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Prairie Literature and Theological Insight

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The prairie once blew and billowed like a huge, fibrous ocean at the very center of the North American continent. It stretched from Illinois to the western slope of the Rockies, and from the Texas panhandle into the prairie provinces of Canada. Trees were rare on the virgin prairie, tucked like occasional deciduous oases in little ravines and moist swales. The prairie was ruled by its grasses: grasses slow to gather their strength in spring, wildly fecund during a short summer, tawny and reluctant to give up in the fall, and somnambulant under a dusting of snow in winter. These grasses were endlessly subtle in their splendor and, above all, they offered little shade, few shadows, and nowhere for people to hide.

The American prairie is gone now, turned into the breadbasket of our continent and half the world by farmers whose eschatalogies have stretched at least as far as harvest time. But if the prairie is gone, much of its way of life and clarity of vision remain: a clarity of vision caught up in a small but precious body of novels. Stories of people who lived their lives beneath a bright sun in a cloudless sky (and whose comings and goings could be seen by all the neighbors) must be told with simple accuracy. It is both inappropriate and naive to expect novelists to be very good at or even concerned with speaking about our revealed God, but their telling the truth about the way things are with us and our world is always welcomed by theologians.

Two perspectives on our mortal scene that can be found in prairie literature are an unsentimental view of nature and a keen sense for death as the natural end of life. The first of these can teach us to cling more closely to God revealed, while the second can give us both pastoral wisdom for soul care and focus and urgency

for our preaching. Ole Rolvaag and Willa Cather can be distinguished, in part, by their sense for the natural world, while Larry Woiwode writes of death with abiding perception.

I. BEAUTY AND STRUGGLE IN ROLVAAG AND CATHER

Ole Rolvaag looked at inanimate nature with the clear, unsentimental gaze of a Lutheran theologian. While Willa Cather described the great beauty of the prairie, Rolvaag knew that it was as wanton and hostile as it was lovely. He also knew—better than Cather ever could have—that the face of God revealed on that prairie was more often frightening than it was serene.

From the very beginning of Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, the prairie is shown to have a capacity for extreme obstinacy:

> It was late afternoon. 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.
> 'Tish-ah!' said the grass....'Tish-ah, tish-ah!' ...Never had it said anything else—never would it say anything else. It bent resiliently under the tramping feet; it did not break, but it complained aloud every time—for nothing like this had ever happened to it before....'Tish-ah, tish-ah!' it cried, and rose up in surprise to look at this rough, hard thing that had crushed it to the ground so rudely, and then moved on.[1]

From that first page and throughout his novel, Rolvaag presents the prairie as carrying a borrowed fecundity which is not easily won. The prairie is beautiful and so productive that it can use even the cold snow to nurture its produce, but there are frequent troubles. Locusts fill the summer sky in undulating waves, and the sun burns down unceasingly. Above all, Rolvaag understands the prairie as the reluctant province of our God-given dominion: a dominion which is hard, often productive, sometimes ill-used, but inevitable. Rolvaag's prairie fights against God's plan for blessing with the same alacrity that people do, and the face of God one might see in the waving grasses leers as much as it smiles.

Certainly it is no literary accident that the life of Rolvaag's protagonist, Per Hansa, is taken by a midwestern blizzard:

> He put on his skis, straightened himself up, and remained standing there for some time; as he pulled on his mittens he took one glance homeward. He could just make out the house in the dim distance. Then the whiteness all around it thickened—rose up in a cloud—seemed to be piling in. Whirls of snow flew high over the housetop—sometimes the house itself disappeared....He sighed deeply, brushed his eyes with his mitts, and started on his way.[2]

He started on his way to death. The same earth which had been the beautiful and productive mother of Per Hansa's life blows up a storm which comes down on him from the northwest and sucks his breath away.

[1]O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1927) 3.
[2]Ibid., 463.

In Cather's marvelous *My Antonia*, the prairie may occasionally be touched with hostility but is essentially our magnificent and fruitful companion. People may be evil—so much so that, like villainous Wick Cutter, they verge on caricature—but the prairie seldom reveals an insidious side. Winter is surely winter for Cather, with slate sky and sullen land mingling in an indistinct horizon, but her snowstorms arrive on schedule and merely provide an occasion for people to be snug inside the house. Above all, the prairie reveals its maternal instincts:

> While we were lying there against the warm bank, a little insect of the palest, frailest green hopped painfully out of the buffalo grass and tried to leap into a bunch of bluestem. He missed it, fell back, and sat with his head sunk between his

> long legs, his antennae quivering, as if he were waiting for something to come and finish him. Tony made a warm nest for him in her hand; talked to him gaily and indulgently in Bohemian. Presently he began to sing for us—a thin, rusty little chirp. She held him close to her ear and laughed, but a moment afterward I saw that there were tears in her eyes.[3]

Cather's sense of a co-operative relationship between people and the prairie is most beautifully attested in the epiphany of the cave. After an absence of many years, Jim Burden returns to Nebraska to visit Antonia. Mature and weathered, Antonia holds the beauty of someone who has suffered much out of love. She and her children show him the cave in the prairie where they store canned goods:

> We turned to leave the cave; Antonia and I went up the stairs first, and the children waited. We were standing outside talking when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment.[4]

Rolvaag and Cather both see nature with the clear gaze of prairie people, but they see with differing degrees of depth and varying shades of sentiment. Cather writes about the creative, indomitable human spirit which is both lonely within and energized by the endless prairie, and which cannot be thwarted by the crude—even evil—human forces that fight against it. Rolvaag, on the other hand, writes about the vocation of settlement and farming, vocations typified by a struggle with a sometimes reluctant prairie host. For him, life was necessarily a little like establishing a beachhead in enigmatic, productive, beautiful, but occasionally hostile territory.

The clear vision of each of these prairie perspectives is to some degree correct, but Rolvaag's view is theologically driven and theologically useful. Cather knew that there is some deep correlation between the fecundity of the prairie and our own sexuality and creativity. She certainly was not surprised to know that "God formed man from the dust of the ground" (Gen 2:7), but she would have been less convinced that the prairie blocked our way with thorns and thistles. For her, people and the prairie had a gentle, lovely partnership.

[3]Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918) 27.
[4]Ibid., 218.

Rolvaag, on the other hand, did not understand the prairie as our partner so much as the wonderful, productive, and dangerous realm of our dominion. The point was to settle the land, tame it, and force it to yield food—so much so that our sensitivity for the environment cannot but be piqued. Yet, Rolvaag most certainly believed in our responsibility for good stewardship of the creation as it is presented in the Genesis creation account. Like the Old Testament aetiologies, Rolvaag simply saw and recorded the struggles with the land that are necessary to agricultural life. Dominion is a fact of our lives, and in these days, when it is altogether clear that we have badly damaged our environment, *Giants in the Earth* reminds us that the abrogation of dominion can never replace proper stewardship as a faithful option for Christians.

Christian theology and ministry are both served by Rolvaag's unsentimental view of the prairie. On the one hand, when the great plain is personified as "watching them breathlessly" or as "drinking the blood of Christian men," it is painfully clear that the naked, natural face of God is terrifying and that God is capable of judgment as well as mercy. On the other hand, to know God's dark aspect is also to know that faith is possible even in the greatest depths of life, depths against which the light of Christ's love shines with incomparable brightness. It is no theological accident that when the pastor enters Rolvaag's narrative with his message of Christ's forgiveness, the God of the prairie is finally revealed as being God for us.

It should not surprise us that prairie authors tend to understand that death is the natural end of life. One reason is that, in an elemental agricultural environment, the natural cycles of birth and death are so inescapable. Another is the keen sense—which all fine novelists have—that the death of a dear one is monumental, an event from which one cannot and should not ever completely recover. Ignoring death is difficult for prairie dwellers.

II. WOIWODE ON DEATH

In Larry Woiwode's splendid novel about a contemporary North Dakota family, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall,* everything leads toward and away from the death of the mother, Alpha. However, even before Woiwode strikes the first solemn notes of her literary requiem, the novel begins with another death and another burial, that of Grandfather Otto. His prairie burial is so elemental, so stark, so beautiful, so sad, so appropriate, so filled with precious hope that one cannot but wish to rid oneself forever of the contemporary American way of death:

> Charles finished the coffin at two o'clock. He sealed the cracks and seams of it with wood putty. He found a binder canvas with most of the slats missing or removed and cut it in lengths to fit the sides and base of the coffin, then painted the interior of the coffin with tar, and pressed the length of canvas into place. The lid was identical to the base, but with a flat one-by-three strip around its edges he hoped would help make it seal, and the cleats on it faced inward. He painted the top of the lid with tar, laid canvas over it, nailed over the canvas another thickness of one-by-eights, rasped their outer edges round and sanded them smooth...

> From the low ground of the homesteading shack, looking across the creek to the north and the east, the plain stretched off in golds and greys and blues to the line in the horizon; to the west he could see the buildings of Mahomet and the road to the farm. A prairie willow grew a ways downstream, and standing closer was an oak his father had planted, nearly bare now, with large mismatched limbs bent by prevailing winds, and a brown-gold layer of leaves around its base....
>
> Charles walked into the depression, to the place where his father had said, "Here we slept," and lifted the iron bar with one hand and drove it into the ground....
>
> They set the coffin beside the open grave. Charles took the missal from

Augustina, unable to look at her, and read the last rites at the grave in Latin. He sang 'Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine' and Augustina and Charles gave the responses. He placed the missal beside his father's right hand and saw that his forehead and nose and beard were dusted with pollen. The shadow of Charles's head across his body looked deformed, and he reached up and discovered he was wearing a cap. He removed it and was amazed; had he actually been wearing this striped work cap with his suit....

He replaced his cap, got the lid and laid it over the coffin, picked the hammer up, and went down on one knee and drove the first nail home with a single blow. Augustina touched his shoulder, and Clarence said, 'Wait.' Charles looked up, and then to where Clarence and Augustina were looking, and saw, in the direction of farms to the north and the east, and in a ragged procession along the road from town, dark shapes, mourners in black clothes, grownups and children moving over the plain, coming to pay their last respects to his father.[5]

Otto's death is strangely elemental, expected, and tactile, not like the shocking, perpetually unexpected deaths of a society where denial feeds voraciously on unbelief. This precious corpse is not whisked away at once like some unwanted mask of our mortality. Charles tends his father's body, dresses it for burial, and sings his faith with a voice touched by deepest grief. He knew with his hands and eyes that his father was gone, absolutely gone, and his faith rushed in to fill—though by no means obviate—that aching vacuum. Woiwode does not begin Charles's life-long adjustment to his father's death with introspection—not even with what may seem to be a proper expression of grief—but with the hope of the resurrection flung against a coffin, against the obvious, palpable end.

Beyond the Bedroom Wall, however, like the great plain rising to and descending from a mountainless divide, moves toward and away from Alpha's death. Despite her frail health, Alpha was sensitive, nurturing, steadfast, and beautiful. She was, above all, a mother. Deeply ambitious for her children, Alpha treasured her North Dakota home so much that its loss constantly hovered like some incipient disease. Her humor was gentle, and her great sympathy grew from an extraordinary sense for the inner wounds of those whom she loved. As nurture provides the framework for developing life, Alpha provides the key to the novel. From the beginning of his book, Woiwode surrounds Alpha with the melancholy note of her impending death. When her death does come, the reader half expects it but is nevertheless surprised to learn that Alpha was only thirty-four:

[5]Larry Woiwode, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1965) 39-58.

"Mr. Neumiller—" His eyes went to Jay and he tugged at the gauze mask around his throat. "We've used all of our medical knowledge, the new drugs, and the most sophisticated equipment that's available to us, and it's just not enough. Your wife died about an hour ago. We tried to get in touch with you earlier, but couldn't. I'm terribly sorry, sir."

Streamers of light, comets or falling stars he'd read about or seen, sped

down the hall and entered his shoulders from the front and behind and held him on his feet. The doctor took his hand, then wavered and bent as though underwater, and said, "Would you like to see her?"

He nodded and his upper lip started fluttering toward his eyes. The doctor led them down a different hall and around a corner and set a door ajar. "We've brought her down here," he said, "You can go in alone, sir."

Martin closed the door behind him. She lay on a high, wheeled stretcher beyond an empty bed, her face uncovered in the dim light, free of the tubes and masks that had sustained her, her hair, curled since she'd gone into the coma, the massy tangle it was when she was a girl. Her hands arranging the roses in a vase. Her critical and artistic eye.

A glass shattered down the hall.

"Oh, God," he said, meaning she was only thirty-four.[6]

Thus the earthly life of Alpha Neumiller ended as naturally, as quietly, as inevitably as the collective coughs and pains that preceded it. Yet tremors of her meaning and memory stretched palpably out into the terrain of her survivors' entire lives. The grief of her husband and children was so great that it could not simply be faced, but had to be divided, repressed, divided again, and then let out gradually, in tender sentences, over years and years.

Woiwode makes it clear—with a precision common to novelists and sometimes foreign to clinical experts in human affairs—that Alpha's death, however dramatic, is a natural toll taken by life itself. He describes the symptoms of her mortality with subtlety, stealth, and even gentle humor. Alpha, who works hard teaching school and caring for her children, often tires easily. There are vague but persistent bladder problems, and unrelenting sadness over a brother's accidental death inevitably takes its physical toll. Here there is no dramatic medical announcement, glaring diagnosis, or dramatic struggle, but only the quiet gathering of Alpha's natural mortality. And finally, when the end comes in connection with a pregnancy, it is the desperately sad but gently cumulative result of the struggle of her nurturing heart.

III. PRAIRIE LITERATURE AND THE GOSPEL

The law is meant to serve the gospel, and the law of finitude is better proclaimed by some prairie authors than it is by our culture. Ernst Becker, in *Denial of Death*, has rightly claimed that this basic denial is endemic to our entire way of living: endemic to the great hospitals that are the cathedrals of our cities; endemic to our commercial fondness for youthful vigor and muscle tone; endemic to our "evening news" preoccupation with accidental and surprising death. Many of our nearly-grown children have had no close brush with spent life. Denial of death is

[6]Ibid., 302-303.

in the air, taking its quiet, theological toll on Christians, quietly directing them away from the cross of Jesus and plugging their ears to the gospel's promise of new life. Little wonder that one hears so often of a Jesus who is, above all, a companion who suffers with and for us, a fellow traveler who always understands. Even the blessed cross, which with the resurrection is the fulcrum of all Christian hope, has come to remind us of something that we would rather forget.

Nevertheless, the law is still preached, and the particular law of the natural reality of death is often preached eloquently by prairie novelists who see with a clear vision fostered by open spaces and the uncluttered elements of life. The narrative preaching of finitude is, of course, not yet the gospel, but it prepares the way for the preacher's accounting of another life which is not confined by death and which alone is saving, that of our risen Lord Jesus.