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FAIRY CASTLE OR STEAMER TRUNK?

CREATING PLACE IN O. E. RØLVAAG'S *GIANTS IN THE EARTH*

DIANE D. QUANTIC

What happens when humans move beyond the boundaries of civilization? Does the very act transform them? How do they define themselves in apparently empty space? Throughout the nineteenth century, thousands of Americans headed west to the frontier, the borderland between civilization and wilderness. Most went willingly, confident or desperately hopeful that they would have the freedom to create a place of their own and, in the process, recreate themselves. Before they set out for the

frontier, they imagined it a garden, based on the myths of plenty and entitlement that were described in boosters' letters, newspaper accounts, railroad brochures, and the hyperbole of hope. Not all went willingly, however. Some followed reluctantly, fearing that in such an unsettled space they would themselves be transformed into bestial figures, detached from their pasts and left without culture or society to replace familiar habits and rituals. Many, their hopes faded or their fears confirmed, headed back to the more familiar East. This continuous ebb and flow is one of the central themes of Great Plains literature. Since Hamlin Garland began to write his stories of Iowa and Dakota farmers, authors have explored the effects wrought by people who transformed much of the grasslands into cash crops and the impact that the place itself had on these new arrivals.

For over thirty years I have been reading and teaching O. E. Rølvaag's novel *Giants in the Earth* (1927),¹ fascinated by his account of the process by which a social group—Norwegian immigrants, in this instance—establishes “the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of

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FIG. 1. O. E. Rølvaag, c. 1928. Courtesy of The Norwegian-American Historical Association, Northfield, Minnesota.

their shared identity and meaning.”² Rølvaag’s story is grounded in the relationship between the undifferentiated environment and the built environment; that is, the structures that anchor people in place and define the parameters of human existence where geographical landmarks are few.³ Houses, barns, country schools, and rural churches create discernible shapes that can provide shelter for humans and their animals on the open plains and places for the community to become established. The buildings reveal individual and communal responses to a particular place and differentiate one place from another. This paper is a discussion of the ways Rølvaag elicits this process in both the land and the people who settled in the Great Plains.

Giants in the Earth is a classic account of the struggles that occur when men and women confront space without identifiable bound-

aries, apparently devoid of historical or mythical past. In the expansive Great Plains, Per Hansa experiences an explosive release of energy, a sense of freedom to create a place of his own imagining. His wife, Beret, cannot share his vision. Instead, she imagines mythical Norwegian trolls in the unfamiliar landscape, malevolent giants that lurk in the very land itself and resist human occupation. For her, their homestead is a void she can imagine only in terms of what is *not* there. Rølvaag juxtaposes visions of the costs and rewards of migration and transformation.⁴ He uses the structures that Per Hansa imagines into reality as well as the fields he plows and plants to signify this transformation.

PLACE AND FRONTIER

At least since Frederick Jackson Turner invoked its demise in 1893, we have been trying to come to terms with both the concept of the frontier as America’s manifest destiny, safety valve, or democratic utopia, and the reality itself, technically an area with fewer than two people per square mile.⁵ Although we acknowledge the misnomer for a region that had been inhabited for hundreds of years by indigenous tribes, “the frontier” still resonates not only in our history and literature but in the American psyche. We have described, denied, defined, and debunked the term until, in popular iconography, it has been reduced to a handy label for a theme park or a packaged adventure tour.

Among scholars who consider the Great Plains, the region most often equated with the frontier in the popular mind, the term *frontier* remains an important point of thematic and geographic reference. Scholarship in cultural geography, history, literature, and philosophy that argues for the restoration of *place* as a component of the discussion of the time-space continuum provides a useful frame for this discussion. In traditional debate, a place such as the frontier is a line that moves on a linear construction of time. As Edward Casey has pointed out in *The Fate of Place* (1997), this

emphasis on time as the measure of progress has relegated *place* to a minor role in the traditional European American concept of historical continuity.⁶ In this book and in a companion volume, *Getting Back into Place* (1993), Casey makes a strong case for reconsideration of place as an essential component in the discussion of human activity. Instead of considering culture as a product of events lined up along a time line, Casey and other scholars consider *where* events occur: how men and women interact with the places they are and how those places define society and culture.⁷

In a place-centered discussion, *frontier* is not a barrier or a border between civilization and wilderness like a fence, something to be cut away to make room for an expanding civilization. Rather, it is a liminal space: an acknowledged, inhabited landscape where people can consciously choose to remain between one culture and another, suspended, as it were, not in a place but "someplace else," as Casey puts it. For centuries, perhaps, before the invasion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by migrants from the eastern United States and Europe, Indian tribes moved through the region, responding not to official mandates or promotional hype, but to supplies of crops and game, moving from place to place, returning or leaving, in response to the seasons. They knew the places in the Great Plains intimately and instinctively: their concept of place dictated living lightly on the land. They left little evidence of their occupancy so that the newcomers, intent on transforming the place, could ignore their faint marks on the land. Settlers, instead of recognizing the grasslands as an inhabited *place*, set out to survey the vast prairie stretches into grids: in the process, they changed themselves as well. This is especially evident in Great Plains literature where, in story after story, new arrivals act out the transformation of the prairie space into ordered grids of crops and farmyards. For some new arrivals, the task is empowering, illustrating the ability of determined people to change the land and to be

changed themselves in the process. For others, this apparently amorphous region is not a place that can be transformed but is rather a site of resistance: a place where one is, often tragically, *displaced*.⁸

DISPLACEMENT

Per Hansa and his wife, Beret, perhaps more than any other characters in Great Plains literature, represent the polar extremes in their approach to place on the open prairies. Per Hansa imagines a fairy castle, a metaphor for his self-confidence: he can dream anything into reality. From the moment they arrive on their claim, he begins the process of *implacement*, of creating a *place* on the unmarked land. Beret, meanwhile, attends to her steamer trunk, her link with the familiar places in Norway that she abandoned when she acquiesced to her husband's determination to emigrate. It is the one possession that remains with her for the rest of her life on their Dakota farm. At first, in the open prairies with no familiar trees or mountains, no fjords or sea, Beret feels alienated and abandoned. Per Hansa immediately identifies their homestead as a place, but Beret remains disoriented and estranged from her family and their fellow immigrants. To her, their claim is a fragile, ineffective defense against nature's fierce intent. While Per Hansa imagines a fairy kingdom and sets out to create a practical homestead, Beret sees only crude structures that are barely discernible against the plains' horizon. For her, their homestead remains an undefined dot in the wilderness, in part because she refuses to recognize her husband's efforts to create a place—a fairy castle, even—though she knows he intends it as his gift to her.

The dialectic embodied in Per Hansa and Beret reflects Rølvaag's larger purpose. The American myth of progress, a linear concept of physical and metaphorical movement, is embodied in the supremely confident dreamer Per Hansa. However, Beret distrusts the physical displacement of immigration masquerading

as progress, even as Per Hansa sees unlimited opportunity to create his fairy kingdom. She suspects that humans who move beyond the boundaries of civilization risk transforming themselves into barbaric products of the surrounding wilderness.⁹ As April Schultz has pointed out, assimilation was a concern current in the 1920s when Rølvaag was writing.¹⁰ Clearly, Rølvaag, like many other immigrants, was aware of the costs of immigration. He witnessed the second generation, many of them his students at St. Olaf College, abandon their parents' language and Old World culture and buy into the American ideal of individualism and material success.¹¹ He sympathizes with Beret, who is acutely aware of the threat of American individualism that energizes her husband and causes him to commit acts that are illegal and sinful in Norwegian culture, the only context she can reference. Rølvaag and his character Beret fear the loss of both psychological and cultural identity in a space without evidence of anything familiar.

The opening pages of *Giants in the Earth* present a vivid account of humans in a landscape devoid of identifiable places. Per Hansa and his family are moving west into Dakota Territory, their habitation a barely usable wagon taken from a scrap heap when their own wagon could not be repaired (4). They are alone. Per Hansa cannot admit to his wife that he has lost the trail of the other Norwegian settlers, that they are adrift (one of Rølvaag's frequent uses of mariners' terminology) in the wilderness. Beret needs no words to reinforce her intuitive notion that her husband is taking them "beyond the end of the world" (9). A landscape that should include markers such as trees or hills and, most important, signs of human habitation, instead consists of smooth prairies that seem to be indistinguishable space: "Had they traveled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless wastes of green and blue?" (37). Even Per Hansa has to admit to himself that he does not know where they are: a landscape without landmarks is a true wilderness.

If Per Hansa is concerned, Beret is terrified. Her displacement is more radical than her husband's temporary disorientation. As Casey points out, if we become disoriented, we find ourselves in an atmosphere not anchored, much less centered, in our own body: we are literally disoriented.¹² Per Hansa remains alert, and when he happens upon their compatriots' camp his navigational instincts soon lead them to the other Norwegians at Spring Creek, the site of their homestead at the far edge of western settlement. The families are living in barely definable spaces, tents and makeshift shelters created from the now immobilized immigrant wagons. Even these minimal structures should create a landscape, a conscious construction in space. While the *environment* includes everything that surrounds us whether we acknowledge it or not, a *landscape* must be visualized as a place, defined by a conscious viewer who interprets what is before him or her.¹³ To the immigrants, the camp is evidence of their minimal reconstruction of their environment into an identifiable place. Beret alone is disoriented, unable to recognize any way to anchor herself in a space with no apparent geographical markers.

As D. W. Meinig says, "Every landscape is a code and its study may be undertaken as a deciphering of meaning, of the cultural and social significance of ordinary but diagnostic features."¹⁴ In Per Hansa and Beret, Rølvaag has created characters who seem to be at opposite poles in this process of deciphering and defining the landscape. While Per Hansa instinctively evaluates the landscape, reading mutton bones on the trail and conceptualizing a house/barn from the prairie sod, Beret cannot see anything to decipher. "How will human beings be able to endure this place? . . . Why, there isn't even a thing that one can *hide behind!*" (29). If, as Meinig and other scholars suggest, each person defines and interprets the landscape as a part of the process of emplacement, Beret, still grounded in the Norwegian landscape of fjords and towering mountains and unable to see the flat and apparently featureless landscape as any place at all, fears

that she will become undefined, essentially erased.

For their first weeks on the prairie, Rølvaag's characters are in a geographical void: they are unable to "read" the landscape that reveals no human-made markers. All the members of the small community feel "they [have] gone back to the very beginning of things," even beyond historical time (32). None of them can articulate this peculiar mood:

[It] lurked in the very vastness and endlessness surrounding them on every hand; it even seemed to rise like an impalpable mist out of the ground on which they sat.

This mood brought vague premonitions to them, difficult to interpret. . . . No telling what might happen out here . . . for almost anything *could* happen! . . .

They were so far from the world . . . cut off from the haunts of their fellow beings. (32)¹⁵

CLAIMS TO THE KINGDOM

As the geographer Edward Relph has pointed out, "[P]lace is not just the where of something: it is the location plus everything that occupies that location seen as an integrated and meaningful phenomenon."¹⁶ Relph explains that we react emotionally to the space we perceive around us: "Space is never empty."¹⁷ However, Beret cannot imagine a home in such infinitude. Even at the most basic, tactile level, she cannot identify any links to a familiar human environment:

Here no warbling of birds rose on the air, no buzzing of insects sounded; even the wind had died away; the waving blades of grass that trembled to the faintest breath now stood erect and quiet, as if listening, in the great hush of the evening. (37)

Although Beret has eyes and ears, she has no way to associate what she sees and hears with her own aesthetic, the familiar, remembered Norwegian landscape. As Catherine M.

Howett has suggested, western Europeans and Americans place a high priority on the way places look: we expect a landscape to be "readable," but the translation of the visual into some sense of aesthetic value of a place is a cultural response.¹⁸ Beret cannot "read" a landscape that is devoid of her own cultural referents.¹⁹

Per Hansa, on the other hand, has clear intentions, and his active imagination enables him to envision a place with fields of his own and a home for his family. For him, the prairie is a space where he is free to create an empire that he will be the first to own. He sets out to impose his own concept of an ideal homestead on the unmarked prairie expanse.²⁰ However, from their arrival, Per Hansa and the others must contend with other claimants to the kingdom. Tønseten assures Per Hansa that he has discovered no signs of human life, "Neither Israelites nor Canaanites! I was the first one to find this place" (34), but his claim is soon challenged: on their first inspection of Per Hansa's claim, Per Hansa finds an Indian grave. This fact colors their response to a landscape that is, in fact, a place with a long human history. For Per Hansa, the discovery is "rotten luck" because it negates his claim to the virgin prairie and because he knows this sign of Indian ("savage") occupation will reinforce the other settlers' unspoken fears of wilderness forces. He consciously dismisses the unease he feels: "This vast stretch of beautiful land was to be his—yes, *his*— and no ghost of a dead Indian would drive him away! . . . 'Good God!' he panted. 'This kingdom is going to be *mine*!'" (35). To assure his ownership, he makes a fifty-two-mile journey to file on his claim (36). This incident is a good example of the process of visualizing a landscape. Per Hansa negates the presence of a human past on his claim because it is not congruent with his own interpretation of the landscape as free of other human stories. To realize the landscape in his imagination, he must be the first resident.

Beret's resistance to the prairie landscape determines her response to the same circumstance. When her children bring her arrow-

heads, Beret intuits the presence of a human past, and when they show their mother the barely visible Indian grave, it underscores the "unspeakable loneliness" of the place where another human lies forgotten (39-40). To Beret, the grave is a relict structure, a sign of historical but unfamiliar human habitation: it provides no bond with place.

The other threat to first settlement is a more immediate one. Homestead claims are defined by property boundaries: stakes mark the corners and make real the paper claim on file in the land office. On a walk across their fields, Per Hansa finds a stake hidden in the grass (112). Though it should mark Tønseten's corner, the name on the stake is O'Hara. Another is marked Joe Gill. That another human could claim the Norwegians' land is unimaginable: the stakes must be the work of some dark force. Rølvaag explains in a footnote that in Norway, "a more heinous crime than meddling with other people's landmarks could hardly be imagined. In fact, the crime was so dark that a special punishment after death was meted out to it" (120-21). Norwegian folk belief held that someone who stole land by moving boundary markers would be a homeless wanderer after death.²¹ Had Per Hansa been familiar with American law, he would have known that stakes alone are not sufficient proof of ownership: the Norwegians' legal filings supersede the unregistered markers. However, Per Hansa is referencing Norwegian custom: when he pulls up the stake that he believes disenfranchises his friend and neighbor Hans Olsa, his act is a direct challenge to the trolls, the dark forces in the earth that even he believes are working against the founding of their community. Beret, already acutely aware of these malevolent forces, recognizes in her husband's behavior "something . . . at last which he had to conceal from her" (117). When she finds the stakes hidden in the stable, she puzzles over the strange names ("Indians!") but knows that they are landmarks that have been standing in the ground. What has been for Per Hansa an act of courage to preserve

their small community becomes for Beret an act of sinful defiance.

Per Hansa puts the preservation of place over adherence to Old World beliefs. Instinctively, he knows that in America, he who occupies and transforms the land has the legal right to it, and he who works the land is rewarded. Beret, who resists knowing anything about American law or custom, views her husband's acts in Old World terms. In her cultural context, land was owned by wealthy men who established hard rules on trespassing. Beret, grounded in this peasant mentality, cannot approve her husband's New World act of defiance. When Beret tries to articulate her fears of the empty, haunted land, Per Hansa assures her that soon there will be more people. Although he acknowledges the fact that "she [is] too fine-grained" for the tasks of home founding, he believes that he can be her capable protector (44). This incident remains a point of deep if unspoken division and—on Beret's part—distrust between them.

Although Rølvaag's context is Norwegian folklore, this incident can also be read as a metaphor for the Indians' prior claim to Per Hansa's "place" and, by implication, the importance of place, not time, as the central metaphor in history. That is, all history in a place exists in the continuous present. In this context, Per Hansa's obsessive determination to impose the American idea of progress on a place with a past he chooses to disregard is, it could be argued, the root cause of his tragic death. Ignoring the Indian and Irish prior claims, Per Hansa conceives his role in terms of empire building, a kind of hubris that results in a tragic chain of events and culminates in the death of the usurper. Even before he begins construction of their crude sod hut, he envisions his fairy kingdom:

When, long ago, Per Hansa had had his first vision of the house, it had been painted white, with green cornices; and these colors had belonged to it in his mind ever since. But the stable, the barn, and all the rest of

the outhouses should be painted red, with white cornices—for that gave such a fine effect! . . . Oh yes, that Beret-girl of his should certainly have a royal mansion for her self and her little princess! (44-45)

Clearly, Per Hansa imagines the farm buildings of a prosperous Norwegian landowner on the Plains. This Old World vision of prosperity is a symbolic overlay that he identifies as *his* place even before he establishes any physical evidence of his “kingdom” on the Great Plains.

SOD AND SOUL

The tiny sod huts of the Norwegian community are the first signs of the Norwegians’ imposition of their will on the physical landscape. The psychological implications of such an act are an important factor in Rølvaag’s novel. As Edward Casey points out in *Getting Back into Place*, a building “exists between the bodies of those who inhabit or use it and the landscape around it. . . . Within the ambience of a building, a landscape becomes articulate and begins to speak in emblematic ways” (32). For Beret, the low sod structure is merely an extension of the earth itself. Where Per Hansa’s envious neighbors see their friends’ innovation in building a dwelling large enough for both his family and his animals (with a sod wall between them), Beret sees their degradation: in a house shared with animals, they become animals themselves. Buildings articulate the relationship between body and landscape. Here, even as her family and neighbors begin the process of getting into place, Beret remains *displaced*, unable to acknowledge an earthen structure as either an emblematic or definitive home. Per Hansa’s sod structure is twice the size of the other settlers’ dwellings and it confounds his neighbors, who are not aware of the magnitude of his envisioned empire. To them it seems a sort of witchcraft must be at work. The house shoots up like “an enormous mushroom” (48). Not only does he

have a structure big enough to house both family and animals, but he has plowed his first fields as he collected the sod squares for building, so that on Per Hansa’s “estate” there is house, barn, and seeded field before the others have thatched their houses.²²

Per Hansa’s innovations puzzle his fellow Norwegians who defer to the building practices they knew in Norway (51-53). Per Hansa, however, combines his observation of their new environment—sod that comes out of the ground in clean-cut building blocks—with ideas he imagines during a trip to Sioux Falls. Rølvaag or his character might have observed similar sod structures on a journey across Dakota Territory through country where other settlers were using techniques familiar to their European origins.²³ For Per Hansa, form follows function: even though he envisions an elaborate cluster of farm buildings, his kingdom begins with materials at hand: the very ground itself, “a sort of make-shift” that saves time and labor and is warmer for animals and humans being housed under one roof (53).

Giants in the Earth provides a classic account of the process of creating place in the frontier landscape. Within a square space defined by a surveyor’s grid, Per Hansa sets about creating a permanent place. His effort illustrates John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s description of an inhabited landscape. In a natural space, a landscape evolves into an inhabited place.²⁴ There is incessant adaptation: the Indian is removed, leaving only a grave behind. The grave and its implied landscape of tipis and buffalo are dismissed by Per Hansa. The Irishman’s boundary stakes are erased from the landscape. His vision of the landscape does not include other European inhabitants. For him, the inhabited landscape includes more practical requirements: good soil, access to water, a homesite for his shining fairy castle and other inhabitants—Norwegians, of course.

The frontier, the liminal space they inhabit, is a region of choices where Per Hansa can realize his own vision of America’s manifest destiny—the ownership of land, denied to him

in Norway by both economics and social class. His imagined kingdom is not an idle dream but a very real possibility that he believes he can build in very real space. The task takes all of his attention, and he deliberately marginalizes himself from his family: "[D]own beneath [his outward buoyant recklessness] lay a stern determination of purpose, a driving force so strong that [Beret] shrank from the least contact with it" (41).

Another factor in Per Hansa's determination to acquire land and create a place of his own imagining mirrors Rølvaag's own life. To Rølvaag and his character Per Hansa, the impulse to emigrate is deeply rooted in Norwegian society. In Norway, Per Hansa does not have even a tenuous claim to land: Rølvaag makes him a fisherman, as Rølvaag himself was. Although fishing plays a major role in Norway's economy, it is by definition a perilous life at best, disconnected from any place other than a movable and fragile boat. Rølvaag himself emigrated from Norway despite an opportunity to have his own fishing boat. Although the sea was an integral part of his life, at nineteen he declined the offer and determined to immigrate to America.²⁵ Furthermore, strict laws of landholding meant that the idea of a fisherman owning land was radical: no wonder Per Hansa feels a kind of exuberant release, a freedom to dream even fairy castles into existence. "No worn-out, thin-shanked, pot-bellied king is going to come around and tell me what I have to do with my kingdom" (43). In his own mind, Per Hansa has created a *habitat*²⁶ where he can accumulate routines and customs and adapt a new land to become his family's place, a hybridized culture rooted in land.

Beret cannot share her husband's enthusiasm for the crude hut he has built. As Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, raw nature is intolerable: houses allow escape from nature, the natural environment that is full of uncertainties and threats.²⁷ Per Hansa's structure might be practical and warm, with the animal's heat to add to their own, but Beret cannot imagine living under the same roof with animals (53).

A house made from the earth provides no protection from the sinister forces that Beret senses threaten her very identity. Built places are intended to stave off chaos, to create a safe, enclosed place. As Edward Casey states in *Getting Back into Place*, buildings serve as "the mediatrix between artless earth, . . . a middle ground between nature and culture."²⁸ Even after they occupy their sod house, Beret feels she is in the wilderness. Casey points out that a building must be constructed well enough to be habitable: it must have permanency and "felt familiarity." (114) There must be an inside and an outside (122). Their rough sod house exhibits none of these features for Beret. The only comfort she comes to feel is in the closeness and warmth of the domestic animals, familiar reminders of her farm life in Norway. Their presence and the steamer trunk are the only "places" that evoke memories of the place she still identifies as home.

RESISTANCE AND SEPARATION

To be an integral part of the place her husband is creating, the farm taking shape in the fields gradually emerging from the prairie sod, Beret must come to identify home with the structures and things in place around her. Beret actively resists this emplacement, remaining unresponsive to the culture of the developing community that is absorbing her husband and children, leaving her isolated psychologically and socially. Rølvaag dramatizes Beret's displacement in several vivid scenes. One is her sense of desolation at their discovery of the Indian grave and her bond of sympathy with the soul buried in this desolate place. At another point, when Beret is left alone, she imagines their fragile dwelling surrounded by a magic circle, a fairy ring derived from Norwegian folklore, erected by the dark forces in the earth. Because no other wagons have arrived at the settlement, she is convinced a barrier keeps them away. "She had even seen the intangible barrier with her own eyes . . . had seen it clearly . . . had had to force herself to step across it." (56).³⁰ Rescue, she

believes, is impossible: no one can cross this magic ring. The enchanted circle entraps her, ironically, in the sod hut's tiny enclosure amid infinite space.

Beret's conviction that evil forces are working against them deepens when a Norwegian family appears searching for the grave of their child buried someplace they cannot find.³¹ The mother is insane with grief and must be tied down in the wagon. Soon after the family's departure, Beret sees a horrifying image in the clouds: a monstrous, leering face that threatens to engulf the land itself. It is a hideous geomorphism: "The eyes—deep, dark caves in the cloud—were closed. The mouth, if it were open, would be a yawning abyss. The chin rested on the prairie . . . Black and lean the whole face, but of such gigantic, menacing proportions!" (321). Schultz points out that this apparition resembles a Norwegian *draug*, a living dead person whose appearance portends disaster (102). That no one else sees it only exacerbates Beret's terror and deepens her conviction that they must escape. The locust plague that soon descends upon them confirms her fear.

Since physical escape is not possible, Beret retreats into deep depression. She discourages the efforts of the other women to include her in community activities. Where the others embrace American language and culture, Beret acknowledges no familiar patterns that can alleviate her sense of social and psychic isolation. She has no affective language to articulate the reality she sees, no familiar words to name the apparently empty space that bears no resemblance to the Norwegian landscape she knows experientially and psychologically. Because the other immigrants do not put as much stock in the Old World folklore, they fail to understand that she believes malevolent forces entrap her, and they misunderstand her periods of silent sadness. Finally, they avoid her company, thereby confirming her marginal status.³²

Beret's radical resistance sets her apart from the little community. But despite the fact that the Spring Creek Norwegians have established

a tentative community on the Great Plains, like Beret they persist in regarding events from a Norwegian perspective, still their most familiar cultural context. When their cows disappear, they remember half-forgotten tales about cows spirited away by gnomes or trolls. When Per Hansa offers to go in search of the animals, the others' imaginings become a kind of validation for Beret. "Perhaps then, it was an act of Providence that the cattle had been lost. . . . It ought to show them how things stood out here" (98). Her fear may seem unreasonable, but again Beret is referencing Norwegian folklore: the gnomes are not the humorous garden variety but are hidden folk who punish humans by stealing their cattle.³³ While the others seem to regard this as merely one possibility, the encounter confirms once more Beret's conviction that "man could not exist in this savage, desolate wilderness" (98).

In her persistent resistance to the Plains' geographical space, Beret constructs a kind of negative sacred space around her. She interprets the Indian burial mound, the enclosing fairy ring, the destroyed stakes, and the threatening *draug* as signs of sacrilege. She assigns to these unfamiliar experiences meanings derived from another cultural landscape. In a place with no recognizable relict structures, no historical or identifiable religious tradition, Beret, who is unfamiliar with America's laws and customs, is incapable of creating new, positive referents.³⁴ As Edward Casey puts it, when one moves among places, one is acutely aware of not having an identifiable place to *be*. Beret remains in this liminal state between destinations and therefore "someplace else" than home. Even though, in the later volumes of Rølvaag's trilogy, Beret becomes resigned to the encroaching American culture, she never fully embraces it as her children, and especially Peder Victorious, do. She resists the settled state, refusing to admit to herself that their dwelling is, as Casey puts it, "somewhere in particular."³⁵

Per Hansa is dimly aware that Beret does not share his expansive vision. He whitewashes the interior of their sod house in an effort to

create a place clearly differentiated from the ground (169). At first Beret is pleased with the sod hut that "shone so brightly inside that it dazzled the eyes," but when the snows come, she regrets the interior reflection: "Her eyes were blinded wherever she looked" (193). In an all-white world, Beret cannot discern the boundaries between the relative safety of their house and the undefined landscape that surrounds them. Without evident physical markers, Beret feels as if she herself has been erased from the landscape. With the passage of time, this liminality becomes more psychological than physical. As Christmas approaches, she prepares for her own death, convinced that she cannot survive childbirth. Her obvious depression distances their family even more from the other Norwegians who feel uncomfortable under her critical gaze. With little to do out of doors, Per Hansa becomes acutely aware of his wife's depression, but he cannot penetrate the "enchanted ring that [lies] about her" (204) or muster the resources of his imagination to coax Beret from her silent resistance. He cannot, in other words, fully understand her displacement since he is so utterly implaced.

The roots of Beret's psychological displacement run deep. Guilt is a part of the cultural baggage she brings with her and is an important element in her persistent resistance to implacement. She believes that they have been enticed to the "trackless plains" by an American myth: Per Hansa is caught up in the American dream of westward expansion, but Beret regards his mythic vision as a delirium that has been visited upon him as retribution for their very personal sin: conceiving their first child out of wedlock (216). The fact that her parents, now separated by distance and time, opposed their marriage and warned her of Per Hansa, "a shiftless fellow" who drank and fought, deepens her sense of physical and psychic isolation. She even draws away from her husband, who has been to her "very life" (217). She empties the immigrant chest to prepare it as a coffin (223). The boundaries of her world constrict to enclose dead space, a dark, airless

steamer trunk, her link to the Old World that she deliberately abandoned to follow Per Hansa.

Beret's release from anticipation of death is ironic. Peder Victorious is born on Christmas Day.³⁶ The birth is long and hard, and in the most difficult time, she reveals the cause of her depression and isolation to her husband, demanding that he give their daughter to the childless Kjersti and "take the boys with you—and go away from here!" (227). Humans, she tells him, cannot exist here: they turn into beasts. He must go back to Norway (228). Per Hansa, frightened by her outburst, addresses the forces he believes are at work: "'Satan—now you shall leave her alone!'" (228). His exorcism and Beret's own unsuspected strength effect a change that becomes apparent when she awakes from her long sleep after the ordeal. For Beret, the birth of her son is the first weak link in the chain of events that finally allows her to acknowledge her place, however marginal, in the cultural landscape being created by other settlers in the geographic space of the Great Plains.

THE EDGE OF COMMUNITY

In book 2 of *Giants in the Earth*, Rølvaag focuses on the community's survival. The process of becoming implaced involves coming to terms with an unfamiliar climate and culture. The primary challenge is no longer Old World gnomes and trolls, stakes, or signs of the Indians' presence, but very real storms and plagues that threaten the entire community's survival. At first, these incidents seem to confirm Per Hansa's role as the community's invincible leader. In midwinter, on a trip to the Sioux River for desperately needed wood, the men are engulfed in a sudden and furious blizzard (259). Separated from the rest of the party, Per Hansa faces the storm with no shelter and only his oxen to aid him in his struggle to stay alive and on course. Like Beret, Per Hansa expects to lose the battle against these forces. This passage (260-62) is couched in the terminology of boats and fishing, reflecting once

again the experiences of Rølvaag and his character Per Hansa in the Lofoten Islands off northern Norway. The imagery evokes a contest on a frozen boundless ocean—the ultimate undifferentiated environment.

But the fisherman Per Hansa does not surrender control over his own destiny to sin or fate or natural forces. Like the Norwegian “Ash Boy,” he perseveres and survives when his oxen carry him to the very house where the rest of the party is safely out of the storm (266-67). Safe and warm, he dreams of a “sod house beset by the western storms. . . . [. . .] A woman was moving about there whose sad face was still full of beauty; she carried a child in her arms” (270). This vision of Beret in the cold hut signifies the fact that they still inhabit very different places in the community: Per Hansa safe with the other men, Beret alone on the cold edge of their settlement.

Another incident underscores the capricious nature of the forces aligned against the settlers. A plague of locusts descends on their fields, a dark cloud roaring like a “heavy undertow rolling into caverns in a mountain side” (331). When Per Hansa returns home at dusk after a futile but heroic battle to beat back the invasion, there is no sign of life. The door is blocked by the steamer trunk so that he must force his way in. What he finds inside the house terrifies Per Hansa. In the steamer trunk is “Beret, huddled up and holding the baby in her arms; And-Ongen was crouching at her feet” (336-38). Beret is hysterical. His wife’s attempt to escape from the savage forces by entombing herself and her children in the constricting, suffocating trunk reveals the depth of her antipathy toward their prairie home. Per Hansa senses the diminished measure of his fairy kingdom—and their community—if Beret cannot be a full participant. The trunk symbolizes a barricade that separates Beret from her husband, who must use all his strength and will to reach her. It is Beret’s ultimate enclosure, a box within a box, that signifies both the stifling restrictions of her allegiance to the Old World and refuge from a place she cannot acknowledge as home. She is, quite

literally, placeless.³⁷ Even Per Hansa cannot dismiss altogether his deep-seated belief in the malevolence of nature, the power of wilderness chaos to resist human incursion and order.

When a Norwegian minister arrives, Beret at first resists his assurance of their place in the Great Plains. She cannot imagine God’s presence in a landscape she continues to regard as the venue of evil forces. When the minister prepares to baptize Peder with the middle name Victorious, her silent resistance erupts: “‘This sin shall not happen! How can a man be *victorious* out here, where the evil one gets us all! . . . Are you all stark mad?’” (368). But the minister’s act dispels Beret’s fear that the name is blasphemous. Beret’s tentative integration into the community is further aided by the minister when he offers a prayer of blessing for their home. The structure that has seemed an undistinguished part of the land begins to take on identity as a place defined by human intentions and experiences. When the minister celebrates communion, he uses the immigrant chest as the altar, thereby connecting her link to the Old World with their Plains home. The visit of the minister calms Beret, but her mood is deceptive: she is, in fact, in a deep psychological depression. The minister’s words have not brought her the assurance she needs to fully accept Dakota Territory and her sod house as home. In her mind and even out loud, she converses with her dead mother: existentially, she remains *displaced*.

But then Beret overhears Per Hansa’s confession of his part in her suffering to his friend Hans Olsa. His acknowledgment of sympathy and his insistence that she is “‘a better soul than I’ve ever met’” (405) provide a point of reference for the emotional grounding Beret needs. “‘It’s my own fault,’” he tells his friend. “‘I should not have coaxed and persuaded her to come with me out here’” (404). After she hears this confession, Beret falls into a deep sleep and when she awakes, she can, for the first time, see the landscape intentionally, identifying landmarks and boundaries and

acknowledging the community's shared experiences:

Everything looked so strange in here today! [. . .] It seemed to her that she hadn't been here for a long time. [. . .] It confused her dreadfully to stand here like a stranger in her own house. [. . .] Beret went searching about in her own home like a housewife who had been away on a long visit and returns a partial stranger. But the feeling of home-coming filled her with such joy that she could only laugh at her bewilderment. (407-8).

As Leonard Lutwack points out, "Human will and imagination go the longest way in making places what they are for human beings, and the mood of a person has much to do with determining the quality of places he is in."³⁸ Now, as she consciously acknowledges her physical place, Beret can begin to come to terms with her psychological place on the Great Plains.

The Norwegian Rølvaag does not let the story end on this modest note of triumph. In the last chapter, entitled "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied," the ineradicable fact of human liminality is embodied in Per Hansa's last act. The community's most confident member, who survived a powerful storm and fought against locust plagues, goes into a blizzard because Hans Olsa and Beret believe that he, Hans Olsa, must have a minister. This common request, of no particular import in most situations, becomes a death sentence in the face of the storm. In countless stories of the Great Plains, the forces of nature symbolize the ancient, persistent demands of place. In this instance, Beret asks her husband to go outside the boundaries of their safe home, their created place, to do an errand in the wilderness storm that they all fear cannot be accomplished. This time, Per Hansa does not return.

The last chapter is emblematic of the history and literature of the Great Plains. Beret is

only the most extreme example of the Euro-American settlers who found it hard to accept and endure the demanding reality of the Great Plains as a place to establish home. The physical and psychological isolation and years of pestilence, famine, and disease take their toll. Some go mad. Others perish. The survivors learn to anticipate and endure storms, fire, plagues, and dull isolation.³⁹

CONCLUSION

Per Hansa and Beret move to the American frontier by conscious choice—Per Hansa because he envisions a fairy castle, a myth that fits nicely with his confidence in America's westering myths, and Beret because she chooses to be with Per Hansa. He sees himself as an invincible pioneer who plunges into the task of transforming the prairie into neat squares of profitable crops, but he comes to understand that the land itself makes demands; his fairy castle fades. He must acquiesce to real storms and crises, to economic reality and Beret's vulnerability. Beret, in contrast, attempts to maintain a tenuous connection to her familiar Old World culture, resisting the American society being created around her, but it is impossible to remain displaced forever. Tenuously, in large part through her Americanized child Peder Victorious, Beret comes to accept, however reluctantly, the place where she is—their home, the church, and the growing community.

Ironically, it is Beret who creates a place for her children in Rølvaag's subsequent novels, *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Father's God* (1931). Although she never fully embraces the Great Plains society and she continues to suffer bouts of depression and isolation, Beret establishes a thriving farm, a showplace of imaginative management and innovation. Her inspiration comes in dreams of Per Hansa, but her own affection for animals and her respect for the forces in the land result in her ordered existence in a place that at first seemed a formless void. In these subsequent volumes, the

steamer trunk is no longer a coffin but merely a piece of furniture, a reminder from another time and place.

In *Giants in the Earth*, Rølvaag has created one of the most explicit accounts of the costs of the transformation of the Great Plains grasslands into cropland. The Indians' presence, signified by the vague outline of a hilltop grave, resonates with Beret, the embodiment of Old World resistance to the cultural, social, and physical demands of an unfamiliar landscape.

Rølvaag embodies Beret's resistance and Per Hansa's confidence in the constrictive image of a very real, tightly closed steamer trunk and an expansive vision of an imagined fairy castle. Per Hansa's vision defines for him their sod house and barn that, like Wallace Stevens's bell jar in Tennessee, redefines the landscape that surrounds it. Beret's steamer trunk, inside the house, transposes Per Hansa's concept of the landscape as home place into Beret's fearful sense of the land's power to, in turn, redefine *them*. The chapter titles "The Heart that Dared Not Let in the Sun" and "On the Border of Utter Darkness" reflect Rølvaag's sympathy with Beret, and his belief that immigration and transformation of land and people come at a cost. It is Beret who recognizes the challenge of the land itself and resists its demands to acquiesce to its power, and it is Per Hansa who faces the challenge and defies the land's resistance. Ultimately, Per Hansa and the thousands of other homesteaders prevail, but at a cost that Rølvaag understood perhaps more acutely than any other Great Plains writer.

NOTES

1. O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1927). Subsequent page references to *Giants in the Earth* are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Paul Groth, "Taking Place: Toward the Regrounding of American Studies," in *Mapping American Culture*, ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 3-23.

3. Groth and other cultural geographers identify this human interaction with nature as the cul-

tural landscape. *Built environment* connotes the process involved in creating the identifiable human presence—dwellings—in the composite cultural landscape. The emphasis here is on vernacular architecture: structures built by individuals to meet their own physical and aesthetic requirements.

4. See Harold P. Simonson, *Prairies Within: The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rølvaag* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), for a thorough analysis of the tragic consequences of the divisions between Per Hansa and Beret.

5. Turner presented his speech, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. He based his declaration that the frontier period had come to an end on the 1890 census that declared there was no more land available for settlement by Americans and Europeans.

6. See Casey's discussion of this shift in part 2, "From Place to Space," in *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 75-129. See also Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

7. Other scholars prominent in the development of place theory include Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (1976; reprint, London: Pion, 1980); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Yi-Fu Tuan, "Place and Culture: Analeptic for Individuality and the World's Indifference" in *Mapping American Culture*, ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), pp. 27-49; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989); William Bevis, "Region, Power, Place," in *Reading the West: New Essays and the Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21-43; D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

8. This displacement is evident, for example, in Mr. Shimerda in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and in Frank Shabata in her *O Pioneers!* (1913). Ma silently follows the peripatetic Pa in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series (1932-41), and Roy Goodnough's wife, Ada, a character who most closely resembles Beret, shrinks and dies on the Plains in Kent Haruf's more recent novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984).

9. Several scholars have noted the influence of Ibsen on Rølvaag's pessimistic point of view: that

success comes at a price, and the more success is desired, the greater the cost will be. See Simonson, *Prairies Within* (note 4 above), pp. 34-35, 46; Paul Reigstad, *Rølvaag: His Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 33; April Schultz, "'To Lose the Unspeakable:' Folklore and Landscape in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*," in *Mapping American Culture*, ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), pp. 89-111 (p. 97).

10. Schultz, *ibid.*, p. 91.

11. The tension between the settlers' struggle to establish place and the indifference of their children, who abandon the ideal for the immediate, is a constant theme in Great Plains literature. It is evident, for example, in the works of Larry Woiwode, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (1975); Wright Morris, *The Home Place* (1948), *The World in the Attic* (1949), *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1959); Bess Streeter Aldrich, *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925); and Douglas Unger, *Leaving the Land* (1984).

12. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (note 6 above), p. 151.

13. Meinig, introduction to *Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (note 7 above), pp. 3-5.

14. Meinig, *ibid.*, p. 6.

15. Rølvaag uses ellipses as a stylistic device. In quotes from *Giants in the Earth*, bracketed ellipses indicate omissions from the quoted text. All other ellipses are Rølvaag's.

16. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (note 7 above), p. 3. Relph creates a geographic continuum of place based on one's ability to differentiate place and space, from primitive awareness of the immediate through perceptive space, existential space, sacred space, and geographical space. For further discussion of the place of place in landscape and cultural geography, see Meinig, *Interpretations* (note 7 above), especially p. 5, 45-46; and Dolores Hayden, "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space" in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 111-133.

17. Relph, *ibid.*, p. 10.

18. Catherine M. Howett, "Where the One-Eyed Man Is King: The Tyranny of Visual and Formalist Values in Evaluating Landscapes," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscape*, ed. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 85-98 (p. 86).

19. For a discussion of the distinction between *place* and the more complex term *cultural landscape*, see Hayden, "Urban Landscape" (note 16 above), p. 113.

20. Schultz and other scholars have pointed out the mythical element in Per Hansa's vision: the

similarity between Per Hansa and the familiar Norwegian folk figure Askeladd, or Ash Boy, a good-for-nothing who perseveres and succeeds where others fail (Schultz, "Folklore and Landscape" [note 9 above], pp. 97-98, 104). See also Reigstad, "Roots in the Homeland," in *Rølvaag* (note 9 above), especially pp. 3, 6, 8-9.

21. Schultz, *ibid.*, p. 103.

22. Many readers interpret Per Hansa's reluctance to share his ideas with the other settlers as a sign of pride or hubris, a manifestation of the tragic flaw that contributes to his death. For example, having heard the objections his neighbors express concerning his unusual building, Per Hansa thinks, "Now he would get ahead of both Hans Olsa and the Solum boys!" (54).

23. In the United States, farmers adopted one another's effective innovations, so that by the time the Great Plains was opened for settlement, such innovations would have been quite common, though unfamiliar to Rølvaag's relatively recent immigrants.

24. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (note 7 above). In this study, Jackson outlines his theory of place.

25. Reigstad, *Rølvaag* (note 9 above), pp. 5, 22-23.

26. *Habitat* is Jackson's term; see *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (note 7 above), p. 40.

27. Tuan, *Escapism* (note 7 above), p. xiii.

28. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (note 6 above), p. 112.

29. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (note 6 above), p. 114.

30. Schultz points out the origins of this belief in Norse mythology: that malevolent forces in the ground itself have created a ring that humans cannot cross (Schultz, "Folklore and Landscape" [note 9 above], p. 102).

31. See Schultz (*ibid.*) for a discussion of the implications of burial in unconsecrated ground in Norwegian folk culture (p. 102).

32. Evidence in the text indicates that in Beret Rølvaag created a character suffering from clinical depression. She exhibits most of the symptoms: persistent sadness and hopelessness; withdrawal from friends and family; irritability and agitation; indecision and lack of concentration; poor self-esteem and guilt; low energy; thoughts of suicide or death. See also *Giants*, pp. 174, 204.

33. Schultz, "Folklore and Landscape" (note 9 above), p. 103.

34. This "negative sacredness," which derives from Beret's resistance to American culture, especially in matters of language and religion, remains the central conflict in the following volumes of Rølvaag's trilogy. Rølvaag clearly sympathizes with

his character's effort to resist American materialism and the gospel of progress, and to maintain her own cultural identity.

35. Casey, *Getting Back* (note 6 above), p. 121.

36. The birth date and the name Per Hansa chooses underscore the biblical allusions that Rølvaag employs in his novel. Such a birth in exile and in midwinter is central to the nativity story in the New Testament and implicit in Genesis 12:1-4: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing'" (RSV).

37. In *Peder Victorious* (1929; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) and *Their Father's God* (1931; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), the immigrant trunk is an

integral part of Beret's home. Full of things of personal significance, it is one furnishing among many and a link to Beret's now-distant Norwegian past. It provides a point of stability in the increasingly complex American society.

38. Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), p. 35.

39. For other representative stories of the debilitating effects in varying degrees of the isolation in the Great Plains landscape see, for example, Mr. Shimerda in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, and her short stories "Eric Hermannson's Soul," "A Wagner Matinee," and "On the Divide." See also stories by William Allen White, "A Story of the Highlands" and "The Story of Aqua Pura" in his collection *The Real Issue* (1896), Hamlin Garland's story "A Day's Pleasure" in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), Dorothy Scarborough's *The Wind* (1925), and, more recently, *The Tie That Binds* by Kent Haruf (1984).