

“You Can't Go Home Again”— Norwegian-American Travel Accounts

Øyvind T. Gulliksen

Telemark College

The title of Thomas Wolfe's novel from 1940, *You Can't Go Home Again*, may serve to invoke an important theme in the literature here under investigation: documentary travel accounts written by first-generation Norwegian-Americans about their trips back to Norway. This paper will consider five such travelogues, published in Norwegian in the Midwest after the return to the United States of their immigrant authors from their first visits to their homeland after many years in America.¹

The travelogue is a well-known American genre. In fact much American immigrant literature, both fiction and documentary writing, is constructed on the travel motif.² Most such immigrant accounts follow three stages of travel

1 This article is an expanded version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, May 2-4, 1991. I wish to express my gratitude to prof. Byron Nordstrom at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, for his helpful comments on the conference version of my paper.

The following five travel accounts, all published in the Midwest during the first three decades of this century, constitute the basis of my discussion: N.N. Rønning, *A Summer in Telemarken* (Minneapolis: The Northland Press, 1903); Wilhelm Pettersen, *Fra bjørkeskog og granholt* (Chicago: John Anderson Pub. Co., 1911); J. A. Berven, *Reisebreve og digte* (Radcliffe, Iowa, 1916); Anton A. Nybrotten, *Fra en Norgestur i 1919* (Minneapolis: Forfatterens forlag, Folkebladet trykkeri, 1922); Kristian Prestgaard, *En sommer i Norge*. vol. I and II (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1928). I have not been able to ascertain the sales of these books. Rønning and Prestgaard were popular writers, whose books were widely advertised in the Norwegian-American press. Others like Berven, published his book privately. In all likelihood the work was restricted to a small circulation of a few hundred copies. It is nevertheless typical of a good many books in the same category.

2 For the use of the travel motif within the literature of one American immigrant group, see for instance Sharon Kaplan Jaffe, "The Immigrant Journey in 20th Century Jewish-American Fiction," Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987.

to the new country: the departure, the journey itself, and the arrival. The direction is westward, the main purpose often to inform the reader of the crossing into new territories. The journey back, however, was often motivated by an elegiac mission to the immigrant's past. The literature of the eastbound return trip invited American readers to join the writer in his rediscovery and retaining of a world they already knew.

Travel writing is an important source material for the study of immigrant culture. They reveal problems of identity and of cultural allegiances, faced directly by the traveller and indirectly by his or her readers. I intend here to analyse these travel accounts, not primarily as source material for history, but as a genuine literary genre.³

The first review of Norwegian-American travelogues about visiting the old country was probably written by Waldemar Ager in an essay published in *Norden* (Chicago) in 1929.⁴ Here Ager offered an interesting comparison between American and Norwegian-American travel accounts. American travel books, Ager argued, tended to include long, tedious and unnecessary comparisons of European conditions to those in the US, whereas Norwegian-American books within the same genre were often too individualistic. It was as if the writer, the traveller, made every effort to appear more interesting to his reader than the places and the people he was observing: "Læseren skal paa død og liv vite at det mest interessante er igrunnen han som skriver."⁵

Ager's point here is well taken. Norwegian-Americans describing their trips home tend to tell more about their own feelings than anything else. But we should not forget that these books were primarily not published as travel guides or tourist accounts. They were, almost without exception, written as "personal narratives," if we may use the name of a category from seventeenth century Puritan writing. There is an element of confession and of revealing the innermost thoughts of the writer in these Norwegian-American texts. Some of the books in fact started as letters home, as diary entries, or as travel reports in various Norwegian-American newspapers. In some cases the author admitted that he felt compelled to write, well aware that this was to be his only book; in a sense he was writing his life story. As an immigrant he commonly divided his life into three stages: the old country, the voyage, the new country. A return to Norway later in his life gave him a chance to relive and reflect upon these three stages during a few weeks' stay.

In his review Ager lists a number of Norwegian-American travelogues, of

3 Anka Ryall, a Norwegian scholar of Victorian travel accounts, has argued that "travel writing deserves to be taken seriously as literature and ought to be given more sustained critical and scholarly attention from that point of view." Book review in *Victorian Studies*, Summer 1989, p. 599.

4 Waldemar Ager, "Norsk-amerikanske reisebeskrivelser," *Norden*, pp. 5-6, 1929. I am indebted to prof. Orm Øverland for bringing this essay to my attention.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

which I have singled out the following five authors for further comment: N.N. Rønning, *A Summer in Telemarken*, Minneapolis, 1903; Wilhelm Pettersen, *Fra bjørkeskog og granholt*, Chicago, 1911; J.A. Berven, *Reisebreve og digte*, Radcliffe, Iowa, 1916; Anton Nybrotten, *Fra en Norgestur i 1919*, Minneapolis, 1922, and finally Kristian Prestgard's two-volumes *En sommer i Norge*, Minneapolis, 1928.

N. N. Rønning's *A Summer in Telemarken* is mentioned by Ager as the first book of its kind. It became in many ways a trend-setter, although it was the only one of the books here considered to be published in both a Norwegian and an English edition.

Rønning had emigrated to Minnesota in 1887. He had studied at the University of Minnesota and entered Norwegian-American publishing business in Minneapolis. Twelve years after he had left Norway he decided to go back to his family farm and home district for a visit. Rønning's book renders a typical emigrant vision of his mother country. The home place had remained static in his memory, a stable and idealized background against the shifting circumstances of his life in the new country. His return to Telemark in 1899 was indeed imprinted on his mind for the rest of his life. The Romantic vision of a rural upbringing in Norway never left him. Back in Minneapolis, he published his first book as a report on the importance of going home. He never went back to Norway again. It was as if he feared that the world of observed facts of another return trip would indeed dispel his vision.⁶

Rønning's book was well received and he quickly realized there was a demand for travel books that would offer the readers an idealized version of a world they had once known, but had left for good. His book is not motivated by homesickness, but by a nostalgia for an untainted, rural past, less complicated and less mechanized than the America he lived in. In his personal narrative Rønning wanted to stimulate his Norwegian-American readers' recollection of their own homes in Norway, or their parents' or grandparents homes. The editor of *Skandinaven* praised Rønning's book for its sketches of the old home, because they had "softened and warmed our harder life here."⁷

⁶ In her study *Canadian Travellers in Europe, 1851-1900* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), Eve Marie Kroller discusses how Canadian immigrants experience a return to their mother country. She argues that such visitors had a special need for an ideal vision of the country they once had left:

"As Canadians began to explore their motherlands' cities and countrysides, they discovered—as most tourists do—that mental image and reality did not coincide, a discovery disillusioning enough for the ordinary traveller, but deeply painful for the colonist whose sense of national and personal selfhood depended on a firmly defined image of the mother country" (p. 91).

⁷ The quotation is from a newspaper clipping in "The Rønning Papers," 1912-1952, Box 1, p. 585, the manuscript holdings of The Norwegian American Historical Association, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota.

Rønning's travelogue, then, is an account of a somewhat untypical American route east into the past, not a journey west into the future, the usual direction of journeys in American literature. As one critic has stated, a return trip has often been regarded in American literature as a signal of retreat, "a defeated rebound from the primary venture."⁸ Rønning's *A Summer in Telemarken* has in fact the very opposite function. It serves as a documentary, though dreamlike journey into a rewarding encounter with his rural past in the old country, an account of a return to overcome some of the emotional loss that emigration had inflicted upon him.

As a Norwegian-American, educated in the new country, it was only natural that Rønning returned to the old country imbued with both Norwegian and American literary models, especially romantic writers. When Rønning beyond himself with joy, reentered his old farm place in Telemark, it was characteristically enough James Russell Lowell who filled him with inspiration! Rønning quoted from and identified with Lowell's knight in the poem "The Vision of Sir Launfal" (1848), a knight who—after a long search for the Holy Grail—finally finds the hidden cup in his very own home castle, an appropriate parallel to Rønning's own undertaking?

In *The Boy from Telemark*, a memoir published thirty years after his first travel account, Rønning again discussed his return trip of 1899. Looking back from much later, he added emphasis on his having become an American, which was not so evident in his first travel account. He admitted then that already in 1899 he had become a stranger in his home community: "I was somewhat of a stranger in my own country. My interests were in America. I had two countries.... When I again set foot on American soil, it was as a member of a family returning home after a pleasant visit to a pleasant place."¹⁰ In other words, it took a going back to the old country to be able to return to the US, this time not as an immigrant, but as one who in a sense was coming home, to America.

As a seminary teacher in Minneapolis, Wilhelm Pettersen also availed himself of literary models in his book about a return trip to Norway, entitled *Fra bjørkeskog og granholt*. In his preface he recommended Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* as the best American book within travel literature. At the same time he invoked a poem from Aasmund O. Vinje's *Ferdaminne*, the famous Norwegian travel account of 1860, on the title page. Before he started on his own account, Pettersen—aware of his double heritage—evidently felt the need

8 Janis P. Stout, *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1983), p. 66.

9 An extensive evaluation of N. N. Rønning's contribution to Norwegian-American literature and of his use of American literary models will be published in the next issue of *Norwegian-American Studies*. Vol. 33, Northfield, Minnesota.

10 N.N. Rønning, *The Boy from Telemark* (Minneapolis: The Friend, 1933) p. 148.

to refer to well-known models within both American and Norwegian literature. Firsthand knowledge of the literature of two countries was clearly seen as a special privilege by leading writers within Norwegian-American culture at the time. Not only did Pettersen resort to forerunners within the world of books. His return trip assumes an unbelievably large scale when he introduces the readers to a map of his own travels back and forth across the Atlantic, alongside the sketched routes of two earlier fellow travellers: Eric the Red and Leif Erickson! This is a clear indication that a language of boosterism and the pride in a viking past was a strong aspect of popular Norwegian-American culture at the time.

Pettersen's text had a double aim. His travelogue was written to boost the spirit of Norwegian-American readers and to freshen their memories of their own ties to the past. Only then could Norwegian-American culture remain a living entity, Pettersen believed. Secondly, he wanted to entice others to go back for a short visit as he had done. To the traveller a return trip and the writing about it was seen as a therapeutic endeavour. Pettersen argues that immigrant pastors who return to Norway for a short stay may even renew their theology. To the worn-out pastors in the Norwegian-American churches, an experience of the sea and the mountain air in Norway would in itself quicken their appeal to the congregation. Here is Pettersen's restored pastor back on his American pulpit: "En dag staar Prasten atter paa Prakestolen. Der er farve i Kinderne. I Øinene brander en ny, frisk Glans. Stemmen har en eiendommelig melodisk Klang."¹¹

Some accounts of return travels were clearly written to strengthen the sense of community and fellowship among Norwegian-Americans. In his book Pettersen frequently used long references to a writer like Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson to promote this task. He found Bjørnson's speech on the traditions of the fathers, "Til Fædrenes Minde" of 1869, so important to his American readers that he included large extracts of it in his book.¹² At the same time Pettersen rejected all critical voices within the newest branch of realists in Norwegian literature. Pettersen in fact wanted them expelled for their constant café life and insipid complaining; they "skulle forbydes at satte sin fod paa norsk grund."¹³ Like a good many immigrant writers, Pettersen travelled in his home country accompanied with the kind of Norwegian literature that he knew was cherished in Norwegian America: Wergeland, Vinje, Landstad, and the early Ibsen and Bjørnson, the "accepted" writers from an earlier period of national-romantic writing.

Because Pettersen was so intricately bound by texts from an earlier version of Norwegian culture, he could feel at home in Norway in 1910, and did not

11 *Fra bjørkeskog og granholt*, p. 24.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 108-112.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

see much of a need to make the concept of home a personal problem. His sense of being at home in Norway was so strong he hoped it would last forever: "Hjemmefølelsen er den sterkeste ... den kjendes saa god, den er saa velgjørende." Even upon his return, the United States still appeared to him as something strange and unknown, "det store, fremmede Land."¹⁴ Yet he does not express any doubts about returning to the Midwest.

Not all writers within this genre had academic training or status. Some travelogues were written by farmers or business people and published privately upon their return, primarily addressed to friends and readers in their home district. Berven's *Reisebreve og digte* was compiled upon a trip to Norway after he had lived forty-one years in the Midwest. He was driven to go back, he wrote, by a desire to see the places he for a long time had only seen in the spirit, "i aanden."¹⁵

Back in Norway, Berven takes special joy in listing names of people and places special to him, but only to a few of his readers. All readers could, however, follow him home and in their imagination replace his local names with their own. In spite of the profusion of local names, Berven's project is conceived as a journey back in time as well as place. He wonders if the old familiar places will bring forth memories of his boyhood, the innocence of his youth, "uskyldighedens rene glader." But as a traveler-writer, equipped with a stem dose of Lutheranism, Berven also takes the reader back to the spot of his first sin, "min første bevidste synd,"¹⁶ only to leave the curious reader there without any explanation of the nature of his sinful act.

The conclusion of these travelogues follow a much repeated pattern, and Berven's is no exception. First he urges the reader to embark on a similar voyage back, provided he or she has a strong, inner desire to do so: "Har du en indre langsel efter at se stedet hvor du tilbragte dine ungdoms- og barneår, ... reis." Secondly, the return trip to Norway gives a new meaning to the travellers' idea of what it means to have become an American. Berven realizes that going "home" to the old world proves to be impossible. Leaving Norway again he writes: "Nu er langselen sterk til Vesterheimen, hvor mit kjare hjem vinker mig imøde og hvor jeg for fremtiden vil slaa mig tilro her i tiden." Finally we often find a strong tie to the rural past of the old country linked with a sceptical view of some aspects of modern Norwegian culture as perceived on the return trip. Berven complained that Norway was lapsing its firm pietism: "Det gjør mig ondt at maatte sige, at der hos mange sporedes en aandretning, der slettes ikke spaar godt for fremtiden."¹⁷

Anton A. Nybrotten's travelogue, published in the early 1920s, is also sceptical

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁵ *Reisebreve og digte*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

tical to trends in contemporary Norway. He brings a tone of the popular red-scare to the Norwegian scene he observed: "Den socialistiske bolshevikske aand holder paa at forgifte den ærlige arbeiderstand i Norge."¹⁸ Nybroten returned for a summer to his mother country after more than thirty years in the US. Yet he concludes his travelogue with a statement that his real home cannot be found in Norway any longer. Home is in the Midwest, "hvorhen vi nu skal stevne og hvor vort hjem er."¹⁹ But it is only by returning for a brief encounter with Norway that the one-time immigrant discovers that he has in fact been more Americanized than he had realized: "Saken er at vi er blit mer arnerikanere end vi selv vet av."²⁰

Knowing that his sense of home is in the Midwest, Nybroten nevertheless gives a meticulous description of his personal universe at the time of his childhood in Norway. He takes the reader to places where he used to go fishing, to the kind of farmer's bed he slept in, to stories told by his grandmother, to the wall on which he carved his name [it was still there], and to the church in which he was confirmed.²¹ To first generation Norwegian-Americans these glimpses would be more important reading than the contemporary scenes he observed on the same trip. Such recollections of childhood in fact led the author to "intimations of immortality." His return to Norway is linked in his mind with a meditation on the last departure: "Jeg er saa vel fornøiet med denne Norgestur. Den neste store reise blir naar jeg gaar til Gud."²² Like the other writers of return trips to Norway, Nybroten travelled with a sense of purpose. He desired to see the old places and to record his impressions for the benefit of himself and his descendants in the United States before he died.

Kristian Prestgard, the editor of *Decorah-Posten*, also related his return trip in religious language. In his account of 1928 the return traveller becomes a pilgrim to sacred places, not the commonly accepted sacred places of a nation or a religion, but holy because of their value to the writer only: "Jeg er en pilgrim og færdes paa lutter hellige steder."²³ In his review Ager praised Prestgard's travelogue as being the best in this category. Prestgard's style and skill of writing compares with Rønning's. In order to introduce his homecoming after thirty-six years in the US, truly the most dramatic episode in the two volumes, Prestgaard brings the reader to the scene by speaking to him directly in the imperative: "Look there is .." "Og se der og der ..."²⁴ The implied reader, who is clearly the first-generation Norwegian immigrant, is directly addressed in the text as a fellow-traveller, a companion to the author's

18 *Fra en Norgestur i 1919*, p. 157.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 65, 63.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

23 *En sommer i Norge, I*, p. 37.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

attempted rediscovery of home as it once was.

Prestgard's rediscovery of his own youth in Norway is also strengthened by a reference to an American writer, to Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle.²⁵ To Prestgard it is as if the years of absence have been obliterated, just as in Irving's story: "Kjære, jeg reiste jo herfra igaar."²⁶ This makes the concept of home in his case terribly complicated. To Prestgard it was evidently a question of having two homes, or none at all. Again it was Aasmund O. Vinje, as poet and travel writer, who provided the textual basis for much of Prestgard's own book. He includes long references to Vinje's *Ferdaminne*,²⁷ and he quotes from Vinje's poetry, especially from lines about the poet's strong memories of childhood. In Prestgaard's mind, as in Vinje's for that matter, the refound places and the unattainable past unite in a language of joy and sadness: "det var vist min egen barndom jeg lette efter."²⁸ Prestgard's rediscovery is so strong, he feels completely fused with his past in Norway: "Alt er mit. Jeg er ett med det. Her er min heimstad."²⁹ But this sense of union with his past and his home in the old country does not dissipate upon his return to the United States, his new home. Approaching the east coast Prestgaard confessed: "Paany gik der en iling igjennem mig. Ogsaa det er mit land. Der har jeg nedlagt mit livs arbeide. Der er mine barn født, og til det vil deres skjæbne være knyttet."³⁰

Prestgard came back to Decorah-Posten with an intricate concept of home. His conclusion to his two volume travelogue is an interesting illustration to what Werner Sollers in his study *Beyond Ethnicity* has called "the tension between consent and descent" in American culture.³¹ Prestgard explains his newfound idea of home: "Jeg følte mig rik som har to land jeg kalder mine. Med fødselens og valgets ret er de begge mine."³² In Carl Swensson's Swedish-American travelogue of 1897, *Åter i Sverig*, a similar idea is expressed although in more powerful symbolism as our mother Sweden and our bride America: "Vår moder, Sverige!... vår brud, Amerika!"³³ The hyphenated

25 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 113.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

30 *Ibid.*, II, p. 216.

31 Werner Sollers, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.237.

32 *En sommer i Norge*, II, p. 216.

33 Carl Swensson, *Åter i Sverige* (Chicago: The Swedish Book Co., 1897), p. 647. Swensson's choice of images here may have been typical of a male traveller. Noticeably all Norwegian-American travelogues I have studied have been written by men. Some travelled alone, others were accompanied by their wives, but in all the cases I have studied the travel and the coding of the experience was a male undertaking. The going back was after all a personal quest. A major purpose of their return visits was to come back to places of the travellers' childhood, to memories of their premarital lives, which their spouses of course did not share.

American's sense of home is here expressed in the images of two women, the first of descent, the other of consent. In Prestgard's travelogue the elements of descent and consent become blended. His home by birth and nationality, the home he had inherited, had now by his return trip also in a sense become his home by choice. In his travelogue he transforms his past through descent, his Norwegian past, into an act of consent. At the same time he understood what until now had been his home by choice, the Midwest, to be linked through his work and descendants to something wider than just a question of choice. In the United States, his new country by consent, the writer now had a sense of being the first in a line of descent.

Norwegian-American travel accounts of return trips to Europe constitute a genuine genre within ethnic American literature. They helped to articulate the cultural traditions of their own immigrant group. The writers discussed above wanted to accomplish more than just a report from a summer's holiday in the old country. In most cases it was their only return, usually after decades in the Midwest. There was in a sense no need to return again; the first going back could not be repeated, the sort of travelogue they had published could indeed only be written once. In the plot structure of a return voyage they had written their life story. The travelogue of a summer became a personal quest, an autobiography of a life time. Even Rønning's travelogue, written by a relatively young man who was to have a long career in publishing, reads as if it is based on the wisdom of old age. Although the travel writers mentioned were able to see their home places again, their sense of what it meant "to be home" as recorded in their accounts became a complicated term, essentially because they were not only going back to a place but to a past they wanted to formulate into their present lives. The trip back was also a project to find out if their past in a different country was irretrievably lost.

Within their own ethnic group, these writers had the benefit of an intimate knowledge of literary models in two literatures, American and Norwegian, Mark Twain and Aasmund O. Vinje, a privilege shared by none of their Norwegian forefathers and which they knew would be shared at best by only a few of their American descendants. In their meditations on the meaning of "home" they illustrated what Werner Sollers has called "an acute sense of doubleness," "a double consciousness."³⁴ among ethnic writers, which according to Sollers—they share with modern writers. The published accounts of the visitors to the old country mentioned above did not turn all of them into established authors, but all of them were through their stories able to celebrate a sense of doubleness. By consciously adhering to two cultures they helped formulate their own special Norwegian-American culture. These writers were not painfully torn between two countries or living in troublesome marginality.

34 *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 249.

For them it was more a sense of a "double" than a "divided heart."³⁵ None of them, however—except Rønning—expected ever to reach outside a single audience, the ring of readers within their own group, primarily Norwegian born American citizens. To this group the authors could speak with the authority of one who had gone back to see the old world, one who had visited and incorporated his past into his American present.

Although restricted to a particular readership and a period of time between 1900 and 1930, these travelogues also provide the historical and intellectual background for recent achievements within a typical American, perhaps we could say, a Midwestern genre. It is important to notice Midwestern forerunners to books like for instance Patricia Hampl's reward-winning *A Romantic Education of 1981*.³⁶ It is my contention that her book continues a trend first introduced in the Midwest by a series of relatively unknown immigrant writers, who published their books in other languages than English. Hampl's story follows the same structure. Her starting point is the Midwest, in her case St. Paul, from where she travels back to the place of her family's origin, to Prague, in search of a "usable past." Even though she is a third generation American, the old country and her family past are implanted in her, basically through the memory of her grandmother. When Hampl writes about going to Europe for the first time, it sounds as if it is in reality a return: "Mine was the return of a third generation American, the sort of journey that is so inexplicable to the second generation. 'What are you going to do there?' my father asked before I left Minnesota."³⁷ Hampl then uses her own ethnic background in a meditative travelogue back to the old country, to Europe, into the past and the present, a personal narrative. "It is really," explains Hampl, "the longing of a lost culture that sends Americans on these pilgrimages."³⁸

Maybe a widely read contemporary travel account and personal narrative like Hampl's can bring back an interest in older ethnic American travelogues, now largely forgotten like the few discussed here. Hampl was not the first Midwestern writer to go on such a pilgrimage, nor was she the first one to write about it.

35 I am alluding here to the title of Dorothy Skårdal's seminal study of the literature of Scandinavian immigrants in the United States, *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974).

36 Patricia Hampl, *A Romantic Education*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 148.