conditions, in the wildest Frontier.

The author, Ole Edvart Rølvaag, was himself a Norwegian immigrant in the Heartland—although he did not live the days of *Giants in the Earth*. He was born in a small settlement on the island of Dønna, in the district of Helgeland, near the Arctic Circle; the name of the settlement was Rølvaag, that Rølvaag adopted as his last name when he got to the United States. (He was Ole Pedersen in Norway, since he was son to Peder, but he preferred to change his name, which was the usual custom among Scandinavian-Americans, as he explains in *Giants in the Earth*.) Young Rølvaag left his native Norway notwithstanding the decent future as a fisherman his mother land offered him; instead, he requested a ticket to America from his uncle in Dakota, traveled and settled there; he was admitted into a university and earned a degree. Afterward, he would devote his entire life to teaching Norwegian in Saint Olaf College, in Northfield, Minnesota, and to write about his experiences as a Norwegian immigrant in the Midwest.

The idea to write a novel about the lives of those who got to America from Norway originated in Europe. It was Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer who, in 1923, declared that he intended to write a novel on this issue. Bojer's idea appealed to Rølvaag, who believed such a story should be narrated by a real immigrant, by a Norwegian-American, someone who knew the land and the people capable of providing first-hand information: someone like him. Rølvaag traveled to Norway and conversed with Bojer, who explained that he sought to give his novel an European approach, not American, and that he wished to analyze the effects of emigration rather than immigration. Rølvaag, on the contrary, wanted to write an American novel for Americans, a text that considered the colonist as an immigrant not an emigrant, and that showed Midwesterners the origins of their nation. His perspective was converse to Bojer's; he thus lost all his fears of incurring into plagiarism, and

determined to hang on to his project: the composition of a novel which covered all the aspects about the life of the first settlers in the Prairies. After visiting Bojer in Norway, Rølvaag returned to the United States and retired to a cabin in the north of Minnesota, where he began to write *Giants in the Earth*. Subsequently, he would continue his work in South Dakota, assembling the historical data for his novel, chiefly from his father-in-law, who had lived the times in which the action occurs.

Rølvaag's novel is the most representative text about the colonization of the Heartland because it focuses on the Scandinavian experience, and Scandinavians were the predominant element among immigrants. In Minnesota there were more than four hundred towns which bore Swedish names by 1890; travelers in Eastern Dakota reported that Norwegian was more commonly spoken than English and that visitors who could only make themselves understood in English would definitely encounter important difficulties to communicate with the inhabitants¹. *Giants in the Earth* is the story of some of the first Scandinavian settlers in the Heartland; and by detailing the troubles and endeavors that the conquest of the Prairies took, it turns into a literary monument in the memory of the many men and women who *tamed* this land, and into a historical work which honors the Midwestern colonists from the Norwegian example.

As it did to Rølvaag, history had always fascinated American writers, and it is in fact one of the eldest motives in American Literature. Puritan New England produced only historical writings, sermons and poetry²; and history was only second to religion treatises in a Puritan's reading. Indeed, a significant number of the first New English texts are historical accounts, e.g. Nathaniel Morton's *New England's Memories*, William Wood's *New England Prospect*, Edward Johnson's *History of New England*, William Hubbard's *Narrative of the problems with the Indians in New England*, or Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, or *The Ecclesiastical History of New England*. However, America's transition from colonial state to republic altered her literary interests. America was not a religious state any longer, and her population did not maintain the Puritan intellectual tendencies always. The Americans of the nineteenth century became fascinated by other subjects apart from religion and history, and their literature began to portray the new American life; it was at this point that wilderness/nature, government and race (i.e. the relationships amidst white, black and native American) captured the point of view of American writers. Yet history continued to be discussed by many authors, including the elite. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* fathoms the importance of history in the works of

¹ Ray A. Billington, *Westward Expansion, A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1960), 114.

² See Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (eds.), *The Puritans. A Source Book of Their Writings* (New York: 1938), and Richard L. Ludwig (ed.), *A Bibliography Supplement* (New York: 1959).

Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Hawthorne, and how these authors somehow fulfilled the function of historians—yet in differing ways.

Emerson's interests were, in the academic sense, unhistorical, for they were rather diffused and did not serve his age and nationality. For Emerson, history is eternal and must embrace time's experiences in Greece, Rome, Spain, England and the other key nations that forged Western civilization. Although Emerson believed that no individual is great, he supported the idea that history had to depict peoples through their most prominent individuals. Emerson's *Representative Men* glorifies the "Central Man"—the people's individual, and History's point of view—like Thomas Carlyle had in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, a revision of the lives of the men whom he believed heroic and representative of an age and a people. Emerson followed Carlyle's formula and presented Shakespeare, Raphaelle, Michel Angelo, Dante, Plato and—particularly—Socrates as the ideal "Central Men".

Thoreau was never indifferent to history; Matthiessen emphasizes how Thoreau's intellect was "solidly planted in the knowledge of his province" and its "deeper life", rather than the "spectacular events"³, a perspective that opposes Emerson's. For Thoreau, the unimportant life of the unimportant people, rather than the heroic feats of Emerson's Central Men, nourishes the bases of history. Thoreau believed that the "Man of the Age" was the workingman, for he alone had built America, and taunted Carlyle with not having allowed for him. Furthermore, Thoreau mystified the Frontier Myth since the future of America had and was being constructed in the remote limits of civilization. Once the last frontier was conquered, the most heroic stage of American history—the forging of the nation—would have been completed, and this turned the struggle against the Frontier into a heroic age. Neither did Carlyle's ideas appeal to Whitman, who supported Thoreau and his belief in a heroic age that took place in the Frontier. Whitman focussed on men's experiences in the open air, and favored the depiction of history in an agrarian background rather than in the city, since America was being made in the country and the provincial towns, not in the Eastern cities.

Giants in the Earth presents the way of life of the working man in the remote Frontier. However, and unlike in Thoreau's and Whitman's works that participate of history, the events that Rølvaag narrated were not contemporary to him as they belonged to the past instead; in this sense, Rølvaag's historical point of view in *Giants in the Earth* is retrospective, just like Hawthorne's had been before. Hawthorne was preoccupied with American heritage; he thought that knowing and understanding American heritage was dramatic in a stage in which the United States were still an *uncomplete* but growing nation. Henry James acknowledged the importance of Hawthorne's historical consciousness, and T. S. Eliot remarked that

³ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 230.

"Hawthorne... had a very acute historical sense. His erudition in the small field of American colonial history was extensive, and he made most fortunate use of it"⁴. Indeed, Hawthorne pictured American colonial life in his novels better than many historians. James Russell Lowell wrote about Hawthorne's *The Seven Gables* that "this book was the most valuable contribution to New England history that has been made," for it — Matthiessen added—"typifies the intimate connections between heredity and descent, which more mechanical historians had failed to establish"⁵. Likewise, Rølvaag's literary aims are very much the same than Hawthorne's in *The Seven Gables* or in any other work that deals with the history of New England: to offer a complete view of a particular episode of American history, which, in fact, constitutes the "most valuable contribution" to the history of the Heartland. In *Giants in the Earth*, the reader can get an accurate picture of the Scandinavian Midwesterners' lives by the end of the nineteenth century, which is as accurate as Hawthorne's portraiture of the life of Puritan New Englanders, or perhaps even more, since all, or at least most, of the adventures he narrated had been witnessed by his father-in-law and were, therefore, authentic.

Yet *Giants in the Earth* results from the relationship between fiction and history in the same terms that marked the birth of the English novel in the eighteenth century. Ian Watt maintains that "the novel plot is... distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the case of present action"⁶, and coincides with Jacques Derrida in the belief that "realism" differentiates the novel from the previous form of fiction—the romance. In a time in which England had launched her sons and daughters to the conquest of the globe, and the English were sensible of their economic and military supremacy over the rest of the world, a "History," "Memoir," "Life," "Voyage," "Adventure," or "Account" became the most exciting reading. (Edmund Curll, one of the most prestigious book sellers in England by the beginning of the eighteenth century did most of his profits from letter collections and fictive autobiographies.) By the same token, Rølvaag and the rest of twentieth-century Norwegian-Americans felt that same necessity to know who their grandparents were and how they built the society they now live on.

Nonetheless, English writers went further in their attempts to "portray history" in their literature. The first English novels were, in George Meredith's words, "a summary of actual life"⁷, this being a feature that defined them and enhanced their appeal to the reader. The first specimens of the English novel strove to tell a story in a historical manner; in the words

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 320.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁶ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 22.

⁷ Quoted in Laurie Langbauer, *Women and Romance: The Consolation of Gender in the English Novel* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 45.

of eighteenth-century novelist Clara Reeve: *The novel gives a familiar reflection of such things as pass by every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us to persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys, or distresses of the persons in the story, as if they were our own*⁸.

These were the terms in which novelists conceived their works: as specimens of a historical identity. When novelists chose to give up their historical consciousness, for "Legendary Tales and Old English Tales" whose lack of realism was obvious, the English novel turned into "an almost meaningless label"⁹ for some decades (until the end of the Gothic). Yet in the United States, history continued to support the subject matter of many works. Some novelists renounced historical fiction and borrowed from real life to narrate authentic stories; this became an obsessive fad in the United States, as is the case of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* that captured the attention of American readers in the beginning of the nineteenth century by informing them of the authentic, tragic stories that might happen to anyone.

Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* belongs to the historical tradition that had always shone in American Literature before him, from the Puritan history books to *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* to Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Hawthorne. Rölvaag's novel complies with Thoreau's and Whitman's historical preferences for the workingman in an agrarian background, preferably the Frontier, where America's heroic age took place. *Giants in the Earth* is thematically a historical document—within the boundaries of literature—in Hawthorne's vein, for it offers a documented story that forshades any other pictures from historians. Furthermore, Rölvaag also endeavored—like the first English novelists—to offer "a summary of actual life" and "a familiar relation of such things that pass everyday" in the lives of the Scandinavian immigrants, which does in fact "deceive us into persuasion... that all is real" as the reader cannot tell the authentic passages—those described by Rölvaag's father-in-law—from the author's own—if any.

Giants in the Earth's structure lies in the relationship between the arrangement of the events that are narrated and Rölvaag's interpretation of history. Rölvaag did indeed epitomize Theodore Parker's ideal American historian, who *must tell us of the social state of the people, the relation of*

⁸ Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1920), I, 29.

⁹ Joyce Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 238.

¹⁰ Clive Probyn, *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1987), 1.

*the cultivator to the soil, the relation of class to class. It is well to know what songs the peasant sung; what prayers he prayed; what food he ate; what tools he wrought with; what tax he paid; how he stood connected with the soil; how he was brought to war; and what weapons armed him for the fight!*¹¹

Rölvaag's narration is particularly enriched by his passionate feelings but also by his research on the issues with which he deals in order to endow his novel with a thoroughly historical accuracy. *Giants in the Earth* offers thus every particular about the settling of the Heartland; it analyzes all the aspects that made colonizing a challenging adventure: the meetings with the Indians; the struggle to obtain the Homestead grants; the harshness of the weather; the striking poverty; the solitude of the region; and the linguistics problems between English and Scandinavian speakers.

Most European settlers feared Indians, and were constantly scared of coming across a group of Indians who might interpret their presence as an invasion and attack them. Yet the problem with Indians is beautifully solved by Rölvaag in his novel: the characters come across a tribe, and they gain the trust of the Indians by curing the chief's injured hand. The episode is long—the cure takes approximately forty pages—but keeps the reader's interest excited. The first problem that arises from dealing with the Indians is the language; the Indians speak some English but the Norwegians none, with the only exception of Store-Hans, Per Hansa's child. With the aid of their young interpreter, the Europeans, who have some background in medical lore, achieve to relieve the Indian from his pain. This is the very first adventure in the novel, and from then onwards the Norwegians have the respect and help of the Indians. Rölvaag suggested in this particular episode that providing the Indians with any aid, and showing them that they could be friends was the only way to avoid enmity between both peoples. However, reality did not turn out the way Rölvaag told us in his novel; the Indians did not always "stay around", showing up from time to time and thanking for the "cured hand"; instead, they were systematically pushed westward, and by the 1870s, there were no reservations East to Minnesota; there were only reservations in Minnesota, Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. The two biggest reservations were the Sioux Reserve in Dakota and the Ute Reserve in Colorado, apart from the junction of the reserves of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Wichita, Sauk, Chikawsaw, Choctaw, Osage and Pawnee, in the north of Texas.¹²

But Indians were not the only hostile people these Norwegians had to confront. The Homestead grants—or pieces of land bestowed upon the head of a family who wanted to settle in the Prairies—caused serious troubles too. Per and his family encounter a major disillusion when they

¹¹ Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen (op. cit.), 633.

¹² Ray A. Billington (op. cit.), 239.

come across one stake which has been placed in their property by an Irish farmer, claiming thus ownership upon that same piece of land. Although they had marked their property before the Irishman, this stake deprives them of any rights on the land that had so far belonged to them. The resolution of this conflict takes a long time and much trouble, perhaps because this was a classical dilemma among the early immigrants in the Prairies, and Rølvaag wanted to emphasize it. Marking a piece of land and legalizing a Homestead was the first task a farmer had to get done when he settled in any area; however, the large number of people who wished to claim a piece of land, and who consequently rushed over it, always made legalization polemic for authorities and settlers, and caused bustles like Rølvaag described in *Giants in the Earth*.

The massive immigration coming into the Prairies in the last third of the nineteenth century is essentially the result of a neat campaign which spread propaganda in both the United States and northern European countries. The propaganda proclaimed that the achievement of richness through farming in the Prairies was an undeniable fact; and cases of people who had arrived in the region in extreme conditions of poverty and had become extremely wealthy in the short period of five years were known in both sides of the Atlantic. The "American fever" brought approximately 10,000 immigrants from Norway, Sweden and Denmark in 1865; the number increased systematically through the years, and in 1882 there were 105,362 people who left Scandinavia for the Prairies. In Dakota, where *Giants in the Earth* takes place, the number of acres given away through Homestead grants in just eight years—from 1877 to 1884—increased 52 times:

YEAR	# ACRES
1877	213,000
1878	1,377,000
1879	1,657,000
1882	4,360,000
1883	7,317,000
1884	11,083,000 ¹³

But Europeans were not the only people who sought land in the Prairies. There was another important group: the African-Americans who had just earned their freedom after the Civil War. In 1879 there was an "Exodus" of slaves from Kansas who were persuaded by a former slave in Louisiana, named Henry Adams, to make their way up to the Prairies. Massification, obviously, caused problems like the stake discovered in *Giants in the Earth*.

¹³ John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt, A History of the Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 331.

In the novel, the Norwegians achieve to keep their land after a number of meetings and arguments with the Irish farmers.

Once again, the language is the strongest barrier when they have to deal with the Irish, as it had been when they helped the injured Indian; and once again, Store-Hans has to translate the negotiations between both parties. Consequently, the discussion between the Irish and the Norwegians becomes even more strained, since every sentence needs to be translated by the kid. The situation, however, turns into an unintended weapon for the Norwegians, as their interpreter is doing a consecutive translation, which allows them enough time to measure the terms of their vindications. The first contact with the Indians, although a successful one, was also quite frightening at the beginning since they had no hope to succeed in the linguistic communication. As a result of these two episodes, they come to the conclusion that they need to hire a teacher of English for their children; of course, the adults want to learn English too, and the classes, which are conveniently located in different homes on a rotative basis, become the most important event in the environs.

Notwithstanding the increasing figures of immigration, the colonists in the Prairies had to face a problem those in Ohio or Pennsylvania did not: there were many farmers in the Heartland, yet the region was so large that they sometimes did not know who their neighbors were; in fact, they did not know whether they had any neighbors, and whether they could get help from anyone, if needed. In *Giants in the Earth*, the protagonists are not even aware that some strangers have been in their property and claimed it as their own; furthermore, the fact that the intrusion was done unintentionally turns the passage into an intriguing sample which highlights the magnitude of the isolation which all these colonists endured.

But ironic as it seems, the farming land these immigrants coveted and needed so dramatically was not particularly rich; indeed, it simply could not furnish them with the essential products for their homes. Billington explains that: *There was no lumber for homes, barns or split-rail fences. There was no water save the muddy gruel in occasional rivers. There were no belts of trees to shelter them from the baking sun of summer or raging winter blizzards. And worse of all there was in the province seldom enough rainfall; annual precipitation West to the 98th meridian [approximately the Mississippi river, or the limit of Illinois with Iowa] was normally bellow the twenty inches required for agriculture¹⁴.*

Moreover, they were devoid of the machines which could obviously improve the conditions of work. Machinery was certainly an essential factor in farming, and it could really make a difference by saving much money and time, as the following figures highlights:

¹⁴ Ray A. Billington (op. cit.), 213.

CROPTIME	WORKED	LABOR COST
	Hand - Machine	Hand - Machine
WHEAT	61hours- 3	\$3.55 - 0.66
CORN	39 - 15	3.62 - 1.51
OATS	66 - 7	3.73 - 1.07
LOOSE HAY	21 - 4	1.75 - 0.42
BALED HAY	35 - 12	3.06 - 1.25 ¹⁵

Machinery was the key to a quick and easy agricultural success, but almost no farmer in the Heartland could afford such expensive technology. The figures above show the amazing amount of work and sacrifice these people had to endure, and also help calculate the differences between the living conditions of Eastern farmers—who could pay for these machines—And Midwestern farmers—who could not: the productiveness of the time and the financial profits Midwesterns and Easterns obtained from their respective efforts is certainly overwhelming.

Withal, colonists had many other concerns: the vicissitudes to obtain adequate housing, specially during the first winter; the search for water; and the lack of fuel. Even though Iowa is commonly believed to have the richest soil on the face of the earth, these farmers found absolutely nothing on the surface, no trees, no water, no landscape at all but the never ending horizon, and the prairies awaiting to be worked.

Rølvaag described the rigors of the weather as being another major preoccupation for Per Hansa and his family. While some people tend to believe that the Scandinavian and German immigrants chose to settle in the Midwest because the weather was similar to that in their native countries, and it somehow appealed to them, or made them feel comfortable, the truth is that the weather in the Heartland (and the Midwest generally) is significantly different from the weather in Scandinavia or Germany. In the Midwest, the temperature is likely to go below 0 degrees Fahrenheit (-18° C) during the winter months, and in the summer it gets to the 90s (32 to 38° C), with a high percentage of humidity, beside the wind chill factor, the outrageous storms and the tornado risk. The severe winter climate was one of their chief preoccupations; Beret, for example, cannot confront her fear of storms and grows extremely frightened whenever one is blowing. Particularly imposing, and almost grotesque, is the passage in which Rølvaag narrated how the cows get trapped in a snow storm, perish in the snow, and remain stuck in it until the thaw, when their remains appear. While the arid climate (and also the lack of machinery, as mentioned above) was a serious impediment to develop the agricultural techniques which were being employed in the East, the grassland, the sparse vegetation, and the unfamiliar soils made farming even harder.

¹⁵ John D. Hicks (op. cit.), 179.

Cattle was consequently more profitable than crops, and the farmers knew that. In the Prairies states the number of heads of cattle increased from 1860 through 1880 in these terms:

STATE	HEADS OF CATTLE	
	1860	1880
Kansas	93,455	1,533,133
Nebraska	37,197	1,113,247
Colorado	none	791,492
Wyoming	none	521,213
Montana	none	428,279
Dakota	none	140,815 ¹⁶

Yet handling cattle in the Prairies was not short on troubles either—as Rølvaag explains in his novel. In addition, cattle was not easy to get, and most colonists could only afford to work the land.

The combination of an arid weather, unproductive land, and poverty are the key to decode the title of the novel. Rølvaag does not tell us know who the “giants” are, but some possibilities have been offered by critics, as Anne Moseley points out¹⁷. On the one hand, Eckstein, in *Where the West Begins*, maintains that the “giants” are connected to the trolls, or the evil characters in Norse mythology. According to Eckstein, in *Giants in the Earth*, the “giants” or “trolls” are the elusive and nameless forces within the prairie, the hostile forces threatening frontier civilization, namely drought, cold, hunger, blizzards, fires, sickness, loneliness, despair, etc. On the other, Paul Reigstad suggests that the “giants” are the settlers, and that the term refers not only to their heroic but also to their monstrous qualities, revealing thus their potential evil.

The epigraph Rølvaag chose for his novel—a quote from Genesis VI: 4, the biblical book in which the creation of the world is narrated—is the key to the interpretation of the title, and, judging from the polemic it has provoked, a riddle itself: *There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of all men of renown.*

Notwithstanding Eckstein's hypothesis, the «giants» are not something non-human. Reigstad's theory is not quite accurate either, since the characters in the novel do not keep any potential for evil, in fact they are profoundly religious, sometimes resembling the Massachusetts Puritans of the seventeenth century: they help the Indian like good Samaritans; and

¹⁶ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷ Anne Moseley, *Ole Edvart Rølvaag* (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1987), 13-14.

long for a preacher to come and rule their little settlement, because the priest represents God, and they want God to rule them. They keep no "potential for evil" whatsoever.

The passage from Genesis says that the "Giants" "were... in those days", what implies that they were other people rather than "the sons of God who came [after that]". Both the *giants* and the *sons* are human beings. "There were giants in the earth" refers to the very first colonists who got there and strove to survive: the Norwegian settlers, as Reigstad points out; they were there in the first moments of the colonization of the Heartland—end of the nineteenth century—, and also "when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men"—the *sons* being the immigrants who came to America after the *giants/settlers* and found their daughters. These *sons of God*—who got to the Prairies after the *giants/settlers*—did not come "to the land", because only the original settlers, those men who had to struggle against all those adversities, saw the *real land*, the *untamed land*; the subsequent immigrants who came (to "the daughters of men" who bore children) did not have to spurt the way the settlers did, as they knew they were going to stay there forever because the land had already been *tamed*. The settlers could not be certain whether they would survive or not, they could either die by starvation or freeze to death, get killed by Indians or by other farmers who claimed the land where they were living. Thus, once the settlers, or the *giants in the earth*, have definitely settled, their first generation and other immigrants will "bare children" or reproduce to guarantee the dwelling in the land which took so much strife to conquer. (Of course, the settlers had children, but did not know whether or not their sons and daughters would be capable of surviving.) The second and the third generation became "mighty men which were of all men of renown", which means that the offspring of the first settlers became "mighty men" or rich farmers, the *engine* of the most powerful nation in the world, and who are symbolically the mightiest men in the world.

"There were giants in the earth by those days; and also after that": these giants are heroes, *giants* because their efforts were of gigantic proportions; a good example of this is Per Hansa, who, represents the American Dream with his "optimistic pioneer spirit". Therefore, the *giants* were chiefly the settlers ("in those days"), but *giants* are also all the courageous people of subsequent times ("and also after that") who worked the wild land and defied the dangers it entailed. These are the *giants*, the heroes who conquered the Midwest and helped the United States become an economic *giant in the earth*.

After the struggle against wilderness, the land was conquered. The settlers did not live in shanties and huts any longer, but in houses that could shelter them properly; the agricultural revolution was on, and they just had to wait to become richer and richer. However, there was still one important objective to be gained, the mingling of the numerous cultures which subsisted in the Heartland. The rivalry between the Irish and Scandinavians

is emphasized in *Giants in the Earth*: while the merriest event for the characters is the visit of other Norwegians, any person of any other nationality was always a threat they avoided. In *Peder Victorious*, the sequel to *Giants in the Earth*, the subject matter stresses the miscellaneous composition of the inhabitants of the Heartland, and how cultural differences became their major concern. For the first generation of Norwegians, the language was still a problem, but now because of a different reason: Per's and Beret's son, Peder, prefers to speak English, and his parents grumble at him because they want him to speak Norwegian. Withal, the most serious problem, which turns into a tragedy, arises when Peder decides to marry an Irish girl, who is Catholic and not Protestant. Peder has dated two girls, the Norwegian Else Gabrielsen and the Irish Susie Doheny; at the end, and against his parents' will, Peder marries Susie. In a third volume, *Their Father's God*, Peder realizes that he did not know the real Susie before he married her, and regrets his marriage. They have gone through a number of arguments, most of them because of their different religions, others because of nonsense like the fact that one likes drinking tea and the other coffee. In *Peder Victorious* and *Their Father's God*, the Catholic priests and the Lutheran ministers even refuse to marry couples of Norwegian and Irish background. Rølvaag always stood for the necessity to remain true to one's cultural heritage, and to find one's American character through one's ethnicity. Rølvaag himself married a Norwegian woman, and his children were one hundred per cent Norwegian. It certainly took a while to diminish the cultural baggage that many brought to the United States, and which sometimes was a barrier for the development of the country.

Although the offspring of Hawthorne's retrospective analysis of history, of Thoreau's and Whitman's Frontier myth, and even of the first English novelists' domestic realism, Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* also fits within its chief contemporary literary trend: the twentieth century historical novel. Historical themes have intrigued most twentieth-century novelists, who have randomly assumed the analysis of history as one of the chief musts in their work. No doubt historical interests have marked literature always, not only since Puritan New England in the United States or the Renaissance (as David Cowart points out), but from the very first writers, Homer and Virgil to Medieval chronicle writers. Historical consciousness has thrived dramatically in the twentieth century, and the novelists of our century have enthusiastically explored the historical forces that have derived into our present society; e. g. Norman Mailer, who analyzed in his *The Naked and the Dead* the consequences of World War II, as a historical force, upon a group of soldiers, just like Dos Passo's *Three Soldiers*, Thomas Boy's *Through the Wheat* or Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* had about World War I.

In his *History and the Contemporary Novel*, David Cowart suggests that "historical fiction [is] any novel in which a historical consciousness manifests itself strongly in either the characters or the action", and divides twentieth-century historical novels into four groups, according to the manner in which

they depict history: The Way It Was—fictions whose authors aspire purely or largely to historical verisimilitude—; The Way It Will Be—fictions whose authors reverse history to contemplate the future—; The Turning Point—fictions whose authors seek to pinpoint the precise historical moment when the modern age or some prominent feature of it came to existence—; and The Distant Mirror—fictions whose authors project the present into the past¹⁸. For Cowart, these categories are not alineating, and a historical novel can belong to one or more of them. *Giants in the Earth*, conveying a conspicuous historical consciousness, falls predominantly into the first category, for it displays *the way it was* and attempts, and achieves, historical verisimilitude. Furthermore, it focuses on one Turning Point in the history of the Midwest—the colonization years—and also of Norway and the rest of the Scandinavian countries—the migrating fever mentioned above. Finally, if one contemplates Rølvaag's trilogy on Norwegian immigration in the Midwest, that *Giants in the Earth* opens, the author's intention was to construct a Distant Mirror to suggest the way things will/should be for Scandinavian-Americans in the American *melting pot*: to preserve their Norwegian heritage, i. e. their language and religion.

Overall, Rølvaag's aims seem to target verisimilitude, and this favored the formal elements in his novel. It is certainly intriguing how the lack of historical evidence regarding the historical episode with which Rølvaag dealt enhanced the psychology of the fictive characters of *Giants in the Earth*. Cowart advises how "The more proximate the history... the more obliquely the author must treat it"¹⁹; Rølvaag, nonetheless, could face proximate history directly because of its lack of famous historical protagonists. On the choice of historical recorded elements George Core considers that: *The historical element in fiction deliberately mutes so far as particulars go, [otherwise] the novelist loses control and history takes over. In consequence, the good novelist is careful not to put major historical figures in the center of the stage*²⁰.

Rølvaag could not include a major historical figure from the anonymous episode of history he was drawing, for there was not any; but by including fictional characters performing and suffering model authentic situations, he turns *all* Norwegian settlers—through his fictive characters—into major historical figures, creating thus the heroic figure of, what we could call, "the anonymous settler".

Novels of a prominent historical consciousness, like *Giants in the Earth*, arise the question whether they belong to the realms of literature or to those

¹⁸ David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁰ George Core, "The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Burden of the Past", in Robert K. Morris (ed.), *Achievement of William Styron* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 213.

of pure history—in the scientist sense of the word. Georg Lukács protests the rejection of the historical novel as a form of art, argues that any historical novel complies with the formal elements that make a novel, and states that “A writer’s relationship to history is not something special or isolated”²¹, i.e. that all novels participate of and depend on history. Novelist Margarite Yourcener declares that: *Those who put the historical novel in a category apart are forgetting what every novelist is only to interpret, by means of the techniques which his period affords, a certain number of past events... In our day, when introspection tends to dominate literary forms, the historical novel, or what may convenience’s sake be called by that name, must take the plunge into time recaptured, and must fully establish itself within some inner world*²².

The historical novel is therefore a *respectful hybrid* that results from history and literature; the historical and the literary components in a historical novel can oscilate, but, overall, it is as valuable a historical testimony as it is a piece of art. In this sense, Rølvaag’s presentation of all aspects and archetypal situations in the life of Norwegian settlers make the historical value of *Giants in the Earth* conspicuous; indeed, this is the text—among historical and literary—that best describes the colonization of the Heartland. *Giants in the Earth* epitomizes the ideal historical text of many critics who have maintained that history needs of fiction and imagination to catch its readers’ attention—e.g. J. Hillis Miller, who believes that “All historians have been aware that the narrating of an historical sequence in one way or another involves a constructive, interpretative fictive act”²³, or Thomas Babington Macaulay, who points out that “A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative picturesque”²⁴. David Cowart concludes that: *The reader, then, who wants to know what really happened at the Battle of Waterloo may learn more from Hugo, Stendhal, or Thackeray than from Michelet or John Keegan, for the novelist routinely transcends imagined material to speak with great authority about the past*²⁵.

Many examples corroborate Cowart’s statement: Homer and Sophocles over Herodotus and Thucydides; Mark Twain and Walt Whitman over Francis Parkman; and, of course, *Giants in the Earth* over, for example, Billington and Hicks.

Although Rølvaag intended his texts to be American, one of the most serious problems when considering Rølvaag’s works is whether they must

²¹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 168.

²² Margarite Yourcener, *Memoirs of Hadrian and Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963), 329.

²³ J. Hillis Miller, “Narrative and History”, *ELH*, 41 (1974), 455-73, 461.

²⁴ Quoted in R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 124.

²⁵ David Cowart (op. cit.), 20.

be deemed Norwegian or American. Lincon Concord, author of the "Introduction" to *Giants in the Earth* and a close friend of Rølvaag's, explained that this novel is about the conquest of America and American life, but felt reluctant to give an opinion on its *nationality*; he rather leave that to the author. Rølvaag decided to write this American work in Norwegian; the reason is simple: Rølvaag's mother tongue was Norwegian; all of his novels were therefore written in Norwegian, and their translation into English was often a problem. Rølvaag rendered *Giants in the Earth* into English with the help of Concord, who gave account of the difficulties of the task. Concord recalled in his introduction to the novel how he once asked Rølvaag which country had taught him to write: America—he being typically American, and the Heartland his home—or Norway—whose language he always wrote in. As a response, Rølvaag simply "threw up his hands"²⁶. *Giants in the Earth* has an European structure (for it develops the characters' psychology rather than the plot²⁷), and was written in Norwegian; on the other hand, American scholars have allowed for its setting to label it "American." Yet while *Giants in the Earth* is such an important testimony of American history, it is, according to its author, a "saga," because its protagonists were Scandinavians who traveled and lived a number of adventures in a strange land, who could only speak a Scandinavian language, and could only trust other Scandinavians: it is, consequently, a piece of literature and a historical document for Norwegians too.

Notwithstanding *Giants in the Earth's* share of the historical features that identify the first English novels, Rølvaag's historical aims were formally more Hawthornian than European. Rølvaag intended his novel to be a historical novel that can teach us the history of the Midwest; like Hawthorne's, Rølvaag's historical perspective is retrospective, while the perspective of the eighteenth-century English novelists and of Thoreau and Whitman were contemporary. Generally, Rølvaag's novels explore the historical forces that determined his society; they are, indeed, an effective way to get to know and understand the history of the Heartland, how a land with a deserts appearance was turned into the heart and the *engine* of the most powerful nation in the world, and all the endeavors it entailed. *Giants in the Earth* is, as Rølvaag pointed out, a "saga", one of the size of Leif Eirikson's, the first European who stepped on American ground. Approximately nine centuries before Per Hansa and his family settled in the United States, the Norwegian Vikings had to leave the New World which they had discovered; their adventure came to an end when the Indians, or as they called them "skræligs", featured a very belligerent attitude against them²⁸. Almost a

²⁶ L. Concord, "Introduction", in Ole E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper, 1927), 7.

²⁷ Joseph Baker, "Western Man Against Nature: *Giants in the Earth*", *College English*, 4 (1942), 20.

²⁸ See Hjelge Ingstad (ed.) and Joan Tindale Blinheim (trans.), *Vinland the*

millenium after that, other Norwegians set sail for America, perhaps because the estoic courage inherited from their Viking ancestors needed to break through the horizons of their native Norway. Their saga was completed, and a new era was opened in the history of the United States: Norwegians had returned to America, and this time they had conquered it, they had tamed and settled the toughest region of America and stayed; their *tour de force* is certainly comparable to the Pilgrims', and *Giants in the Earth* is the testimony.