# O.E. Rölvaag Peder Victorious

Introduction by Gudrun Hovde Gvåle

## Peder Victorious

A Tale of the Pioneers
Twenty Years Later

by

## O. E. Rölvaag

Translated from the Norwegian by Nora O. Solum & the Author

With an Introduction by Gudrun Hovde Gvåle

Translated from the Norwegian & adapted by Einar Haugen



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### Introduction\*

Rölvaag's pioneer novel Giants in the Earth had no sooner made its successful appearance in Norway in 1925 than the author began to think of a sequel. It was going to require three full years, however, before he could complete the work that he himself as well as his readers awaited with impatience. They were eager to know how the spirit of Per Hansa was going to live on in Peder Victorious, the boy who was born with a victory cowl on the pioneers' first Christmas eve in Spring Creek. Even while he was at work on his great epic of pioneering, Rölvaag realized that he would have to write more books about the immigrants if he were to give a true and rounded picture of their lives. His letters from the year of publication show that he had no time for literary activity.

His leave of absence from St. Olaf College in 1923-24 had been no vacation, even though it had been an enriching, creative, and broadening experience. At the end of it he returned to head once more the Department of Norwegian, and he plunged into college life again in spite of his weariness. His classes were larger than ever, and he never spared himself in relation to his students. In 1925 he took an active part in preparing the great celebration of the Norse-American Centennial in Minneapolis, which resulted in his being made secretary of the newly founded Norwegian-American Historical Association. His literary

<sup>\*</sup> From Gudrun Hovde Gvåle's Ole Edvart Rølvaag: Nordmann og Amerikanar (Oslo, 1962), pp. 372-385. Translated from the Norwegian and adapted for this edition by Einar Haugen.

work was limited to a few articles and to the preparation of the American version of Giants. He was also profoundly depressed over the indifference to his work on the part of his own countrymen in America: "Talk of crying in the wilderness!" he wrote to an old schoolmate in the winter of 1925.

Nevertheless, the theme of his next book had begun to take shape in his mind. He wrote to a friend in December of 1925: "I simply have to write another volume, one that will deal primarily with the second generation, to show those people over in Norway how inevitable it is that we have become Americans. But even this I don't have the time for. Art takes its whole man!" This focus on the problems of Americanization was an old one with Rölvaag, but his renewed residence in Norway had brought home to him the need for clarifying it for his countrymen there. In speeches and articles he pictured the emigrant's disillusionment at returning home and finding that he is a stranger to his own kin and that even highly educated people in the homeland imagine that Norwegians in America can remain "Norwegian" forever. In an interview with the Norwegian poet Nils Collett Vogt, who was a visitor to the Norse-American Centennial, Rölvaag had defended his students for writing their essays on Ibsen in English: "The young people are Americans. Don't forget that! They are going to live and work here. The crucial thing for us teachers is to give them an impression of Norwegian culture and to keep the contact alive as well as possible. We can't manage any more."

A major theme of the new book about the second generation would therefore be to show how the young people who grew up in America were shaped by their environment into real Americans, in spite of their Norwegian parents and their Norwegian heritage. A portrayal of the conflict between the generations would give him an opportunity to uncover ever-deeper layers of the tragedy of emigration, the basic motif to which Rölvaag's writing again and again returns.

Unhappily Rölvaag could not draw on his own experiences to the same extent that he could in his pioneer novel. To be sure, he had had intimate contact with the second generation ever since his immigration, above all in his teaching and also through his own children who were just

growing into the ranks of American youth. But it is clear that he did not feel himself on nearly as safe ground in dealing with Peder as with Beret and the others, where his own intimate self-exhumation could provide the psychological groundwork. Just as he had turned to his fatherin-law as a "priceless source" of information about pioneer days, so he now looked to his intelligent younger friends for light on their problems. To Ruth Lima he wrote in November of 1925: "You are a child of the second generation. I want you to give me the second-generation psychology. How did you feel at the very threshold of your conscious life, as far back as you remember? How much were you Norwegian, and how much were you American? And when were you the one, when the other . . . ? Can you relate some little incidents from your early youth that tend to show how you felt at that time?"

The work did not proceed very expeditiously, however. Not only was he hampered by his many duties, but the heart disease that had long threatened him took a turn for the worse and kept him from working most of the summer of 1926. His health was shattered, but still he never gave up. Most of *Peder Victorious* was written in his cabin at Big Island Lake in the summer of 1927. The publication was further delayed by his wish to have both the English and the Norwegian version published simultaneously. The manuscript was sent to Aschehoug in Oslo in the summer of 1928 and published that fall, while the English translation by Nora Solum was published by Harper & Brothers in New York on the 1st of January the following year.

The background of the action in *Peder Victorious* is the development of the American Midwest, which was then considered the Northwest, and above all the transformation of the Dakota Territory into the states of North and South Dakota in 1889. There are still echoes in this book of the westward movement, stretching all the way to the Pacific coast. Even in Spring Creek some of the settlers, young and old, are carried along by the stream of westward migration. Ole Holm, the oldest son of Beret and Per Hansa, goes out to Montana to find himself a farm, and his sister Anne Marie follows him. In South Dakota, society has begun to take shape, with institutions like school and government being firmly established. The Norwegians

at Spring Creek also keep up with the times; as in other Norwegian communities, their churches are racked and split by doctrinal controversy. Spring Creek is a "mixed" settlement with a strong Irish-Catholic component, and the Norwegian language is therefore under strong pressures

by the second generation.

In spite of the firm historical contours that are drawn up as a background for this story, there is not the same sweep, nor do we hear the same resounding echoes of man's greatest migration, that gave his pioneer story its glitter and grandeur. We do not see man silhouetted against the western skies in a gigantic battle with the trollish powers of nature. We are not witnesses to the drama of creation, only to the slow, unexciting process of the "mill of the gods" grinding out the materials for the building up of a new culture. The author conducts us down into the mazes of a youthful soul and holds us there a good deal of the time, in order to show us how "the roots grow down into the soil."

In this book that bears his name, Peder Victorious grows out of childhood into youth. "The theme of *Peder* is revolt," the author wrote to Lincoln Colcord, the translator of *Giants*. It was necessary, he felt, for the second generation to rebel against its elders if it were to win a foothold in American society. Peder's rebellion is made

clear to us from the very first page.

In his school years, writes the author, Peder lives in three "rooms." In one of these rooms he is wholly by himself; he dreams about the future and all that he will take hold of when he is a grown man. Here everything is in English, and he is always happy. In the second room everything is in Norwegian, and there Peder is less content. He is accompanied by his mother and the family, but they understand little of all the adventures that could be waiting for all of them. They do their work routinely, and they take no interest in politics, which is Peder's passion. He is the youngest and the most American in the whole family. Least of all does he understand his mother, who neither can nor will talk English, the "easiest thing in the world!" And yet she could be so incredibly good and wise!

In the third room, too, everything is in Norwegian to begin with, for there his mother has been with him from the start. Later he is alone with God there in the dark, quiet room. In the first happy years when his father was still alive, Peder had always seen the Lord as a nice old grandpa. But when his father was lost in the snowstorm and was found dead on the western prairie, in spite of Peder's unwavering faith and his and his mother's fervent prayers, Peder's image of God changed completely. "God suddenly became a harsh, heartless creature one had to watch out for." After that time he felt rather a defiance when he entered the third room, and in the next years he is much affected by religious doubt. He finds it difficult to understand the goodness of a God who is also a vengeful God. Peder's intellect questions many of the Lutheran dogmas he meets in church and religious school.

His doubts about the church are strengthened through his frightening experience with the zealous pietism that drives the innocent little girl Oline Tuftan out of her mind and makes her hang herself. The quarreling and the gossip that accompanied the split in the congregation are also factors in young Peder's waning confidence in the church. He reaches the conclusion that this God who seems to hate life must be Norwegian. Even though his mother knows that she should try to see the good side of people, not just their sins, she is too afraid to let in the sunlight, too afraid of life for Peder to come to terms with her kind of Christianity. The Norwegian religious books, with their old-fashioned Danish language, do not promote a friendly attitude in Peder toward his religious heritage. Even so, he promises to read the Bible in order to please his mother. but he does not do so until the minister gives him a Bible in English.

The minister, Pastor Gabrielsen, has an eye for Peder's intelligence and tries to persuade him to read for the ministry. But in the face of Peder's growing interest in practical matters and his dawning love life the minister has to give in. The minister, however, is a factor in the growing Americanization, for he is convinced that "in twenty years there will not be heard a Norwegian word in all America." In the local district school the children are not allowed to use anything but English, even in the schoolyard. Miss Mahon warns Peder against speaking Norwegian at home, for he has "a bad accent," which he must get rid of. In this and other ways he is brought up to admire everything American. The author uses his opportu-

nity to air his distaste for the American common school by drawing a thoroughly unsympathetic picture of this

young "Yankee" schoolma'am.

All the teaching in this school is exclusively concerned with America and its life, a hymn to America as the "home of the free." The immigrant children in particular must learn to be grateful for their citizenship in a country where everyone can aspire to wealth and the highest positions. The Declaration of Independence is Miss Mahon's confession of faith and is read with solemn devotion every morning and afternoon. It helps but little that Beret gets Peder transferred to a more Norwegian school district the last few years before confirmation. The language, the subjects, and the textbooks are the same there. The only thing he finds about the country of his fathers is a drawing in a geography book, which shows "a Norskie" wrestling with a bear. In comparison with all the glorious things that he has learned about American civilization this is so pitiful that Peder wishes that he might go far away where he would never again have to hear about Norwegians. His heritage is an anachronism, rather like the old cow Rosie, who came along into the new, modern barn on the Holm farm.

This is the deep human tragedy of the book: the child that slips into a world where his mother cannot go. She can no longer make herself understood to her own children, while the child has its family roots cut. Rölvaag wrote to the Norwegian-American editor Kristian Prestgard in 1928, "I think I have put my finger on the tragedy of emigration, the true tragedy of the soul, more intensely in this book than in any of my others."

In a long letter to Professor Percy Boynton in 1929, he develops this theme of the conflict between generations: "The break between the first and the second generations of Americans of British descent may oftentimes be quite violent, due to the difference in schooling and outlook and the difference in traditions between the two countries. But in the case of, for example, Scandinavian Americans, the break is oftentimes brutal, though the human qualities may be just as fine. You will agree with me, I think, that it is a tragedy for mother and child not to be able to converse intimately with each other. Her songs he cannot understand. What her soul has found nourishment in, he

cannot comprehend. She seems to him a peculiar anachronism, a senseless, unreasonable being. Can you not feel the heartache of that mother as she sees the child slip away from her into another world? Thither she cannot follow, for she has not the key, and the magic password she does not know. Can you understand her utter helplessness? And can you understand, too, that the child suffers a loss which he can ill afford? There are tragedies in life for which language has no adequate expression—this is one of them."

Presumably because this was supposed to be the book about Peder, the author has kept Beret in the background. Only toward the middle of the book does he pick up the thread of her experiences since Per Hansa vanished in the snowstorm. He has not had a fortunate hand with this part of the book, the continuity of the story being interrupted by it. Beret represents so large a part of what Peder is revolting against that she dominates the scene even when Peder is in the foreground. No matter how great an understanding the author has developed of the inner problems of the vounger generation, their lives are not his own right into the marrow of his bones in the same way as is Beret's. In spite of external differences, Rölvaag himself had wandered the heavy path of the emigrant and experienced the shepherd's grief at "the nine-and-ninety who were lost to us." Therefore Beret interests both author and reader more than Peder, and she remains the main character of the book.

In the first summer after Per's death Beret had more than once thought of picking up her effects and her children and going back to Nordland. But gradually it becomes clear to her that the children are more at home here than in Norway, that their opportunities are greater here, and, above all, that she cannot run away from all that Per Hansa had founded. It is as if he were lying over there in the graveyard and keeping an eye on her; she has to carry on, as the old minister had told her, try to bring his work to fruition, even though she does not feel up to it.

Beret picks up her burden and bears it honorably. She becomes the best farmer in the whole settlement; she and the children labor early and late and keep up with the latest methods of farming. The Holm farm becomes a model for the rest. When Beret builds a new barn, it follows the plans that Per had sketched for the boys before he left, only with up-to-date improvements that were unknown in his time. It is as if some of Per's spirit has found housing in Beret as well. She always thinks of what he would have said when she is making a decision. She sits in front of his picture on the bedroom wall and confers with him, as it were, when she is in her deepest quandaries. Faithfulness to all that Per stood for becomes the constructive force in Beret's life.

The religious crisis that followed Per's death has made her more tolerant and understanding, but her life is one long sacrifice. Her children depart one by one to make their own futures. She finds herself surrounded by a youth that departs from religion and tradition alike. Her children speak only English to one another, and with the change of language come so many other changes. "When we break down the fence," she says to the minister, "the cows run away." She took Peder out of his first school to keep him away from the Irish: "You can't have wheat and potatoes in the same bin." She knows that the children have to learn English, but just because a new language comes in, the old one surely does not have to go out? When the minister complains to Beret that "the world" is about to swallow up Peder, she answers that surely this only means that they have harvested as they had sown. When young people forget their mother tongue and mix with strangers, one cannot know where they will end.

When she first came to America, she had asked fearfully, "Are these plains to be peopled by having lives thrown hopelessly away?" Now she sees that America demands more than lives; it is asking for men's souls as well. Her own children do not even keep their Norwegian names: Store-Hans and Sophie call their oldest boy Henry Percival after the grandfathers Hans Olsa and Per Hansa; Ole and Randi name themselves in having their son christened Randolph Osborne!

One of Rölvaag's central purposes in the book was to give a detailed portrait of a young person on the threshold of maturity. Contemporary literature showed a growing interest in Freudian psychology, but Rölvaag was not pleased with the new "realism," which tended to present man as an animal in the grip of his own urges. For this reason, and in keeping with the environment in which he

grew up. Peder's adolescence is dominated by the religious development and the social problems of his time. Rölvaag had an exalted view of love, including both the physical and spiritual basis for marriage. He found that in much contemporary literature this important and beautiful aspect of human life was either taboo or presented as something unworthy and unclean. Some even exploited it speculatively in order to titillate the senses. Rölvaag felt that the great writers of the past usually had a healthier view of sex, and none more so than the Bible. In the previously cited letter to Professor Boynton he spoke of the lies that surrounded sex in much of contemporary literature: "The poet of The Song of Songs refused to look at it that way; he glorified it, with the result that the poem has been handed down through the ages as one of the finest love songs ever written."

Rölvaag had something like this in mind when he set out to describe the dawning eros in Peder's life. In an undated letter of September, 1927, he wrote to Lincoln Colcord: "I want to do the psychology of youth in such a way, that intelligent young people who may happen to read it shall look upon themselves as children of Light rather than lost children of Darkness. I love mankind. Particularly youth. If it were not for that foolish feeling, I certainly would not be teaching this year!—And if I succeed in making the sex-urge beautiful instead of nasty,

I shall perform a great service."

It is doubtful whether Rölvaag succeeded in giving his Peder "everlasting life" for this reason, but there are beautiful passages in the book which give unusually sensitive and lyrical glimpses of Peder's passage from boyhood to manhood. We see how he becomes aware of having a body of flesh and blood, and a sweet, restless longing for something soft and gentle to caress and protect with his youthful strength. There is the joy of feeling these powers rising in his body like the sap in a tree, of standing naked before the open window in one's bedroom in the evening, and letting the moonlight and the warm summer air play about one's young limbs. There are charmingly youthful love scenes, where a bashful glance or the light touch of a young cheek is enough to fill one's whole life with song and sunshine.

For a time Peder seems to be most delighted with the

latest girl he meets. Gradually there is one who emerges as the girl, the nut-brown, kittenish Susie Dohenv, sister of his best friend and Irish schoolmate Charley. She is vivaciously alive, with a pair of glittering blue eyes in which vellow-brown spots drift "like fluffy good-weather clouds under a deep afternoon sky."

Beret has watched Peder, the child of her heart, drifting away from her bit by bit. First it was the school, then confirmation, then politics, practical life, young America, Whitman's song to "the Western youth":

All the past we leave behind,

We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world, Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march:

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Then comes the worst blow. When she discovers that Peder is no longer running after girls in general, but has settled upon this Irish lass, she is desperate. This surely cannot be the will of the Lord! She makes futile attempts to put an end to it. But then one night she dreams that Per Hansa comes to her and asks her not to stand in Peder's way: "Just let him have the girl when he's so fond of her! Do you remember how I ran after you? And you weren't much better; you didn't give a hoot what your parents said, and I thank you for that." So it is Per Hansa's spirit, young America, which wins its victory on this occasion also, and Beret drinks the last bitter drop of her chalice. The book ends with her taking Peder over to the Irish Dohenys in order to arrange for the wedding.

And so the book ends on a tragic note, which for Beret is more poignant than the one which struck her at Per Hansa's death, since she has now to resign herself to the idea that "as things were shaping themselves now, it was not just their bodies that America wanted!" The exchange of languages, the changing of cultures, the mixture of peoples, the whole process of Americanization moves inexorably without regard to who resists it, or what it costs, or

what values are lost in this transformation.

Unsentimentally and objectively the author has drawn his detailed, realistic picture of an age of vigorous conflict in prairie society. Immigrants from many countries had

founded this kingdom, but the time had come when the national idiosyncracies had to be wiped out. This occurred earlier or later in the various settlements according to whether they were composed of several nationalities or of a homogeneous group. In the Spring Creek settlement the transition occurs in the second generation, in the 1880's and 1890's, something for which the book was criticized by many, since it generally took longer for the language change to occur in most Norwegian settlements of the Midwest. The time is defensible enough when one considers the strong Irish contingent in this settlement, but there was some justice in the criticism that Rölvaag was in fact describing the events of his own time. This explains also the somewhat chaotic impression which the book makes: the author stood in the midst of events and could not place them in a proper historical perspective. The picture has therefore not been drawn with the broad strokes that characterize the preceding book. It has its strength in the details, in the multifarious, pulsating life which throbs throughout the work. It stands like a Pompeii with its realistic insights into the vanishing Norwegian-American immigrant world in the midst of its transformation.

A conflict of generations that involves the break between two cultures and the "change of soul," as Rölvaag puts it, comes very near the limit of what men can bear. Rölvaag here uncovered a stratum of American life that had been overlooked up to this time. He had the right to exult just a little bit at having shaken the melting-pot optimism in certain circles, as he did when he wrote to Waldemar Ager, his close friend and fellow Norwegian-American author, in 1930: "I have actually succeeded in getting the 'Yankees' to see that the Norwegians are good people, and that the country has not lost anything in getting us here. Some write such touching letters to me about Peder and Beret. Americanization has suddenly acquired a different face: that which had been looked upon as a great blessing now begins to look like a tragedy!"

In spite of Beret's many defeats in her struggle against Americanization, the mood of the book is not pessimistic. Rölvaag's sober account does not leave one in doubt that his and our sympathies are with Beret, and if we look a little deeper, we find that even the second generation is unmistakably Norwegian. One American reviewer declared, "These people on the Dakota prairies . . . are spiritually and physically true descendants of the ancient Norsemen of Sigrid Undset's stories." He noted particularly their quiet courage, their enterprise and individualism, but also their deep feelings. Peder is marked by a keen love of nature, with a touch of the artist in him. And the pinchpenny politics of Gjermund Dahl are not unknown in Norwegian life.

No matter how negatively Peder seems to react to the views of his mother, we can see that he is fond of her and understands that she is an unusually wise and good person. The seed she has sown in his youthful soul throughout the years will be able to sprout after wintering for some years. The author repeatedly pointed out that this was the book of Peder's "defiant period" though, of course, he would some day find his way back to the paths of his ancestors. "Wait until you see him at forty!" wrote Rölvaag to Colcord in 1929.

Another quality that has made the book so stimulating is its typically Rölvaagian interest and faith in life. Everything that lives is worth being framed and reflected upon. Everything has a divine origin and a divine purpose. The portrayal of Peder's development fascinates with its strong, healthy, refreshing joy of life. There is a delicate lyric quality in the style, and there are many fine descriptions of nature.

No one can be in doubt about the influence of Freudianism in the study of Peder's development. One might also mention Gustav Frenssen's Jørn Uhl (1901) as having been influential, for there is something in its mood and in the description of the link between man and soil that is reminiscent of Peder Victorious. Rölvaag is known to have admired this book very much. Any comparison with Turgenev's Fathers and Sons, however, serves only to bring out Rölvaag's vigor and vitality.

Even though *Peder Victorious* was well received both in Norway and the United States, it sold only about a third as many copies as the pioneer novel, although it was on the best-seller list for some months. There is little drama connected with its reception, compared with that of *Giants in the Earth*. Rölvaag chose to get along without Anglo-American help in the translation, and even though

his colleague Nora Solum did a fine job of translation, which he himself revised, it is more of a Norwegian book translated into English than the preceding one. In the original the Norwegian style fits the contents more intimately, and the extensive use of dialect in the dialogues

gives it a special mystique.

The criticisms that were most often made of the book, in Norway as in America, were that the construction was unclear and that the narration was too circumstantial. These are criticisms that one can level against much of Rölvaag's writing. To him all individuals and all phenomena in life were equally interesting; he enjoyed dwelling on each phenomenon and engrossing himself in it. His theme here had been the building up of a soul by exploiting "the innumerable impressions from its environment through which it broke its way into life." It is undeniable that now and then he may have needlessly multiplied his exemplification. But he was one of those who helped to bring psychological analysis and the close interpretation of life into American literature, a novelty to a public that had above all demanded action and entertainment.

Even if *Peder Victorious* was not the success that his previous book had been, Rölvaag had reason to be pleased with what he had achieved in his new work. He had secured his reputation as a Norwegian and an American author with a new book which combined Norwegian cultural heritage and literary tradition with an American theme and uncovered new areas of the literary continent he had discovered. He could be pleased with the bridgebuilding that he had accomplished: by clarifying the process whereby the emigrant in many ways becomes a stranger to his old homeland, as well as by giving the "Yankee" a deeper understanding of the problems facing the foreign-language immigrant.

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