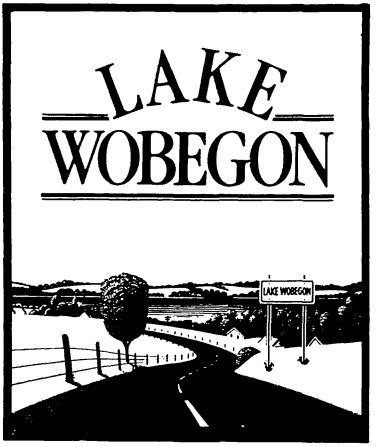

keillor and rölvaag and the art of telling the truth

bruce michelson

> Church is a comfort, all right, but your water and your sewer, those are necessities. And roads. People can skip church, but they do not skip water or sewer. When it really comes down to it, it comes down to plumbing. And plowing in the winter. But you got a bunch of windbags on the town council who don't know pipe from a hole in the ground, want to spend money on a library but think water and sewer is some some sort of natural fact, like a river, what can you do? . . . And you hope when the thing falls apart the members of the town council are sitting on their toilets reading books from the library. Man in the can reading *Giants in the Earth.* Goes to flush, no water. Goes and gets water, pours it in, but the pipe is clogged, and his mess runs out all over the floor. Right then he finds out something. Then he wakes up finally.[1]

This is the wisdom of Bud, the one-man Department of Public Works in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, the town that Garrison Keillor has won a place for on America's imaginative map. Bud does not have much use for stories or the imagination; he likes measurable, weighable, diggable physical fact, and storytelling—which of course grants him all the existence he has—is by his reckoning a habit of windbags and dreamers who do not pay sufficient heed to unadorned truth. Such a jab, by a fictional character, at the preposterousness of fiction, does not constitute reflexive irony in the Barth-Borges league, a heady lesson about the paradoxes of

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the realistic novel. Yet this moment showcases a problem which faces self-conscious storytellers who write in the American realist tradition, who, in the face of so much theoretical ferment, seek to represent in fiction ordinary life, as it is or as it once was. The thoughtful contemporary realist, comic or not, must contend with the ungainliness of reality as one sees it, and with widespread doubts about the place and validity of mimetic storytelling. And sometimes the challenge involves other stories as well, portentous myths that must be addressed, conversed with, and moved out of the way.

"Realism"—not the overdefined nineteenth century literary movement, but rather the persisting, unideological motive—has never fallen into disgrace among talented writers who hide beyond the patrols of suspicious academics; and even the best of the American reading public has not been browbeaten out of its faith and pleasure in such narratives, or out of a hope that in the act of reading them, present and past might rearrange themselves in some valid way. But amazing things happen when a sophisticated realist writes, as Keillor does, with an awareness of the paradoxes of the mode, and of the intellectual and aesthetic crosscurrents blowing through his own world. What comes from that complex state of mind is an enriched and expanded realism, a fiction which affirms, celebrates and satirizes itself all at the same time, and comes to terms with our own imaginative and literary ancestry.

In *Lake Wobegon Days* Keillor engages with problems peculiar to writing both as a Norwegian American from the upper Midwest, and as a humorist, social historian and critic in a tradition which began in this country with Mark Twain. For humor can be a tricky but time-proven way of conveying something like truth, of representing a world as it is and was; such humor depends, of course, on giving voice to heretofore-unspoken recognitions, those experiences one intuitively accepts as reality, regardless of what epistemology one acquiesces to in windowless seminars. Such a writer and social observer deals in the sort of "truth" that flies home under the theory-radar, slipping past the defenses laid out by ideologues and professorial skeptics. I am referring to "mythology," in both the strict and the loose sense of the word: the *mythos* of continuity and consequentiality which allows one to go about one's daily business and believe it worthwhile, and the body of lore which gives a people a collective sense of who they are. In the quarter century since Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*[2], no one has come up with a better definition than his of the latter sort of myth; and it will be recalled that he concerned himself less with how mythology is made than with how it is accepted. The intervening years have proven Smith right, for it is clear now that the lore and the self-conception of a people can be transformed by books, comic strips, films, popular music, television programs and advertising

campaigns, at least as readily as they can by tales told by common folk around the campfire.

While ordinary comic writers may tinker ineffectually with mythologies of the first sort, the truer American humorist can find the way into this other realm. For in telling stories which resonate in this larger way, stories which try to work with the myth-history of a culture, some of those myths may have to be refreshed, transformed, even overthrown, not only for the sake of the comedy but also for the community as well. Some public-works projects on the collective mythology can be safer than others: in domesticating King Arthur into a Victorian statesman, and rebuilding bloodthirsty Lancelot into a French lieutenant in love, Tennyson had Malory to contend with, but not much else—and Malory was already far enough removed from the newer British way of thinking that updating these old knights would cause no shock. Keillor's task with the Norwegian-American experience is in some ways more difficult. Keillor has to work not only with myth and folk history and old tales, but with the established "facts of the case," a history which survives both in official archives and in the still-green memories of the families he writes to and about. Above all, Keillor has to reckon with one powerful, modern and convincing imaginative interpretation of his own past. He has to respond, somehow, to Ole Rölvaag.

Insofar as there is a saga of the Norwegian settlement of the American Midwest, that saga is Rölvaag's testament. Even Bud knows that: the one book he thinks of when he thinks about the town library is *Giants in the Earth*, the first, best and best-known novel in Rölvaag's trilogy on the struggles of the Hansa family in making a life on the northern plains. When Lake Wobegoners sit down, in the bathroom or anywhere else, to enter imaginatively into the lives and minds of their forebears in this town, Rölvaag is the writer they take to hand, for no one looms larger in transforming the Scandinavian-American past into something alive, and darkly consequential, for the children and grandchildren of Per and Beret Hansa, and the others who broke the sod and brought a European culture to the region.

But for the imagination, Rölvaag is also something of a problem. The best recent study of his work, Harold Simonson's *Prairies Within*[3], makes a strong case for Beret Hansa, a woman who in *Giants* represents the deepest existential despair, as the center of consciousness in the three novels. Whether or not one accepts Simonson's reading of her as *angst* incarnate, a deracinated soul who ultimately sustains her own and her family's life on sheer pragmatism, on faith, on the very rock of her own psychological breakdown, one cannot mistake the atmosphere of Rölvaag's tale. His portrait of his ancestors is a study in grey and black. Simple and taciturn by nature, Per and Beret Hansa rarely speak their hearts to one

Rolvaag in the backyard of his Northfield, Minnesota home, 1928. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

another; and in *Giants in the Earth* the menace of the land they have come to tame is unequivocally described:

> An endless plain. From Kansas—Illinois, it stretched, far into the Canadian north, God alone knows how far; from the Mississippi River to the western Rockies, miles without number. . . . Endless . . . beginningless.
>
> A grey waste . . . and empty silence . . . a boundless cold. Snow fell; snow flew; a universe of nothing but dead whiteness. Blizzards from out of the northwest raged, swooped down and stirred up a greyish-white fury, inpenetrable to human eyes. As soon as these monsters tired, storms from the northeast were sure to come, bringing more snow . . . "The lord have mercy! This is awful!" said the folk, for lack of anything else to say.[4]

It is all here: the unrelieved landscape, the endless winters, the Nordic silences, the Calvinist pain, the avalanche of details about what it was to get a house up, a harvest planted, a life established to pass on, ultimately, to those ungrateful, forgetful, soft-handed folk who idle in the climate-controlled shopping malls that now dot this countryside. Rölvaag is the proprietor of this mythology; this is the narrative which gives form to the history of Minnesota and Dakota Scandinavians. Yet time and change have been at work upon this chronicle, in the half century since it first appeared—much as time has been altering the portrait of Magnus Oleson, one of Lake Wobegon's tough, laconic, Rölvaagian progenitors as his well-intentioned offspring, trying to honor his memory, have carried it off to bolster lives which seem light-years distant from his own:

> A fine portrait of the old man taken when he was sixty-eight and strong as a horse, his white beard like a buttress and his eyes still clear and sharp despite this print having been photographed from a photograph of a photograph—this portrait hangs in a vast white living room in La Jolla, in a mobile home outside of Abilene, in a stone house in the province of Michoacán, Mexico, in a dreadful driftwood frame above a purple plush couch in a Chicago condo, and God only knows where else aside from Lake Wobegon, of course, where you see it almost everywhere you look. Anyone who looks hard at him gets a good hard look back telling you to buck up, be strong, believe in God, and be about your business.[5]

The story of the pioneer past, the story which Rölvaag set down with relentless precision, nonetheless changes with passing years and outlandish new contexts: even the stongest, most doggedly naturalistic novel must become a photograph of a photograph of a photograph, growing fuzzier and more curious as it moves through space and time, and as newer generations, on their plush couches, try to give it a hard look, imagine their way back to the way things and people were. The truth can be lost, the myth can cease to matter, if allowed to grow too strange.

What is at stake, therefore, in Keillor's playful yet prudent conversation with Rölvaag in the opening chapters of *Lake Wobegon Days*, is a legitimate revitalization of Rölvaag's people, Rölvaag's story, so that they can hold a place in the consciousness of newer generations. Without trivializing or caricaturing the ordeal that brought Norwegian America into being, without burying and forgetting the heroics and the pain, one nonetheless has to make that history imaginatively enterable for the contemporary self. This need not mean "bland," nor "palatable," but acceptable, rather, in the basic sense of the term: within the imaginative grasp of Per

and Beret Hansa's great-grandchildren. Even for the humorist, the retouching and reframing of Rölvaag's black-and-white photograph of pioneer history has to be a meticulous, affectionate rehumanizing of voiceless truth.

In reading Keillor's most forthright adaptation of the Rölvaag saga, the "New Albion" and "Forebears" chapters of *Lake Wobegon Days*, one is struck by the emphasis that Keillor places on the grimmer circumstances of pioneer life in the town. Indeed, as far as frontier catastrophes go, Keillor's chronicle of the early settlements puts Rölvaag's to shame. Running his hamlet through a diptheria epidemic in October, 1865, wiping out thirty-seven children, eleven women and four men in this small place, Keillor delivers a body-count unlike anything in *Giants in the Earth.* Not out to make the Rölvaag myth still darker, Keillor wreaks this havoc in order to balance a lightening that has to take place in the *way* his story is told. What really matters is not the higher death-toll—one knows hardly any of the victims by name—but rather the altered pace, the different proportions and tone of this new version. These disasters do not numb and cauterize the mind, in part because they are allowed only a page or so in the narrative, and because the people who survive, the people whom we do come to know, are a different folk than Rölvaag will allow into the foreground of his own tale.

We must recall that Rölvaag wrote his story of the Hansa family according to a codified and widely-acclaimed doctrine of fiction. His mission as a writer was to catch and preserve the truth of the frontier experience, but not to engage in some pure and naive mimesis; in structure and characterization *Giants in the Earth* is close to textbook naturalism, the mode perfected a generation before Rölvaag by writers like Hardy and Zola, and practiced in America by Frank Norris, Hamlin Garland, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Kate Chopin and Stephen Crane. Effective as it is for capturing the gloom of life in a sod house through a Dakota winter, perfect as it might be for presenting inarticulate tragedy and the misery born of an inability to speak from the heart or to see one's own situation clearly, this is still narrative with a particular shape, at times almost stylized in its motions, so that anyone who has read for a while in the determinist fiction of the British, French, or American nations will understand intuitively what world one is entering as one begins to read Rölvaag.

What seems most stylized now, in *Giants in the Earth*, are the monochromatic moods of the Hansa family: the infrequent childlike joy, the long spells of melancholy. The issue is not whether this is the way that pioneer Norwegians, including Rölvaag's own people, actually *were*; the problem is that the real agony of *Giants in the Earth* lies within these personalities, and that accurately-drawn or not, they are not *our* people. Even the most tormented modern Calvinist cannot sit all winter in a sod

house and raise his sorrow to such breadth and height as to fill the whole cold, empty plain; he or she has to get into the car, drive down Main Street or Hennepin Avenue and be civil, if not hypocritically cheerful, to shop-boys, secretaries, polltakers, divisional managers, immigrants from Viet Nam or South Carolina and all sorts of people who have also learned to leaven their own angst with the patter of modern busy-ness. The northern wilderness is no longer empty; and its new denizens, when they get the winter blues, can escape to Florida on cheap excursions. It is not surprising then that Per Hansa himself is presented in *Lake Wobegon Days* as the ancestor who can be honored but not quite understood. Keillor puts him right on Main Street, as a bulky, permanent, familiar, troubling presence. He is the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian:

> Sculpted by a man named O'Connell or O'Connor in 1896, the granite youth stands in a small plot at a jog in the road where a surveyor knocked off for lunch years ago and looks down Main Street to the lake. A proud figure, his back is erect, his feet are on the ground on account of no money remained for a pedestal, and his eyes—well, his eyes are a matter of question. Probably the artist meant him to exude confidence in the New World, but his eyes are set a little deep so that dark shadows appear in the late afternoon and by sunset he looks worried. His confident smile turns into a forced grin. In the morning, he is stepping forward, his right hand extended in greeting, but as the day wears on, he hesitates, and finally he appears to be about to turn back. The right hand seems to say, Wait here. I think I forgot something.[6]

This inscrutability is not just a matter of awkward sun angles and a bad job by a naturalist sculptor. The problem comes up whenever the living look into the set, memorialized face of ancestors they have not known, wonder what humanity lay behind that mask, and how time and change have altered consciousness itself. At the beginning of the opening chapter of *Giants*, "Toward the Sunset," Per Hansa passes a day like the statue: in the morning he is stepping out confidently in front of the family wagon, heading straight west; by the end of the chapter, as the sun moves low, he is confused, unhappy, having no idea at all where he is going. The rest of his responses to life are comparably, unenterably simple: he feels joy and satisfaction, grief and fear. There are occasional rages and much shaking of the head when Beret, whose nervous breakdown dominates the center of the novel, ventures out to imaginative and psychological grounds which are beyond his comprehension. Hansa's most harrow-

ing moment in the novel is one of near-absolute muteness—he cannot tell others the nature of his pain, and he cannot tell himself. About to give birth after weeks of near madness in the middle of winter, Beret has decided that she and the child will die this night, and as she raves and pleads about her burial, Hansa can stand no more. For once in his life he considers suicide. But there is none of Hamlet in Per Hansa, no self-scrutiny, deep reflection, or special intensity in his mind:

> His breath seemed to leave him in a great sob. The whole prairie began to whirl around with him; he staggered forward a few steps and threw himself face downward on the snow.
>
> . . . But then suddenly things didn't seem so bad to him . . . really not so bad . . . he saw a rope . . . a rope. . . . It was a good strong rope that would hold anything. . . . It hung just inside the barn door—and the cross-beam ran just *there*! happy at the thought; that piece of rope was good and strong—and the crossbeam ran just *there!* [7]

While one must grant Rölvaag the perfect naturalistic simplicity of this consciousness, one may not be able to enter it, or even believe in it, from a late-century perspective. To read any sense at all in the bronze face of the past, the present must breathe into it something of life as the present knows it. Rölvaag's naturalistic men and women, in other words, must be refined into characters with some imaginable breadth of emotional range, some measure of subtlety in their great silences, some way of communicating to one another which, while true to Scandanavian taciturnity, is nonetheless richer, where Rölvaag commonly presents an almost-unendurable failure to express. Keillor's manipulations of history buy him the room he needs for such re-imagining.

It matters that the Norwegian settlement of Lake Wobegon is a *retreat.* Unsuccessfully established by transplanted New England Emersonians, the town of New Albion is overwhelmed and saved from extinction by Norwegians fleeing eastward from a season out in Rölvaag's empty Dakota plains, where they have tried a season of Per Hansa's life, found it miserable, and have come back—as we ourselves come back from *Giants* to realities that are more liveable. *Lake Wobegon Days* follows this pattern consistently: a comic, cautious, measured withdrawal from naturalistic absolutes. To loosen the grip of determinism on the mythology of Scandinavian pioneer history, Keillor works gently: showing no wish to set his ancestors in hideous driftwood frames of his own making, he works to refresh those old photographs without ruining them—without

"colorizing" them into grotesque hybrids of past and present, South Californians in overalls and plaids.

To that end, Keillor offers situations drawn straight from the determinist canon, sometimes straight from Rölvaag himself, and makes those incremental changes which define the difference between the old myth and his new one. For example, the account of how a man named Gunder Muus, the first of the Norwegian Bachelor Farmers of Lake Wobegon, happened to come to town for good, opens like something out of the notebooks of a hard-line determinist storyteller from the end of the last century, one of those writers who broke the trail for Ole Rölvaag. For that matter, it is a standard motif in *Giants in the Earth*, for characters to be wandering around in the wilderness, in peril of their lives, trying to find a way home. Here is Keillor's variation on that old naturalistic theme:

> He walked through the pouring rain, carrying his rucksack under his thin coat, singing hymns to give himself strength, and felt weak when he reached the settlement of New Munich two days later, and collapsed on the street, feverish and out of his mind, and was treated there for consumption by a Mrs. Hoppe who decided the poor man was dying and put him on a wagon for Lake Wobegon, where, at least, he could expire among his countrymen. The wagoneer, approaching the town, saw no life in his passenger, lying under the canvas, and dumped him in a ditch, knowing what a lot of trouble a person has when he drives into town with a dead man. . . .[8]

That much, of course, could work as a conventionally-harsh ending for an equally-conventional fable about human shallowness and the precariousness of life out in the borderlands. But Gunder's story continues: he wakes up in the ditch yet he is not rescued, not given succor by gentle folk from this new village. The Rölvaagian model of the world is, in other words, not cast away for Gunder's sake; it comes through at least 90 percent intact. Gunder must get up and walk away from his own disaster, and his welcome into the brotherhood of Lake Wobegon is balanced between finding his own Good Samaritan, and the mere continuation, after a brush with death, of dull business as usual:

> He crawled out of the ditch and saw he was thirty feet from the shore of a fine lake. On the water, a man sat motionless on a log raft, holding one end of a line. Muus felt as weak as a baby and his throat was parched, so he was surprised at the strength of his voice as it hollered out of him, "How are they biting?"

"Pretty good," the man yelled back.
"Is there room for two?"
"Are you a fisherman?-
"Yes."
"Then there is room." And he poled the raft to shore, helped the formerly dying man onto the craft, and the two of them spent several hours pulling a good string of crappies out of the still water among the weeds and water lilies.[9]

This vignette steers carefully between determinist cliches on one hand and sentimentality on the other. In Keillor's version of small-town history, something is allowed to come *after* the Rölvaagian ordeal—as a way of explaining to the present how life has managed to continue, how life became, after all, finally tolerable to at least some of our forebears, and that while the joys of living do not overmatch the pain (as would be true in some outright refusal of the Rölvaag mythology), the daily activities of life *between* catastrophes do count for something. Indeed they count for more than they seem to in the cadences of Rölvaag's narratives.

Something just as important has happened to the nature of these "forebears" themselves, to the personalities attributed to them. They are not masquerading in their straw hats; they are not, as a group, measurably wittier or cheerier than Rölvaag's settlers. Nor are they, at least in a strictly-verbal sense, more articulate. Silence between husband and wife or mother and child, is of course a favored way of compounding grief in determinist fiction. For were beleagured characters able to name their misfortunes and describe the shape of life as they must live it, they might be able to achieve some imaginative control of it, might even begin to live it some other way—and that, of course could work havoc on a deterministic narrative. Keillor does no such violence to Rölvaag's model of history; he does not transform Rölvaag's settlers into poets. The silence they keep is obviously a source of much of the humor and the pathos of the stories Keillor tells. He does however, give them small ways of speaking poignantly. Gunder Muus and Magnus Olesen, who happens to be the man who poles ashore to take Gunder fishing, say nothing to each other for the rest of that day, yet the mere offer of the chance to fish has been enough, has been a welcome back to community and to life. Through these same oblique pathways, a Norwegian man can communicate, can express affection—a *wish* to love if not love itself—to his German mail-order bride, better than Per Hansa and his own wife do anywhere in the whole run of *Giants in the Earth.* Magnus Oleson has been corresponding with a prospective wife in St. Paul. Her brother has been writing her letters for her; she speaks no Norwegian herself—and when she comes up by train to St. Cloud she is expecting trouble:

> She tried to look pleasant for his benefit, but she was terrified because back in Germany the punishment for deceiving a suitor was pretty stiff, and she couldn't tell him, of course, that it had been her brother's doing. She must've felt like a convicted criminal. He felt sorry for her but he also felt that it was God's will that she came and it was up to him to take the next step, so what he did was get up from the table, clear it, and over her protest he washed the dishes. She'd never seen a married man do that. It was his way of telling her how much he cared about her, being unable to say it. And then presumably they went up to bed.[10]

Keillor is both skillful and circumspect in retouching Rölvaag's personality-types, enriching their speech, expanding the meaning of their silence, and rewriting familiar scenes from the repertoire of rural naturalism—the overall effect of his retold saga being not a "lighter" but a reilluminated *Giants in the Earth.* And in watching this process of amendment, one can see an essential Keillor-idea at work, sustaining the humor and making it a good deal more than that. Like so many American novelists, Keillor is an anarchist when it comes to ideas: his work shows a suspicion of any campaign to lock up human character or cultural history or storytelling itself with any ism, any systematic, closed-ended interpretation. Much of the fun of reading Keillor lies in seeing people who are ostensibly stereotypes—and often taken as such even by their neighbors—reveal powers and complexities which resist any easy explaining; but the book's resistance to ideological thought and art goes beyond that. It seems created on the premise that the best thing about form, whether cultural, religious, ideological, artistic or otherwise, is the resistance it generates against itself; that the joy of structure and the received idea is that it usually doesn't "take," doesn't inform or explain the world to anybody's satisfaction. And in the narrower realm of myth and culture, the place and the present time will be served, will have their own way with cultural baggage shipped in or passed down.

In *Lake Wobegon Days* this kind of affirmation underlies an opening chapter which seems to cause puzzlement among readers, the chapter on the founding which wasn't, the "New Albion," town and college, which came first and failed, leaving little more than some cleared land and some official stationery for the Norwegian and German second wave which got the place going in ernest, as an extension of themselves and their own ways, not of Transcendental Boston. There is nothing like this of course in Rölvaag, who sends the Hansa family out into vast empty fields marked only by those invisible boundary stakes which Per Hansa ultimately destroys. But the myth of contemporary Minnesota is none the worse for

including a tale of getting the old myths out of the way. Keillor's tale of the origins, about well-meaning New Englanders trying to recreate Concord in the northern prairies, is gratuitous, if the idea is to explain the place and the people of this town now. But with its record of disasters and abandoned high hopes, the chapter is a declaration of independence for the Midwest, and for every region and people who have been exhorted to take their culture, their identity and their heritage from the chromos of The First Thanksgiving, the first thousand pages of the *Norton Anthology*, American Civilization 101, the Rölvaag shelf in the town library or any other official source. Lake Wobegon is not to be the "Parnassus of the Prairie" or the "Boston of the West"; Dr. Henry Watt can make his passionate, two-hour Emersonian addresses, but no one will really listen. And the real history of the town begins only after some un-Emersonian wild bears have had their way with the little college, and its disappointed founders have returned to the real New England they had tried to bring with them. When the cultural pontiffs go home, when the keepers of the Official Story fall silent, only then can the real cultural life begin. When the past, the finished idea, the completed myth, is proffered in any spirit as a ready-made package for the present, the present must find some way to affirm its right to rewrite all of that into something that is for itself alive and true.

It doesn't seem a grand surprise, therefore, that the ending of *Lake Wobegon Days* has to do with a man lost in a blizzard, a reprise, and in some ways a variation on the last pages of *Giants in the Earth.* Faithful to the mood of his novel, Rölvaag kills off Per Hansa by having Beret send him out into blinding, terrible weather to seek a minister for his dying neighbor Hans Olsa. In a turmoil of rage and familial duty he puts on his skis and goes out on this absurd, heroic errand; and his frozen body is not found until May, his eyes "set towards the west" in a perfect expression of that inarticulate, bottom-of-the-soul stubbornness that has kept his family alive and in such a place as this. Keillor's parody of this Norse immolation scene involves a man going out into a Minnesota blizzard, not on skis but in a Buick, "even though he can barely see across the yard to the barn and his wife and child are pleading with him to please not go to town." The ostensible mission is absurd—to fetch a carton of cigarettes from the Sidetrack Tap, four miles away—yet by this point in the book one has learned to read the unspoken motives of proud Lake Wobegoners: the idea is to "do it," to "get through" in spite of what the womenfolk say: a paltry, climate-controlled replay of frontier rugged-individualism, a ridiculous proof to the self, if to nobody else, that a little of great grandfather Per Hansa lingers on in the thinner blood of his posterity. But the ride home is no joke:

> It's quiet in town, but a mile south of there, the wind comes up and suddenly he can't see anything. He is damp with sweat. He can't see the ditches, can't see the hood ornament. He drives slower, staring ahead for the slightest clues of road, until there is none—no sky, no horizon, only dazzling white—so he opens his door and leans out and looks for tire tracks: hanging from the steering wheel, leaning way down, his face a couple feet from the ground, hoping that nobody is driving toward him and doing likewise. Then as the car slips off the road, he realizes that the track he is following is the track of his own left front tire heading into the deep ditch.[11]

Keillor's farmer-adventurer discovers, on crawling out of the window of his car, that he is only about a quarter of a mile from his home; as he sets out on foot, he grows philosophical, and the book, like Rölvaag's, ends with a man in a blizzard thinking about his family:

> But what a lucky man. Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known. He takes deep breaths and the cold air goes to his brain and makes him more sensible. He starts out on the short walk to the house where people love him and will be happy to see his face.[12]

All's well that ends . . . but it is not hard to see what this, too, is echoing: Per Hansa's last domestic thoughts before he freezes to death:

> The swirling dusk grew deeper. . . . Darkness gathered fast. . . . More snow began to fall. . . . Whirls of it came off the tops of the drifts, circled about, and struck him full in the face. . . . No danger—the wind held steady: . . . At home all was well . . . and now mother was saying her evening prayers with Permand. . . . Move on!—Move on![13]

Keillor does not narrate his snowbound man all the way to the house, and those who have wintered in the northern tier of American states know how possible it is for a grown man to freeze a quarter of a mile from his own front door. The News from Lake Wobegon is ambiguous about his fate, just as the whole book seems reluctant to say anything for sure about inherited mythologies and their shifting relationship to the present. Pres-

ent and past have to converse. Neither side can dictate terms to the other. The mythology cannot keep dominion over the mind of the changing culture; the culture cannot violently remake the myth without endangering its own identity. Every narrative, whether humorous or deadpan, is a suspicious enterprise; we are always ordering history according to our own sense of what order is, always infusing it with our own blood, populating it with people within the reach of our own experience, even as we try to keep faith with what we have of their own words, and to respect the powerful renditions of their personalities by writers who knew them first-hand. We have no choice: without this effort, the old portrait, the old letters, even the old novels, have no life, no more meaning than, say, the old underwear and attic junk that Birgit Tollefson, on an historical jag, wants to collect into the Mist County archives. Keillor is easier to read than mythmakers like Faulkner, yet what Keillor is attempting, as a social observer and historian of common human experience, seems no less important. He is engaged in an old, paradoxical art which no ideology has ever stamped out or explained away, the expression of cultural truth through the telling of tales, and the transformation of American mythology as the surest way of keeping it alive.

notes

1. Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York, 1986), 261. From *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor. Copyright © Garrison Keillor, 1985. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books, USA, Inc. All subsequent citations in this article are from this edition.
2. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950). Smith defines myths as "larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (vi). In the same place, Smith notes that the myths he deals with have "the further characteristic" of being "collective representations rather than the work of a single mind," but he does not concern himself with how or by whom myths might be generated, so long as they ultimately become collectively endorsed.
3. Harold P. Simonson, *Prairies Within: The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rölvaag* (Seattle, 1987). "What makes Rölvaag's Beret such a dynamic character is an integrating harmony of religious faith and pragmatic realism that places her squarely in the present world of time and history and under the ever-present shadow of mortality. Her strength is tempered, hammered, made firm by an inheritance that spiritual angst, psychological breakdown, and cultural disorientation cannot annul" (7-8).
4. Ole Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York, 1928), 249. Subsequent citations refer to this edition. In all instances the ellipsis is Rölvaag's.
5. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 96.
6. *Ibid.*, 114.
7. Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 238.
8. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 94.
9. *Ibid.*, 94-95.
10. *Ibid.*, 90-91.
11. *Ibid.*, 420.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Rölvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 464.