

## THE LITERATURE OF THE PIONEER WEST

The same year which has witnessed America's coming of age in the profound historical and critical studies of Mumford, Parrington, and Beard,<sup>1</sup> has witnessed, with singular appropriateness, the appearance of the most penetrating and mature depiction of the westward movement in our literature. It is O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, and it inspires this encomium because it chronicles as no other volume has that combination of physical and spiritual experience which is the very warp and woof of American history. It indicates in the realm of fiction the same attitude which has already expressed itself in criticism and in history — that the story of America is not the story of physical and material development and expansion to the utter exclusion of the spiritual or psychological. The westward movement ceases to be the victim of romance and becomes a great physical and spiritual adventure. It ceases to be the proud epic of man's conquest of earth and becomes the tragedy of earth's humbling of man.

For a generation American history has been concerned with the significance of the frontier, and American literature with the son of the middle border. These two avenues of approach have led us in history to a wholesome, if occasionally somewhat arid, economic realism, and in literature to romance, but we have not yet come out on the highroad of understanding. Historians, economists, and sociologists have given us their various evaluations of the physical processes and institutions of the frontier and of the westward movement, and novelists have sublimated the chronicle and symbolized it for all time in

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day; A Study in American Experience and Culture* (New York, 1926); Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought; An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (2 vols. — New York, 1927); Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols. — New York, 1927).

the covered wagon. But history is no more a physical than a psychological phenomenon, and the significance of the westward movement and of the frontier for the development of American character and the American mind is to be discovered neither in statistics of population growth nor in the camp fire songs of the western trails, but rather in the psychological experiences of the individuals and communities that participated in the great enterprise.

This more mature and reflecting attitude toward the westward movement made its appearance, as might well be suspected, somewhat earlier in criticism than in fiction. Indeed, the earliest travelers in America were frequently struck with the psychological aspects of the frontier experience and of the influence of pioneering on the American mind: thus Crèvecoeur and the Duc de Liancourt at the time of the Revolution, thus Harriet Martineau and Mrs. T. A. Trollope and Fredrika Bremer in the first half of the nineteenth century, and thus those two major observers, De Tocqueville and James Bryce. Nor were American critics unaware of this aspect of the frontier. Henry Adams, with his customary penetration, suggested something of the influence of environment not only on the economic development of the frontier but on the cultural and spiritual as well, and touched on the disparity between the grandeur of the physical environment and the meanness of the cultural experience.

This conception of the westward movement as a cultural phenomenon, as a chapter in the history of the American mind and American psychology, did not gain general acceptance. Historians continued to write of the West as an economic concept. And where the psychological aspect was touched upon, it was commonly clothed in general terms, in pretty phraseology, usually in a romantic idealism somewhat more appropriate to fiction than to history. Historians described the buoyant pioneer and the zest and energy of pioneering, and even Adams grew lyric in the prospect of the plowboy

some day going to the field whistling a sonata of Beethoven. The West was the vessel of idealism, the stronghold of democracy, the promise of progress, the vindication of the great American experiment. The scientific school of Turner and his followers directed attention more exclusively to the economic realities of the westward movement, but they did not fundamentally alter the idealistic conception.

This idealistic conception communicated itself to the literature of the West, though to be sure the process was one of interrelations and interactions. From the day of Cooper and Montgomery Bird and William G. Simms to Owen Wister and Emerson Hough and Zane Grey and Herbert Quick, the westward movement was portrayed as a crusade, symbolized in the covered wagon and celebrated in that magnificent chorus that Hamlin Garland has given us:

Then over the hills in legions, boys,  
Fair freedom's star  
Points to the sunset regions, boys . . .

Ah, that was it. The sunset regions! Out where the West begins! And Whitman consecrated it with one of his most inspired lyrics:

Have the elder races halted?  
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?  
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

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!

But there were sceptics who doubted the authenticity of the creation story. They had witnessed, perhaps, the labor, and they distinctly remembered that it had been painful and arduous. They repudiated the aureole of romance and glamour which a past generation had thrown over it, and offered instead their own narrative, bearing the authentic stamp of personal experience. The new realism found its first expression

in two volumes strangely neglected by the brilliant author of the *Mauve Decade*. Edward W. Howe, in *The Story of a Country Town*, offered a tragedy too stark, a masterpiece too honest, for the generation of the *fin de siècle* and allowed a later generation to hail *Main Street* as original; and Hamlin Garland, in *Main Travelled Roads*, presented farm life in Wisconsin and Iowa in all its grim and unprepossessing actualities, "with a proper proportion of the sweat, flies, heat, dirt and drudgery of it all."

In the course of the next three decades the ranks of the heretics grew until realism became orthodoxy. The continuity from the *Story of a Country Town* to *Main Street*, from *Main Travelled Roads* to *Iowa Interiors*, is an obvious and unbroken one. The realistic school of the middle border has attained respectability: it numbers among its disciples Willa Cather and Margaret Wilson, Frank Norris and Edgar Lee Masters, Ruth Suckow and Edith Kelly, and even William Dean Howells and Francis Grierson, with their neglected stories of early Ohio and Illinois; and it has achieved the comfortable recognition of learned dissertations, ponderous bibliographies, and rather uncertain interpretative essays.

Indeed, it has achieved more than this doubtful beatification. For by one of those curiously consistent developments from radicalism to conservatism, from realism to romanticism, the arch leader of the rebels himself, Hamlin Garland, waved the magic wand of romance over the scenes of his boyhood and enveloped them in a nimbus of beauty, and we might paraphrase Ariel that

Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a land-change  
Into something rich and strange.

The result is the *Son of the Middle Border*, the classic narrative of pioneer life in the West, and it portrays in colors of incomparable loveliness the heroic saga of the westward movement. There is realism here, to be sure, but over it all Garland

has thrown something of the lovely grace of a day that is dead and will never come back to him:

It all lies in the unchanging realm of the past — this land of my childhood. Its charm, its strange dominion cannot return save in the poet's reminiscent dream. No money, no railway train can take us back to it. It did not in truth exist — it was a magical world, born of the vibrant union of youth and firelight, of music and the voice of moaning winds.<sup>2</sup>

But this was not the West of *Main Travelled Roads*, nor even of *Rose of Dutcher's Cooley*. The *Son of the Middle Border* is the most exquisite presentation of pioneer life in our literature, but the criticism of Mumford is pertinent:

The post-Civil War writers who deal with *Roughing It*, *A Son of the Middle Border*, or *A Hoosier Schoolmaster*, to mention only a few examples, had already abandoned the scene of the pioneer's efforts and had returned to the East: they made copy of their early life, but, though they might be inclined to sigh after it, because it was associated with their youth, they had only a sentimental notion of continuing it.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception, indeed, of Willa Cather, the writers of the middle border were overwhelmingly concerned with the physical and material aspects of life. It is the taking up of the land, the struggle with the soil, the physical environment that dominates the scene. Their interest is centered upon the economy of the westward movement. To a certain extent, therefore, their stories are propaganda; they form the literary chapter in the history of the agrarian revolt.

This chapter in American literature, then, furnishes a striking parallel to the synchronous chapter in American historiography. *Main Travelled Roads* is the literary articulation of Buck's *Granger Movement*, and the *Son of the Middle Border* of Turner's "Contributions of the West to American Democracy." With their attention fixed so largely upon the taking up of the land, the novelists of the middle border emulate the

<sup>2</sup> Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 67 (New York, 1917).

<sup>3</sup> Mumford, *The Golden Day*, 62.

historians of the middle border, and the interpretation is an economic one.

The appearance of the volumes of Mumford, Parrington, and Beard seems to mark the beginning of a new era in American historiography — the “sober second thought” of the historian, the intellectual maturity of the critic. The emphasis in these studies is on the cultural and psychological aspects of American history rather than on the economic, though Beard’s volumes may be something of an exception to this generalization. It appears, indeed, that in American as in European historical writing we are entering upon that era of psychological interpretation which Professor J. W. Thompson prophesied some time ago. Nowhere is this more evident than in the criticism of the westward movement. From the economic point of view that phenomenon was an epic. From the psychological point of view it was a tragedy. The intrinsic subjectivity of the facts of history which Carl Becker celebrates with such malign satisfaction never received apter illustration.

It is fitting and not altogether without significance that this new attitude in history should find concomitant literary expression. It is for this reason that we can hail *Giants in the Earth* as a milestone in American literature. It is not only that it portrays more completely than any other novel the synthesis of what Schlesinger has happily termed the “two grand themes of American history” — the westward movement and immigration. It is rather because for the first time, adequately, in the literature of the middle border the primary concern is not economic but psychological; the main interest of the story centers not on the taking up of the land but on the effect of that experience upon the characters. For the first time a novelist has measured the westward movement with a psychological yardstick and found it wanting.

We do not necessarily imply that Rølvaag is either the first or the only author to call attention to the psychological aspects

of the westward movement. Neither Garland nor Howe, nor their numerous successors, have ignored this element. Willa Cather, indeed, in her remarkable *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, has dwelt intelligently and sympathetically upon the problem. To a certain extent she may be said to anticipate Rølvaag and some passages from her volumes might serve as a text for *Giants in the Earth*:

But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, and the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.<sup>4</sup>

But, withal, Miss Cather records the triumph of Alexandra and of Ántonia over their grim environment, and her novels are panels rather than murals.

Hamlin Garland has furnished us, perhaps, with the explanation of the partial failure of the novelists of the middle border to penetrate the spiritual life of the frontier. He was looking back upon his first courageous efforts, when he said, "I intend to tell the whole truth." He confesses, however: "But I didn't! Even my youthful zeal faltered in the midst of a revelation of the lives led by the women on the farms of the middle border. Before the tragic futility of their suffering, my pen refused to shed its ink. Over the hidden chamber of their maternal agonies I drew the veil."<sup>5</sup> Rølvaag is not less tender, but he is inexorable. The even tenor of his tale nowhere falters, nor does he choose to draw the veil of silence over the "tragic futility" of the women's suffering, over the "hidden chamber of their maternal agonies." Indeed, it might be said that his volume is primarily concerned with the "futility of their suffering," and the emphasis is not so much on suffering as on futility. Of all tragedies the most poignant is that of

<sup>4</sup> Willa S. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 15 (Boston and New York, 1913).

<sup>5</sup> Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 416.

futility. Not to have suffered, but to have suffered in vain, ah, there's the rub!

And futility is the moral of *Giants in the Earth*. Of what avail is the conquest of the soil by man; the scars which man inflicts upon the virgin earth are as nothing to the scars which nature inflicts upon the souls of men. Against physical environment men can indeed struggle, and they can emerge successful. The earth can be made to yield its bountiful crops, the forests timber, and the rivers fish. Men can build homes to shelter them from the fury of the elements, they can close out the bitter cold and the fierce storms. To the indomitable courage and energy of man nature must yield her grudging tribute. But what of the souls of men here on the distant plains? What of the infinite loneliness, of the secret fears, of the primeval silences that shake the faith of men? What of that concern with the salvation of the physical being that sacrifices the salvation of the soul? And what of the pleasures of social intercourse, the homely comforts of a homely culture, the social and religious and family life of simple folks? Aye, man might wrest a living out of nature here on the dreary prairies, but nature would wrest civilization from man. And what indeed shall it profit a man that he gain the world if he lose his soul? The life is more than the living, and living could be achieved only at the cost of life itself.

This literary diagnosis of the spiritual realities of pioneer life harmonizes strikingly with the critical interpretation of Mumford; the narrative and the interpretation are complementary, and passages from the latter merely point the moral and adorn the tale.

The vast gap between the hope of the Romantic Movement and the reality of the pioneer period is one of the most sardonic jests of history. On one side, the bucolic innocence of the Eighteenth Century, its belief in a fresh start, and its attempt to achieve a new culture. And over against it, the epic march of the covered wagon, leaving behind it deserted villages, bleak cities, depleted soils, and the sick and exhausted souls that engraved their epitaphs in Mr. Masters' Spoon River Anthology. . . .



The truth is that the life of the pioneer was bare and insufficient: he did not really face Nature, he merely evaded society. Divorced from its social context, his experience became meaningless.<sup>6</sup>

Per Hansa, buoyant, vital, lovable, with his hand to the plow and his eyes fixed hopefully upon a golden future, and Beret, his wife, disconsolate and sick at heart, physically, mentally, spiritually stricken by her cruel experience — these are Rölvaag's symbols for the hope of the romantic movement and the reality of the pioneer West. The symbolism is sustained and terribly convincing. It is Beret, at first a tragic figure in the background, who gradually dominates the scene, just as spiritual tragedy overwhelms physical phenomena. Her experience, subtly and profoundly described by Rölvaag, loses its immediate application and becomes as universal as that of Goethe's Margarete. It is this ability to universalize, to translate the experience of his characters into spiritual values of catholic and transcendent significance, that stamps *Giants in the Earth* as a work of genius.

The "two grand themes of American history" Rölvaag has infused with a profound psychological significance. Immigration ceases to become the story of Americanization and becomes the problem of spiritual adaptation and acclimatization. The westward movement is metamorphized from an economic enterprise or a romantic epic and becomes a struggle against the "power of evil in high places." The characters of this drama are not hailing "fair freedom's star," but "facing the great desolation." Not for them the triumphant song of "Pioneers! O pioneers," but the silence "on the border of utter darkness."

It is upon the eternal verities that Rölvaag concentrates — on birth and death and suffering — and he recites them with a profound understanding and a tender sympathy and yet without sentimentality. The birth of Peter Victorious is the focal fact of the book; he is for Per Hansa a symbol of victory, for

<sup>6</sup> Mumford, *The Golden Day*, 79.

Beret a symbol of sin. Over him this strangely and beautifully mated pair wage their silent battle for life and salvation, and when Per Hansa wins and the child is restored to grace and the mother to sanity, it is by a religion which is the harbinger of death. It is the "eternal yea" and the "eternal nay" echoed here on the western plains, but Per Hansa's magnificent "yea" was to be choked out by the icy hand of death. "The Great Plain drinks the blood of Christian men" — it is the handwriting on the wall of American history.

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