

Fiction as Interpretation of the Emigrant Experience: The Novels of Johan Bojer, O.E. Rølvaag, Vilhelm Moberg and Alfred Hauge*

By **Ingeborg R. Kongslien**

University of Oslo

My idea in focusing on these novels featuring the Scandinavian emigration to America is the assumption that fiction can be an important factor in conveying historical knowledge and human experience. Writers of fiction can do something different from what historians can, namely dramatize and individualize man's meeting with the historical conditions.

The selected novels are called "emigrant novels" due to the material with which they deal, namely the Norwegian and Swedish emigration to the United States in the previous century, and due to the thematic structure that we find in these works, a structure which in fact embodies the entire emigration process.

The novels that will be the focus of this paper are the Norwegian Johan Bojer's *Vår egen stamme* (1924), translated into English as *The Emigrants*; the Norwegian-American O.E. Rølvaag's *I de dage* (1924), and *Riket grundlægges* (1925), both volumes in English as *Giants in the Earth*, and the sequels *Peder Seier* and *Den signede dag*, translated into English as *Peder Victorious* and *Their Fathers' God* respectively; the Swedish Vilhelm Moberg's *Utvandrarna* (1949), *Invandrarna* (1952), *Nybyggarna* (1956) and *Sista brevet till Sverige* (1959), in English as *The Emigrants*, *Unto a Good Land*, *The Settlers* and *Last Letter Home*; and the Norwegian Alfred Hauge's *Cleng Peerson: Hundevakt* (1961), *Cleng Peerson: Landkjenning* (1964), and *Cleng Peerson: Ankerfeste* (1965), translated into English in two volumes as *Cleng Peerson I and II*.¹

The most typical feature of "the emigrant novel" as a genre is its

thematic structure. It is not so much based on plot and intrigue as it is structured by the gradual development of what can be called the "emigration process," following closely the different stages of this process. Leaving the old country because of material need or spiritual oppression, and having a vision of a better life and a dream of freedom, the emigrants journey from that which is known and into the unknown. Settlement and adaption are the next stages of this thematic structure, and then follows the whole process of acculturation. The emigrants have to start from scratch in building up a new existence, materially, socially and culturally. Experiences from their existence in the old country are used to get a grip on all the new things they meet, and therefore the concept of *here* and *there* is always present, "a double perspective" it could be called. All these novels describe in detail the first year in the new country, i.e. living through the first winter, the first sowing in the spring and the first harvest. After this initial period, the novels follow the development over a longer period of time and not step by step as in the beginning.

It should be pointed out here that the term "emigration process" is used for this entire development and "emigrant novel" for a book featuring this entire process. The emigration process as such is the basis of the thematic structure, and the double perspective, i.e. relating to two countries simultaneously, is a distinctive feature of this genre. The double perspective relates to the 'social, the psychological and cultural themes of the emigrant novel.

The interpretation presented by the four writers can be found in the fictitious reality they have created, which tries to give the illusion of reality and at the same time points to a historical reality outside of the fictitious one. The two aspects to be studied, then, are: first, the historical and authentic material which is the basis for the work of art and the selection from this material, and secondly, of course, the literary technique, the rhetoric.

Bojer's emigrants leave Norway in 1882, the very peak of the Norwegian emigration. They are a group of people from Trøndelag who move to the North Dakota prairie, break land, and build a new society. The time is the 1880's and 1890's, with an epilogue around 1920. A few historical facts are presented, but the characters and main events are fictitious. The group consists of, among others, the poor cottager Kal Skaret and his family. In America Kal becomes a successful farmer - the new country allows him to use all his talents - but he never forgets his background and always measures his success in the new country against his life in the old one. There is also Morten, a young single man who

emigrates because the girl he loves is above him socially. He wants to earn money and return to build up the family's small farm, but he gets involved in politics in America, becomes a leading man in his community, and lives out his life with a split personality, divided between the old and the new country. The book features a number of other characters, but most of them are rather superficially drawn and therefore of lesser interest in this context.

The reader first encounters Rølvaag's immigrants on their way westward in America in 1873, and from then on we follow them through the 1880's and up to 1896. Again, both the characters and the main events are fictitious, but some authentic events are used, e.g. the grasshopper plague of the 1870's, the great snowstorms of 1880-81 and the election of 1896, all three having decisive influence on the plot. This work features Beret and Per Hansa, pioneers on the South Dakota prairie. For Per, this is a challenge that calls on all his physical strength and creative powers; he looks towards a glorious future. Beret, the homesick, guilt-ridden wife looks back into the past. The two sequels portray the growing up and coming into adulthood of Peder, a representative of the second generation, and the marriage between the Norwegian, rational, Lutheran, republican Peder and the Irish, emotional, Catholic, democratic Susie, and the breakdown of this marriage. Bojer's, as well as Rølvaag's characters are pioneers on their land. Both writers have used the mass emigration from Norway and the expansive westward movement as their framework.

Moberg's emigrants on the other hand are the first to leave their home region, that is Småland, and the time is the late 1840's with the actual departure taking place in 1850. They become pioneers in Minnesota; we, as readers, follow their settling and their development up to 1865, and even get a few glimpses of them up to 1890. Again, the characters and main events are fictitious, but with authentic characters and happenings on the periphery. Karl Oskar and Kristina leave their small farm with their children in order to build up a new, but similar existence in the new country. Robert sets out for California to find gold, but returns deadly sick and disillusioned. Danjel, an important character in the first stage described by Moberg, fades out of the picture when in America he has all the freedom of religion he could ever ask for. To Ulrika, the parish whore and a social outcast, America offers the opportunity of a decent life. Common for all three of these works, but especially Moberg's and Rølvaag's, is the authenticity in the basic structures of the books, and in the description of everyday and social life, with the main emphasis on social and psychological aspects respectively for these two writers, Moberg and Rølvaag.

Hauge differs from this pattern by using authentic historical characters and events as the point of departure for his writings. His novels describe Cleng Peerson, who has been called "the father of Norwegian emigration," and the Quaker emigration of 1825. Although the novel follows the facts very closely, in broad outline and in innumerable details, it is also clearly a work of fiction where the author departs from established facts when it serves his aesthetic intention. The period chosen is the very beginning of the Norwegian emigration movement. Hauge's novel features Cleng Peerson's life, and with Cleng as narrator, the Norwegian pioneer emigration. As leader, and narrator, he meets with other groups, like the Mormons, the Rappites, and the Jasonites in Bishop Hill, before he ends his wandering years in Texas.

This is the material on which these writers have based their fiction, and hopefully this outline has given some idea of their plots and patterns. They all wanted their depictions of the emigration process to be authentic. Rølvaag said he wanted to "be true to life," he wanted "reality in fiction."² Moberg said he wanted his description to be essentially correct, but he did not want to "describe what actually happened, but what could have happened."³ Hauge's "documentary novel" moves between the factual and the fictitious throughout, the two areas constantly merging and overlapping.

What are, then, the interpretations of the emigration process which are found in these individual works? To depict reality in fiction is not a simple procedure, not a plain and direct mimesis. The historical material chosen and the rhetoric of each individual novel, as well as the writer's intentions and his conceptions of the social and individual factors of the emigration movement, determine the work's interpretation of the emigration process.

With regard to the thematic structure of the emigrant novel, one notices that the immigrant Rølvaag differs from his Scandinavian fellow writers, Bojer, Moberg and Hauge, in that the first stage of this thematic structure, that which describes the background and the reasons for the emigration as well as the journey and therefore emphasizes the social aspects of the emigration theme, is absent in Rølvaag's novels. In his work this stage is represented indirectly, in the symbols and images used and in the psychological description. It is there in Per's use of concepts from this earlier life to cope with all the challenges of his new life, e.g. the prairie compared to the ocean, and in Beret's homesickness and guilt-feelings towards the past that so heavily color her immigrant experience.

In Bojer's, Moberg's, and Hauge's emigrant novels the descriptions of the home societies - the reasons for emigrating and the gradual

development of this decision to leave the home country and seek to fulfill the dream of a better life in the new and unknown land, the realization of a vision - constitute large parts of the works. A distinctive structural feature of the emigrant novel, is that of group or collective novel. Typical for all these books is that they have a group of characters at the center, not one or two main characters. The term "collective novel" is here used in a rather loose sense. It does not really apply to Rølvaag's novel, and with Bojer and Moberg it applies mainly to the initial parts. In the further descriptions of the development, they concentrate more on one or two main characters. Hauge's *Cleang Peerson* is a special type with a great number of characters forming a close knit group, but it is also a first-person novel with Cleang as narrator and main character equally important as the group. But the group-aspect, especially within this first stage of the thematic structure already mentioned, in Bojer's, Moberg's and Hauge's novels, mainly works towards emphasizing the social themes and illustrating the different reasons for emigration. Each individual 'in Bojer's group of emigrants has his or her particular reasons, ranging from material need and social injustice to rejected love and misbehavior. Together they form a representative picture of motivations for emigration. The description shows that the interaction between the individual and the social surroundings is an integral part of the development towards a final decision to emigrate.

Moberg devotes a great part of his tetralogy to a presentation of the Swedish society of the 1840's with emphasis on its hierarchical nature and the immobility between the classes. His characters are depicted in close interaction with the social conditions and their decision to emigrate is shown as a gradual process. With each character Moberg concentrates on a typical or representative emigrant and behind every decision is the vision of a better life. Karl Oskar is the prototype of the early Scandinavian emigrant, the small farmer who cannot, even with hard work, make a living on his small holdings, but as he is rooted in tradition and society his decision has to emerge step by step. Danjel's reason for leaving his native country is religious persecution - the rendering of this motif stresses the close connection between the powers of church and state and shows that even here is a social motivation. Robert's quest is for freedom from masters, while Karl Oskar's is for freedom to make a living for himself and his family. Kristina, the reluctant wife, is finally persuaded to leave when her daughter dies, indirectly because of material need.

The emigration of 1825, as depicted in Hauge's *Cleang Peerson* novel, came about for reasons of religious oppression. There is much irony in

the militant actions taken against the peaceful Quakers; one pastor thinks they represent "republicanism" and anarchy. Like Moberg, Hauge also demonstrates convincingly the social aspects of this religious emigration theme. The Quakers' practicing of their faith was seen as a threat to established society because their behavior did not conform to the social order. This particular feature, which seems to be historically correct, is stressed time and again in the first part of the novel through the interaction of the characters with the larger society. In this first-person novel, Cleng, as the hero of a picaresque novel, moves in different social settings and helps to underline the social aspects of the "emigrating because of religious oppression" theme. The sloopers' dreams or visions were of freedom to practice their religion according to their own conviction and conscience.

The next stage of the emigration process is the journey. The journey across the ocean is just touched on by Bojer. Rølvaag does not describe it at all; as already mentioned he opens with the journey westward on the prairie. Moberg depicts the crossing in broad outline, and thus makes his characters more conscious of why they emigrated as they, on the ship, get to know each others reasons. The social life within the group during the crossing also shows the beginning of the change of the old social order that came about, when people moved from the old to the new country. Hauge devotes much time and space to describe the dramatic, adventurous and authentic journey of the "Restoration." That Hauge has included Cleng Peerson among the passengers, which is not historically correct, is a consequence of Hauge's choice of him as the dramatized narrator.

In spite of great differences in time and place, there are striking similarities in the descriptions of the settling process in all four works. Numerous details, which strongly support the illusion of reality and the authenticity of the descriptions, show the breaking of new land, the building of new houses, the whole task of building up a new existence from the very beginning. Typical for this stage of the process is the emigrants' use of concepts from their old life to cope with the new situation. This is an important structural element. Hauge differs slightly on this point, i.e. not in the basic description, but in describing the settling several times throughout the book, Kendall and Fox River especially, but touching on several other settlements, not all of which are Norwegian.

Among the characteristic features that are important for the interpretation of the emigration process in the different novels, that of the "collective novel" has been mentioned as important in the descriptions

of the social motivation for emigration in Bojer's, Moberg's and Hauge's works. Although this aspect is less strong as time goes, the group element leads to interactions between the individual emigrants' fates which create a complex and many-sided picture of the emigrant existence and the development of the ethnic communities. In Moberg's and Bojer's books this interaction between the characters within the group, as well as between them and the society around them, broadens the social theme.

While Bojer, Moberg and Hauge devote much time to what can be called the first stage of the emigration process, they do not describe the experience of the second generation as Rølvaag does. This difference is of course connected with his immigrant perspective. Rølvaag's novel also has a group of characters at the center of attention as the book opens, but it is worth noting that the way the characters relate to each other is quite different from the kind of interaction just described, and the group aspect therefore has a different impact on his interpretation. In Rølvaag's novel it mainly deepens the differences between the characters, for example the way Beret is compared to the other women makes her fear stand out even clearer, and the way Per is compared to the other men underlines his strength. The collective element in Rølvaag's book serves to bring out the differences between the main characters and thus supports another basic element of this novel, contrasting.

Contrasting is an important structural element in Rølvaag's rhetoric and can be found on all levels of his novel, contrasting characters, groups, ideas and attitudes. When Rølvaag describes the emigrant experience by contrasting two totally different characters, he seems to have intended a representative picture giving both sides of the issues. But an important effect of this contrasting is instead the dramatization of differences as such and the emphasizing of individualistic and psychological aspects of the emigrant experience. In his pioneer novel the Norwegian-American Rølvaag presents what in his view was "the tragedy of the immigrant."⁴ It is a powerful picture, considered by many to be unmatched by the Scandinavian writers in its emotional and psychological authenticity. The two characters created to depict the two different emigrant experiences are equally strong as individuals and equally successful as literary portrayals.

When we get to the two sequels in the emigrant trilogy, with the element of contrasting now featuring Peder and Susie, opposites as personalities, in nationality, and politics, the impact is a rather heavy lopsidedness in Rølvaag's message of "preserving the heritage."⁵ The

two cultures do not stand out as equals or as equally worth preserving. It seems to have been Rølvaag's intention with these two novels to show how important it is to preserve one's cultural heritage, but he has only partly realized his intention because the text says that one culture is more worth preserving than the other. There are two reasons for this: One is that the didactic element has marred the literary quality, and the other is that while contrasting is again used as the main structural principle, Peder and Susie do not appear as equals, either as persons or as literary characters.

Moberg, too, has a husband and a wife at the center of his description of emigrant life. But his depiction of the relationship between Karl Oskar's and Kristina's way of experiencing the existence as emigrants differs greatly from Rølvaag's by being a dialectical one. They influence and moderate each other and together they present a many-sided picture. This is also the case in their relation to the other characters in the group. In the first stage of the thematic structure typical of the emigrant novel, there are several equally important characters, each illustrating different reasons for leaving the home country. But even after Karl Oskar and Kristine have become the center of attention as main characters, the interaction between all the characters in the group as well as between the individuals and the surrounding society further the representative aspect.

A basic structural element of Moberg's emigrant novel, however, is the double perspective. The characters view their new life in constant comparison to the old one. In the beginning, their knowledge of the practical aspects of life helps them in creating their new existence materially, and concepts from their old existence as social beings are used to understand their new surroundings. Towards the end of their lives, Karl Oskar and Ulrika measure the fulfillment of the vision that led them to emigration by comparing their life in America with what they had in Sweden. For Ulrika the main point is that America gave her the opportunity to develop her human potential. For Karl Oskar it is the freedom America has given him to make a living for himself and his family with hard work. Moberg's use of double perspective underlines the social aspects of emigration and brings the social criticism of the Swedish society of the 1840's in clear focus. This criticism is found throughout the novels and is furthered by the double perspective. This does not mean that Moberg paints an overly optimistic picture of the emigrant experience, the rewards and results. Karl Oskar's relative fulfillment has taken a lifetime of hard work. And added to his, or rather in interaction with it, is Kristina's emigrant experience, featuring

another important aspect inherent in the double perspective, namely homesickness: living a lifetime longing for the old country and not feeling at home in the new one. The double perspective also exists in Rødvaag's emigrant novel, and Kristina's and Beret's homesickness can of course be compared. But it should be noted that in Rødvaag's work this concept is closely connected with his cultural theme: the preservation of the heritage.

In Hauge's Cleng Peerson trilogy the quest for freedom is as important as in Moberg's epic. The social aspect of the theme of religious oppression is emphasized. Hauge's group of emigrants is a real "collective" in a social sense, more so than any of the other groups of emigrants found in this material. But in the artistic presentation there is a first-person narrator as mediator between the group and the reader. Since the other characters are seen through Cleng's eyes, identification is difficult. The form of the "fictitious memoir," however, endows the first-person narrative with a flexibility that allows a constant movement in time, in place and among characters. This is the story of Cleng Peerson as well as of the Quaker emigration and the multiple settlements; the search for identity, i.e. the answer to the question "who am I," is a leading motif throughout. This is underlined in the thematic structure of the book and in the presentation of the emigration process by describing settling down several times. The repeated attempts at building up a new life is related to the central theme of a search for the meaning of life.

Bojer's book seems to give the most optimistic portrayal of the emigrant experience. The intention, as seen in the selection of motifs and characters, seems to have been to create a more complex picture, but a superficial treatment of many of them, partly due to such a wide scope in one single book, makes only a few stand out. The one part of the book that is successful is the story of Kal Skaret, a story of how suppressed talents and human potential get a chance to emerge in the new country. The double perspective is a basic element of this story: Kal Skaret never forgets where he came from, and he measures everything he accomplishes against his life as a cottager in Norway.

The four works discussed here offer different, but not opposing interpretations of the emigrant experience. The differences can be found in the writers' intentions, in the time and place chosen as setting for each of them, and in the different literary forms. Bojer builds his fiction on representative features. Within the thematic structure of the emigrant novel, Rødvaag's emphasis is on the psychological and cultural aspects especially related to the individual experience, while Moberg's emphasis is on the psychological and social. Moberg is the only one to

see the fate of the Indians in a truly historical context: the Indians have to give up their land for the emigrant to build up his new existence. Hauge sees the fundamental aspects of emigration as a quest for freedom, religious and material, as well as a search for identity.

These novels have been labeled historical novels and in that respect one might point out the rather obvious fact that they, in addition to being marked by the times they deal with, are also products of the times when they were written. Bojer's novel fits into the Norwegian tradition of neo-realism. Rølvaag's work is influenced by the 1920's, by the gradual dissolution of ethnic communities and by his engagement in this situation to preserve his Norwegian cultural heritage in the new homeland, America. Moberg's criticism of the Swedish society of the 1840's echoes his attacks on the Swedish society of the 1950's, for example concerning the role of the monarchy and especially concerning the situation of the individual. Hauge's novels are influenced by his interest in the question of identity, so much to the fore in the late 1950's and early 1960's, also in Norwegian literature. Together these novels have influenced, and continue to influence, many Scandinavians' understanding of various aspects of the process of emigration. This is knowledge and insight that should be useful to us now when the Scandinavian countries, no longer being countries of emigration, have become countries of immigration.

NOTES

- * This article is a slightly revised version of a paper given at The Conference on Scandinavian Immigration, Settlement, and Acculturation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, August 26-30, 1984.
1. Johan Bojer, *The Emigrants* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1978); O.E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, A Perennial Classic 1965), *Peder Victorious* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1982), *Their Fathers' God* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1983); Vilhelm Moberg, *The Emigrants, Unto a Good Land, The Settlers, Last Letter Home* (New York: Fawcett Popular Library, 1978); Alfred Hauge, *Cleng Peerson I-II* (Boston: Twayne, The Library of Scandinavian Literature, 1975). For the entire Scandinavian-American literary tradition, see Dorothy Burton Skårdal, *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Through Literary Sources* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), and, in addition, Jørund Mannsåker, *Emigrasjon og diktning: Utvandringa til Nord-Amerika i norsk skjønlitteratur* (Emigration and Fiction: The Emigration to North-America in Norwegian Imaginative Literature), (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1971).
2. Rølvaag in an essay on *Giants ...* in *The Editor*, Aug. 6, 1927, 81-85.
3. Moberg in the essay "Om historiska romaner" (About historical novels), *Otrons artiklar* (Stockholm: Forfattarforlaget, 1973).
4. O.E. Rølvaag, *Omkring Fædrearven* (Concerning the ancestral heritage), (Northfield: St. Olaf College Press, 1922).
5. *Ibid.*