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# RÖLVAAG, GROVE AND PIONEERING ON THE AMERICAN AND CANADIAN PLAINS

DICK HARRISON

One Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* and Frederick Philip Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* are not obvious choices with which to begin comparing the pioneer fiction of the American and Canadian plains. *Giants*, translated from the Norwegian, is about Helgelanders fishermen settling in the wilds of Dakota Territory in 1873 and, with little more than their bare hands, trying to farm the alien prairie and establish rudimentary institutions of family, church, school, and local government. *Fruits*, written in English, is about an Anglo-Saxon farmer from Ontario who brings equipment and capital to the task of building an empire just five miles from a railway on the Manitoba prairie in 1900. Even in its English translation, Rölvaag's novel remains "palpably European in its art and atmosphere,"<sup>1</sup> creating, as Steve Hahn says, "a reality which is envisioned in terms of Norwegian religious and cultural

structures."<sup>2</sup> And it is difficult to translate effects from Grove's methodical, naturalistic prose to Rölvaag's style with its lyric flights, its old-world folklore, and its motifs of trolls and magic circles.

Yet the two novels occupy analogous positions in the fiction of their respective regions. Both were written by immigrant novelists who came to the western experience as adults and who wrote extensively in their first languages—Norwegian and German. Both novels were intended to be broadly representative. Rölvaag was dedicated to memorializing in great literature the American experience of Norwegian immigrants. Grove styled himself the "Spokesman of a Race," by which he did not mean the German (he claimed to be Swedish) but the race of pioneers, drawn from all nationalities and driven by a compulsion to begin anew.<sup>3</sup> Possibly because of the writers' declared purposes, *Giants* and *Fruits* are in large measure anatomies of pioneering, laying out systematic and minute information about methods, materials, and procedures that are of interest in themselves. Partly because of their careful analyses, both novels are accepted as among the best fictional accounts of pioneering in their regions.

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While such similarities might encourage comparison, they remain largely extrinsic. The choice of these novels is ultimately based on something more fundamental. *Giants* (1925) and *Fruits* (1933) are pioneering efforts in a literary sense. Rölvaag and Grove were among the first to look realistically not just at the physical but at the mental, emotional, and spiritual rigors of pioneering, or in Rölvaag's words, at "what it all cost."

Fortunately the novels have more specific similarities to lead us to these central concerns. Both are about giants, and in each the same moral ambiguity invests the condition of giantism. Rölvaag's main pioneer, Per Hansa, is a "stocky, broad-shouldered man," much shorter than his enormous alter ego Hans Olsa, but he is capable of titanic feats of land-breaking and building, and he survives epic journeys through impenetrable blizzards.<sup>4</sup> His capability and his indomitable spirit are heroic, larger than life. Grove's pioneer, Abe Spalding, is six feet four, two hundred fifty pounds, a man of unfailing energy and great personal force. The women in his district see him as "a huge figure of somewhat uncertain outlines, resembling the hero of a saga."<sup>5</sup> Both men are natural leaders in their communities and thrive on the physical challenges of pioneering. Both seem at times to have an uncanny bond with the soil, even to bear some mark of election in the way they escape general misfortunes of nature. Per Hansa saves his first wheat crop from locusts because he has ignorantly planted unseasonably early. Abe, on little more than a superstitious whim, stacks his 1,200-acre wheat crop and saves it from the rains of 1912, which ruin the crops of all his neighbors.

Per Hansa and Abe Spalding are ideal pioneers in most respects, and in so creating them, Rölvaag and Grove are defining their subjects; their dramas are not to be about man against the land in any ordinary sense.

Per and Abe also share many of the weaknesses that are inextricable from their strengths. They are proud, stubborn, ambitious men, whose will to conquer is excited by the space and openness of the prairie. Per's exclamation,

"This kingdom is going to be *mine*!" (p. 35), and Abe's resolve that "he would conquer this wilderness; he would change it; he would set his own seal upon it" (p. 22) express a similar imperious will. Both men are also visionaries, and their visions are expressed in images of grand houses. Per Hansa sees on his land "the royal mansion which he had already erected in his mind" (p. 108). Abe Spalding is possessed by a "dream: of a mansion such as he had seen in Ontario, in the remnants of a colonial estate—a mansion dominating an extensive holding of land, imposed upon that holding as a sort of seigniorial sign-manual" (p. 23). It is ironic and ominous that these men who have fled the constrictions of older societies are projecting upon the freedom of the West visions with distinctly regal and feudal casts. Both men, possessed and to some extent blinded by their visions, are incapable of dealing with their domestic affairs, and therefore of creating the homes that should have been the purpose of those visionary mansions. Abe and Per have brought to the prairies reluctant wives, temperamentally unsuited to pioneering and to the plains environment, who deteriorate physically or mentally as their husbands forge the material parts of their visions.

These gross similarities of situation and character are numerous enough to indicate that *Giants* and *Fruits* address some of the same questions about pioneering on the prairies and the encounter between civilized man and an alien wilderness. It is clear that the physical hazards are less important than the psychic, and that the pioneers are endangered less by anything in the new environment itself than by what the prairie with its threat of isolation and loneliness or its promise of openness and freedom draws out of the human character. The parallel elements, while of some interest in themselves, are valuable mainly as an opportunity to draw the works of Grove and Rölvaag into a close juxtaposition that will reveal what is distinctive about each. These comparisons are useful for the differences they throw into relief, and those can be recognized only by looking more minutely at some shared imagery

parallels in structure, and analogies in the action of the two novels.

One of these similarities with a difference is in the representation of the prairie itself. In *Fruits*, despite the later stage of settlement it depicts, the prairie is first seen as a wilderness, as it is in *Giants*. When Abe approaches his homestead, "he reached that flat and unrelieved country which, to the very horizon, seemed to be a primitive wilderness. North, east, and west, nothing showed that looked like a settlement" (p. 21). The desolate flatness of the country he finds "forbidding," yet Abe, with his domineering spirit, is inclined to ignore its character and to take the openness for absence: "That the general conformation of a landscape might have to be considered, such an idea he would have laughed at. Yet this prairie seemed suddenly a peculiar country, mysteriously endowed with a power of testing temper and character" (p. 23). Though the mysterious power in the landscape eventually has a profound effect upon Abe, he rarely allows it to intrude into his vision.

In *Giants* the prairie wilderness is a more forceful presence in the action, a sentient being, often lyrically described in its moods of melancholy and beauty, often dramatically portrayed in moods of sublimity and terror. It can never be ignored. There is commonly a note of menace in the endless, desolate expanse of the plains, and R  lvaag's dominant image of the landscape is the sea. When Per Hansa's wife, Beret, looks over their homestead, "It reminded her strongly of the sea, and yet it was very different. . . . This formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched . . . or cared. . . ." (p. 37, R  lvaag's ellipses). The prairie-sea metaphor has been common since the time of the earliest travelers and is not a surprising comparison for coastal fisher-folk to make, but notice that only certain aspects of the sea are involved in the description—distance, isolation, loneliness, exposure. This is not the life-giving sea but a devouring and sinister force that swallows up life. Its sentient malice is expressed as "something vague and intangible hovering in the air."

This perception of the prairies might at first be ascribed to Beret's morbid sensitivity to the landscape, her neurotic fear of exposure ("there was nowhere to hide," she says), her desperate loneliness at being far from home and familiar sights, and her fear of being isolated from the security of all human society. To a certain extent this is the case, but Beret's is only the most extreme expression of something felt by all the characters. Similar premonitions are repeatedly ascribed to the others when there is no apparent danger:

All of a sudden, apparently without any cause, a vague, nameless dread would seize hold of them; it would shake them for a while like an attack of nerves; or again, it might fill them with restless apprehension, making them quiet and cautious in everything they did. They seemed to sense an unseen force around them. (P. 61)

This conception of the prairie might be identified only with the characters except that narrative comments such as "the Great Plains watched them breathlessly" (p. 59) and "monster-like the Plain lay there" (p. 241) extend it to the overall perspective of the novel. This contrasts sharply with Grove's portrayal of an environment that may be overlooked but eventually must be reckoned with.

R  lvaag's use of the prairie-sea metaphor brings out another important difference in the prairie as setting in the two novels. When Per Hansa's little party first appears it is described as though at sea: "A small caravan was pushing its way through the tall grass. The track that it left behind was like the wake of a boat—except that instead of widening out astern it closed in again" (p. 3). There is nothing threatening in the scene; the prairie sky has just been described lyrically, almost idyllically except for an occasional black cloud. The impression is simply of utter tracklessness where tiny man's hope to make any mark on the immensity is even more futile than at sea. Per Hansa is, in fact, lost and has been wandering for days. Subsequent journeys in the novel emphasize this quality of formless, undifferentiated space

and of a placelessness that dissolves human meaning. Perhaps the most doleful example is the family of immigrants who arrive at the Spring Creek settlement in the fog. The man has tried the nautical method of steering by dragging a rope, but without success. The woman has been driven insane by the experience of burying their child in the middle of nowhere, and days of searching fail to discover the grave. This incident is suggestive for the lives of all the pioneers, for whom the prairie's tracklessness becomes psychological, moral, and spiritual.

Grove uses the prairie-sea metaphor extensively elsewhere in his writing, but sea imagery is rare in *Fruits*, despite the fact that Abe homesteads on an ancient lake-bed that is subject to regular spring floods. Unlike Per Hansa's plains, which resist all marks of human life or order, Abe's prairie is quickly cut by railways, county roads, trails, fences, and survey lines. It is overlaid with the rectilinear world of civilized European man. In part this reflects the later stage of settlement, but Grove's every description is oriented to these reference points and to the numbered sections and quarters within Abe's township. In the back of the novel the reader will find a map of Spalding District showing the survey grid and identifying the claims and holdings of the settlers. While Per Hansa's claim is situated on a natural creek, Abe's is beside one of the many huge artificial drainage ditches in the region, man's most drastic alteration of the landscape. Running parallel at regular intervals, the ditches change the nature of space within the landscape; neighbors who face each other across forty feet of ditch may have to travel four miles via a bridge to reach each other. All such details are suggestive of the structured psychological world in which Abe lives.

Paradoxically, the pioneer can lose himself as easily in either landscape, but the nature and consequences of that loss are not the same. There is a marked difference between Rölvaag's and Grove's assessments of the emotional and spiritual costs of pioneering. The contrast can be sharpened by bringing together one of the

many sea images in *Giants* with one of the rare sea images in *Fruits*. When Per Hansa sets out on one of his journeys, Beret imagines him sinking into the sea:

In the window looking toward the east a woman's face, tear-stained and swollen with weeping, watched his figure grow less and less in the dim gray light of the breaking day, until at last it had disappeared altogether. . . . To her it seemed as though he were sinking deeper and deeper into an unknown, lifeless sea; the sombre greyness rose and covered him. (P. 102)

This passage is highly suggestive of man's whole relationship with the prairie. The woman is typically static, within the house, the one expression of permanence in the landscape; she is looking east, the direction of home, civilization, refinement, tradition, and stability. Per Hansa is typically moving into the unknown. The prairie is an engulfing sea, a force of evil with which Per Hansa has somehow allied himself. As Beret later observes, "this desolation out here called forth all that was evil in human nature" (p. 148). She associates the evil powers of the prairie with her own sins in giving herself to Per Hansa before marriage. The evil of the prairie is not that its savage nature will destroy them directly but that it will bestialize them. As she says to Per Hansa, "We'd better take care or we will all be turned into beasts and savages out here!" (p. 150). Man, removed from the security and constraints of civilization and exposed to the savage wilderness, is in danger of having his primitive nature respond, as Per Hansa's obviously does, by turning into unregenerate man and losing his soul.<sup>6</sup> Per Hansa's is the temperament most diametrically opposed to his wife's in this respect. It is he who files on the land of the Indian graveyard, who consorts with the savages, rides an Indian pony, has the mobility of a savage, and trades in furs with the Indians. It is he who violates all human law and custom by destroying another's landmarks. Per Hansa is the one most perceptibly sinking into this sea, which is unregenerate nature and the body of evil.

It might be objected that Beret is a morbid woman on her way to total derangement, but from the early experiences of the other settlers and from the last scenes of the novel it is clear that Beret's views are only extreme, not peculiar.

In *Fruits*, after years of material success and human failure, Abe Spalding reaches a crisis in his life. When he considers the prairie landscape, he also perceives it as a sea:

Abe, now that he was becoming conscious of this landscape at last, and of its significance, could at first hardly understand that he, of all men, should have chosen this district to settle in, though it suited him well enough now. But even that became clear. He had looked down at his feet; had seen nothing but the furrow; had considered the prairie only as a page to write the story of his life upon. His vision had been bounded by the lines of his farm; his farm had been floated on that prairie as the shipwright floats a vessel on the sea, looking not so much at the waves which are to batter it as at the fittings which secure the comfort of those within. But such a vessel may be engulfed by such a sea. (P. 138).

What Abe, in his hard-headed, practical way, has taken for solid, arable land, he suddenly realizes is psychically a sea, and it is again a sea that threatens to engulf the pioneer. In *Fruits*, however, it is the image of a force of nature that is dangerous not because Abe has let his own primitive instincts respond to it as Per Hansa does but because he has ignored it. Confined within the imperial vision of his conscious will, he has failed to see the power of nature at work around and within himself. Abe has long been aware that his mechanized "power farming" methods have cut him off from intimate contact with the land and external nature. Now with the disintegration of his family and of his sense of purpose he realizes that his tyrannical will has also cut him off from his inner nature. He comes to recognize that nature cannot be confined in a rectangular grid to serve the logic of his ambitions. The boat in the description emphasizes

the suggestion of the sea as an image for the emotional, instinctual, unconscious side of human life that Abe has suppressed and that now threatens to engulf him. The engulfment again results from a loss of humanity, but from causes virtually opposite to those in *Giants*. The neglect of spiritual values is also a factor; Abe reflects that "When all a man's gifts have been bent on the realization of material and realizable ends, the time is bound to come, unless he fails, when he will turn his spiritual powers against himself and scoff at his own achievements" (p. 132). But Abe's spiritual powers are set in opposition not to his instinctual, animal nature but to his conscious will and rational intelligence.

For Grove's possessed pioneer the danger is not of becoming savage, as Beret feared, but of becoming dehumanized. That danger is reflected in a pervasive strain of mechanical imagery. Abe initially works his land with horses, breaking with a one-share plough while he paces off the margins of his fields. In the evenings he and his wife, Ruth, weed their first wheat crop by hand. It is while they are thus working side by side in their "garden," in a chapter entitled "The Idyll," that the most imposing of the machines appears on the horizon, a monstrous steam-driven earthmover, working at night by artificial light to draw a ditch forty feet wide and thirty feet deep across the face of the prairie. It is literally a portentous happening. As Abe expands his acreage he comes to depend more upon machines, eventually including a steam tractor, and he recognizes that the mechanical logic of his economic vision forces him into the power of the machines. The literal machinery in Abe's life and the economic system into which he has locked himself are allied with the unnatural rectangular landscape that dominates the setting and with all that is abstract, merely logical, mechanistic, and dehumanizing in the social, legal, and political systems Abe inhabits. In pursuit of his vision Abe becomes a cold and aloof personality, expecting the district and municipal institutions he leads to work like machines, yet he finds that in so doing he

becomes a part of the mechanisms. When the district demands that he use the political power he has built up, he realizes that "there, too, he had started a machinery which he could not stop and which imposed its law upon him" (p. 263).

If in *Giants* the images of evil are savages, beasts, trolls, and monsters, in *Fruits* they are machines. The contrast is expressed graphically in the houses that form the central expression of the pioneers' dreams. Abe, like Torkel Tallaksen in Rölvaag's Spring Creek settlement, disdains sod houses, preferring to live in a frame shack until he can build his seigneurial mansion to dominate the prairie. When that house is finally built, it is uncomfortably grand and inhumanly mechanized—no more satisfactory to his wife than the cramped makeshift in which Abe had obliged her to raise her children. It contains not only electric lights, plumbing, and automatic central heating, but washer, dryer, and dishwasher; even in the barn there are machines to feed, clean, and milk the cattle. While Per Hansa shares his sod hut with the beasts, Abe shares his mansion with machines.

This contrast evident in the imagery is also emphasized by parallels in action and structure. Each novel consists of two parts or books. The first establishes the fictional worlds, traces the pioneers' material success, and develops the crucial problems inherent in their lives before ending in a catastrophe. Book One of *Giants* ends with Beret's mental breakdown coincident with her confinement in childbirth and associated with the naming of the child Peder Victorious, something she considers an act of blasphemous pride. In a world where the influence of the prairie threatens to brutalize the settlers, it is appropriate that the catastrophe involves the most sensitive and civilized of their number losing her rational faculties, the attribute that most definitively sets the human race apart from the beasts. Part One of *Fruits* ends with the death of Abe's favorite son, Charlie, at the zenith of Abe's financial career. Again, it is appropriate that Abe's blind pursuit of his patriarchal vision should lead to the death of the son for whom he thought he was build-

ing his empire. In a setting where the danger to the pioneer is dehumanization, Charlie's death also implies the death of Abe's finer self. As Abe recognizes, "the boy was himself reared; finer, slenderer, more delicate, more exquisitely tempered" (p. 93), and after the child's death he says, "when Charlie died, he took something of me into the grave" (p. 188).

The catastrophe contains the seeds of the eventual resolution reached in the second part of each novel. Beret's derangement, which is never cured but merely takes a new form in her morbid piety, is the effective cause of Per Hansa's death. In a larger sense, of course, the resolution can be seen as part of a necessary movement from a heroic to a Christian age. If, as Hahn suggests, Per Hansa's heroism is a "courageous but foolish Romanticism, devoid of the means which were needed to establish valid cultural and spiritual structures," then, like the giants of the Old Testament, Per Hansa had to give place to a generation that could complete the process of adaptation to the plains.<sup>7</sup> In *Fruits*, Charlie's death shocks Abe Spalding into a reexamination of himself that leads eventually to his restoration as a whole personality. In a later phase of his regeneration he enjoys another triumph equivalent to the crop of 1912, but this time he is not harvesting wheat with steam power but cutting hay with horses. He is back to reaping nature's bounty on her own terms, and at this point is said to resemble "some rustic harvest god." At the same time, he comes to accept the institutions of his community less as mechanisms for the exertion of will and more as articulations of common needs. Abe is gradually restored to his land, his family, his community, and his essential humanity.

In the light of these resolutions it may be possible to make something of another uncanny parallel in structure between the novels. The first book of *Giants* ends with the birth of a son; the first part of *Fruits* ends with the death of a son. Both children are given an air of extraordinary promise and enjoy a special relationship with their fathers. Peder Victorious, as his name implies, is the promise of a

native-born generation who will complete the work of building the new kingdom. Per Hansa and Hans Olsa represent the generation sacrificed to make that possible. *Fruits*, while it has the less traumatic ending, shows the more pessimistic view of pioneering. The hero's patriarchal vision is destructive. While Abe himself can be redeemed from his dehumanization in the end, it is the next generation that must bear the sacrifice.

Given that meaningful contrasts of this sort can be established, it would still be difficult and dangerous to begin generalizing about the fiction of pioneering in the two Wests on the basis of novels as atypical as *Giants* and *Fruits*. Rølvaag's is technically a midwestern farm novel and is treated as such in Roy W. Meyer's major study of the genre, yet it stands apart.<sup>8</sup> Midwestern agrarian fiction, from Garland and Cather to minor pioneer novelists like Walter Muilenburg, Bess Streeter Aldrich, and Rose Wilder Lane, finds its predominant themes in the physical struggle with the environment and in social, political, and economic concerns. The themes may, as in the novels of Feike Feikeme (Frederick Manfred), extend to man's failure to establish the proper bond with the land, but the nature and efficacy of that bond are never in doubt. The spiritual and psychic terrors of the landscape seldom become a major theme, as they are in *Giants*. The novel has also been classified with fictions of the West, interpreted as "an illustration of the peculiar pattern of American cultural development first described by Frederick Jackson Turner,"<sup>9</sup> and Per Hansa as "a typical man of the West."<sup>10</sup> It is increasingly evident that such interpretations overlook too much that is distinctive in the novel. Steve Hahn, in his "Vision and Reality in *Giants in the Earth*," ably describes the Norwegian literary and cultural matrix in which *Giants* was formed. Rølvaag's universal themes owe much to his reading of Ibsen; his characters perceive their situation in terms of Norse legend and Haugean Christianity brought over from the old country.<sup>11</sup>

Within this cultural framework it is nonetheless clear that Per Hansa holds an intense con-

viction of what it means to be in America. While his Norwegian heritage conditions his perceptions, he envisions the western frontier as the special realm in which his dream kingdoms can spread themselves. The tensions between Per and Beret dramatize the interplay between their old-country heritage and the ideas of the American frontier that the novel shares with much western (as distinct from midwestern) fiction. It is this aspect of the novel that is, in Vernon Parrington's words, "deeply and vitally American" and offers itself for comparison with Canadian fiction.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, *Fruits of the Earth* seems unusual among Canadian prairie novels in its attention to the legal, political, and economic structures of the pioneer community. Prairie fiction tends to be private and domestic rather than public and social. The extent and purpose of Grove's attention to the public scene can, however, be deceptive. Grove's minute anatomy of district and municipal politics, even to quotations from the "Public Schools Act," is all very purposefully selected in relation to Abe's character. Of the wider world there is some mention: news of grain markets and the war. But in the twenty-one years chronicled in the novel (1900-1921), the district seems to have been untouched by federal or provincial elections. It takes no interest in the formation of the Manitoba Grain Growers' Association, the Grain Growers' Grain Company, or other aspects of the farmers' cooperative movement. It is never agitated over the appearance of the Nonpartisan League or other manifestations of the Progressive movement in western politics. The limitations strongly suggest that municipal politics is included not to broaden the reference of the novel but to represent the machinery of social institutions in which a man like Abe Spalding must become involved. Grove's ultimate concentration on Abe's spiritual relationship to his environment moves the novel closer to the center of Canadian prairie fiction.

*Giants* and *Fruits*, then, could be said to present the minimal case for comparison: outwardly atypical novels whose deviations from the norms tend to minimize the differences



that define the two groups of fiction. It is therefore especially significant for the literatures of the two Wests that even these novels differ in some nationally distinctive ways. The contrast between Per Hansa's trackless waste and Abe Spalding's rectilinear world is central to these differences. Rölvaag's novel deals with a frontier of the most basic kind, a meeting point between civilized order and unordered wilderness, while Grove's concerns a more sophisticated phase of man's relationship to his environment. This is partly because they chose different stages of pioneering, but the choices themselves are nationally typical. American western fiction, as Henry Nash Smith explains in his *Virgin Land*, has been preoccupied with the frontier, while Canadian fiction has not, and for good reason.<sup>13</sup> Canada did not have a western frontier in the sense that America had, whether "frontier" is taken in the specifically Turnerian sense or as a more general term. The present essay does not afford the space to elaborate upon the differences in western settlement, but it is possible to identify certain gross features of geography and history that lay at the root of them. The Canadian West was not the western extension of a more or less continuous settlement. Separated from settled Canada by several hundred miles of intractable Precambrian shield, it was not the "frontier" or border of anything. Because of its isolation it had to be colonized in a more deliberate way than if it had been contiguous with the settled colonies. Any influx of settlers was preceded by the structures and institutions of society, including traders, missionaries, Indian treaties, railroads, land surveys, and law enforcement.

Equally important to the character of the West was the historical fact that Canada was not a revolutionary, republican democracy but an antirevolutionary, hierarchical dominion in which the power to govern resided not in the people but formally and traditionally in the Queen. This circumstance implied very different relationships between the individual and his social institutions. It was not expected that the settlers would generate order out of local needs and the traditions they had brought with

them. To a far greater extent than in the American West, it was expected that the order and institutions would descend from higher centers of power. To take the simplest example, the citizens of a community would not think of electing their own sheriff; they would wait for the Mounted Police to bring the law to them. Thus, however isolated and rigorous the settler's physical situation, he was inclined to think of himself as still contained within a known order rather than at the generative edge or "frontier" of it.

Some effects of these different origins can be seen in the Wests depicted by Rölvaag and Grove. Per Hansa, moving out beyond the railroad and the reach of institutions such as church, education, and law enforcement, perceives himself to be going back to "the very beginning of things," with all the freedom and dangers attendant upon an escape from civilization. Abe Spalding, settling down within the familiar rectilinear world of the survey grid, assumes that he can transplant his Ontario preconceptions intact without regard to the new environment.

In the development of a literature, the historical tradition is often more important than the historical fact; how the West was seen is as important as how it was, and Canada did not share the American interest in a western frontier.<sup>14</sup> America, at the time of settling the West, was an Atlantic seaboard nation that had shed blood to assert its independence from Europe. A considerable body of popular opinion of the time regarded the creation of an inland empire out of the wilderness as a necessary completion of American independence. Edwin Fussell, in his *American Literature and the American West*, quotes an American publicist of the 1850s as saying:

The American mind will be brought to maturity along the chain of the great lakes, the banks of the Mississippi, the Missouri, and their tributaries in the far northwest. There, on the rolling plains, will be formed a republic of letters which, not governed like that on our seaboard, by the great literary powers of Europe, shall be free, indeed.<sup>15</sup>

In such a climate of opinion, the western frontier inevitably acquired an importance in the American mind that it could never have in Canada. As Richard Slotkin says in his *Regeneration Through Violence*, "In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness."<sup>16</sup>

The Anglophone Canada that dominated the colonization of the Canadian West was, by contrast, an inland nation clinging to its British character while cut off from the Atlantic by the French in Quebec and the rebellious thirteen colonies to the south. It was inclined to be eastward-looking, and so was the West it developed. Canadians had rejected the revolution repeatedly and with force of arms; having accepted instead a set of mature institutions, they had no interest in a frontier upon which to mature their national character. The fact that the two centuries of fur trade that preceded settlement in the Canadian West have inspired little fiction and almost none of any importance suggests how slight an interest the Canadian imagination has taken in the frontier and its attendant questions of primitivism and civilization.

The different values assigned to the West and "westerling" are reflected in Rölvaag's and Grove's uses of space and movement. Per Hansa *travels* west; Abe Spalding merely *arrives*. Throughout *Giants*, characters are traveling, but particularly Per Hansa, searching, going for wood and fish, for supplies, or to trade with the Indians. Space and distance are extremely prominent features of the consciousness of Rölvaag's characters, and the act of conquering space has powerful implications for the spirit. Seen from Per Hansa's point of view it seems to represent the classic American theme of westerling: journeying through space effects spiritual change. Seen from Beret's culturally reactionary European point of view, journeying is abandonment, leaving behind the sacred places, objects, customs, and beliefs of the past.

Westerling is a delusion into which men are lured. Per Hansa dies of journeying, facing west. In *Fruits* Abe is concerned with the geography of his district not as space but as place. In his moment of spiritual awakening in the chapter entitled "The Prairie," Abe is concerned with his failure to understand the place in which he has attempted to realize his visions and with his relationship to it. By bringing his Ontario cultural assumptions with him and ignoring the place to which he has come, Abe has accomplished physical movement without spiritual change—and this is one of his problems. In this respect *Fruits* is typical of Canadian prairie fiction.

Rölvaag's trackless waste and Grove's rectilinear world also stand as metaphors for differing visions of human order, including the nature, function, and authority of such institutions as the law. Consider the isolated but vital incident of the land markers in *Giants*. Per Hansa, in the wild freedom of the West, does something he would never have done in Norway: he destroys the stakes that mark other men's claims to his friends' land. Since he does not know that the claims have no validity, he is violating ancient social custom and present law, taking the law into his own hands in the classic literary tradition of the American frontier. He yields to one of the temptations of freedom. It is impossible to imagine Abe Spalding tampering with a survey stake. Abe is a man of such uncompromising rectitude that when he is discovered violating the Public Schools Act by attempting to vote while his taxes are in arrears, his sensation is that "the world is falling to pieces." The phrase is apt because Abe's world depends upon the kind of order embodied in legislative acts and survey stakes. This is, of course, one of Abe's weaknesses. Not only do the institutions fail to live up to his absolutist demands, but he is in danger of becoming a moral monster.

In *Giants*, the land dispute is finally resolved in a similarly western confrontation. The Irish settlers have no legal claim but hope to prevail by intimidating the Norwegians. The giant Hans Olsa subdues them with a feat of

strength, picking up their leader and hurling him against a wagon. Whatever roots this may have in the heroic action of Norse sagas, the showdown is very much in the mythic spirit of the American West. What Hans Olsa achieves should have been done by government, but as Per Hansa says, "out here this morning, the government is a little too far away" (p. 137). Justice must be extralegal, ad hoc, created by the people out of chaos to meet an immediate need, and enforced by the salutary application of violence. The incident is consistent with the revolutionary ideals embodied in conceptions of the frontier, since the two beliefs most essential to revolution are that the power of law resides in the people and that violence must sometimes be used outside the law to bring about justice.

At the end of *Fruits*, Abe Spalding also confronts the lawless elements of his community where they are drinking and roistering in the schoolhouse. He subdues them not by violence but by the force of his authority in the community, and "his seeming mildness gave his words a compelling power" (p. 266). Abe has, in fact, toyed with the idea of using violence against them after his daughter is seduced, but has rejected the idea: "He might load one of these guns, go down to the man's shack, call him out, and shoot him down like a dog. . . . But what would be gained by it?" (p. 263). Abe's behavior, and his recognition that the institutions that fail to bring lawless persons to justice are not wrong but merely imperfect, are in keeping with the hierarchical, antirevolutionary tenor of the West he inhabits. Scenes of salutary violence have no place in serious fiction of the Canadian West.<sup>17</sup>

Ole Rølvaag and Frederick Philip Grove both seem to attribute the psychic costs of pioneering to the inevitable process of carrying an inherited culture into a strange environment. More particularly, they see tragic effects of man's prideful attempts to impose a preconceived vision upon a landscape with its own awesome power. Yet the two kinds of Wests in which they set their fictions hold the potential for exploring human problems of different

sorts. Rølvaag, working with the American idea of the frontier West, is naturally preoccupied with the emotional, moral, and spiritual problems arising from the encounter between civilized man and savage wilderness. Some contention between primitivism and civilization is inevitable, with the attendant danger that the dark forces of the prairie will turn the settlers into savages. Grove, working with the Canadian idea of a colonial West, is concerned with man's problem of establishing a vital bond with a new natural environment from within the enveloping order of a transplanted culture. The besetting danger in Grove's fictional world is that the settler will fail to maintain spiritual contact with external nature and eventually with his own intuitive nature. He will become not savage but dehumanized. While *Giants in the Earth* and *Fruits of the Earth* exhibit too much rich individuality as novels to be regarded as typical, they contrast most distinctly in some of those aspects that distinguish the literatures of the American and Canadian Wests.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Lincoln Colcord, "Introduction" to *Giants in the Earth*, by O. E. Rølvaag (reprint ed., New York: Harper and Row, Perennial Classics, 1965), p. xi.

2. Steve Hahn, "Vision and Reality in *Giants in the Earth*," *South Dakota Review* 17 (Spring 1979): 85.

3. Frederick Philip Grove is important to Canadian literature as an early realist who published nine volumes of fiction between 1925 and 1946, four of them set on the Canadian prairie and one, *A Search for America* (1927), set in the United States. The man calling himself Fred Grove and claiming to be Swedish appeared in Manitoba in 1912. His personal reticence and his quasi-autobiographical writings maintained the mystery of his past until long after his death. He is now believed to have been the German writer and translator Felix Paul Greve, who disappeared about the time Grove invented himself in Canada. See especially, D. O. Spettigue, *F. P. G.: The European Years* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1973).

4. O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, translated by Lincoln Colcord and O. E. Rølvaag (reprint ed., New York: Harper and Row, Perennial Classics, 1965), p. 4. All further quotations are from this edition.

5. Frederick Philip Grove, *Fruits of the Earth* (reprint ed., Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1965), p. 85. All further quotations are from this edition.

6. Hahn points out that this perception of the landscape is often associated with trolls and that Rølvaag is probably following Ibsen, who "used trolls to portray what Francis Bull has characterized as 'the evil forces of nature . . . embodying and symbolizing those powers of evil, hidden in the soul of man, which may at times suppress his conscious will and dominate his actions.'" Hahn, "Vision and Reality," p. 89.

7. Hahn, "Vision and Reality," p. 98.

8. Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

9. Robert Steensma, "Rølvaag and Turner's Frontier Thesis," *North Dakota Quarterly* 27 (Autumn 1959): 100.

10. Joseph E. Baker, "Western Man Against Nature," *College English* 4 (October 1942): 21.

11. Hahn, "Vision and Reality," passim.

12. Vernon L. Parrington, "Introduction" to *Giants in the Earth* by O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper, 1929), p. xviii. Barbara Meldrum, in "The Agrarian versus Frontiersman in Midwestern Fiction," *Heritage of Kansas* 11 (Summer 1978): 3-18, described Per Hansa as in effect both western and midwestern and unable to reconcile the two tendencies.

13. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950).

14. When speculating about the effects of the historical tradition (as opposed to the historical fact) on the literature, the tradition of

the American West to which I refer is unashamedly Turnerian. This is done with a clear recognition that a large and distinguished body of scholarship has been devoted to demonstrating the limitations of Turner's thesis. Nonetheless, Earl Pomeroy, in his germinal essay, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (March 1955): 596, warns against the temptation to "merely exchange new narrowness for old," and acknowledges that Turner identified certain important tendencies in western history. I have therefore chosen to draw upon the admittedly overstated Turnerian tradition because Turner described those aspects of the American West that distinguish it from the Canadian and because his was the tradition that was current when Rølvaag wrote *Giants* and has generally dominated the fiction of the American West as described by Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, James K. Folsom, *The American Western Novel* (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1966), and John R. Milton, *The Novel of the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

15. Edwin Fussell, *American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 11.

16. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 4.

17. Minor and qualified exceptions can be found in W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* and *The Vanishing Point*, and in Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese*.

18. For the most recent substantial discussions of "those aspects that distinguish the literatures of the American and Canadian Wests," see John R. Milton, *The Novel of the American West*, and Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977).