

# Nietzsche, Keillor, and the Religious Heritage of Lake Wobegon

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"Let us face ourselves. We are Hyperboreans."

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*

When I found out that Friedrich Nietzsche was raised as a Lutheran and that his father and grandfather were Lutheran pastors, I could not resist the temptation to include Nietzsche's insights in a paper on Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*. It was partly the spirit of Keillor's humor that prompted such a seemingly absurd juxtaposition of authors: what could a German philosopher and a humorist of the American Midwest possibly have in common? I knew, however, that the comparison of Keillor and Nietzsche was not at all absurd and that Nietzsche's writings were directly relevant to a book that discusses, among other things, Midwestern Lutheranism. In fact, I want to argue that Nietzsche's philosophy provides a useful background for analyzing *Lake Wobegon Days* and particularly an extraordinary section of the book, "95 Theses," the footnote parody of Luther's 95 theses which runs the entire length of one chapter. Nietzsche's psychological critique of religion and his "genealogy of morals" have much in common with Keillor's subversive "95 Theses." Both men resent the inhibitions that have been imposed on them in their Lutheran upbringing, and both describe a process of what Nietzsche terms "self-overcoming" as each author revalues the values with which he was raised.

By discussing Nietzsche alongside of Keillor, I also hope to bring *Lake Wobegon Days* – and Midwestern literature in general – out of a strictly regional setting. Mentioning Nietzsche in the same breath as Keillor will, I hope, confer intellectual respect on Keillor's writings and help us to see in his work something more than humorous nostalgia. It will also, I hope, allow us to understand the Midwest in light of the larger cultural context out of which it grew. Lake Wobegon began, after all, as a transplant of European religion and culture on American soil, and it is that European (particularly Northern European) religion and culture that Nietzsche makes the subject of his philosophy.

"95 Theses" is the most original as well as the most unusual section of *Lake Wobegon Days*. Running as a long footnote through the entire length of a chapter entitled "News," it comprises a list of grievances against the town of Lake Wobegon written by a former resident and modeled on Luther's document of the same name. Rather than nailing the list to the door of the church, however, the anonymous author of the modern "95" submits his document of protest to the local newspaper, the *Lake Wobegon Herald-Star*, run by Harold Starr. Unfortunately, the manuscript suffers from Mr. Starr's neglect. Several of its pages are lost, some of its points are obliterated by a coffee stain, and it never finds its way into print. "95 Theses" does find its way into the text of *Lake Wobegon Days*, however, where it exists within the larger text as a partial manuscript, blemished and consigned to oblivion by neglect, a bit of revolutionary commentary that will never be read by the Wobegonians who would surely be scandalized by it.

Although the Lake Wobegon "95" is modeled on Luther's 95 Theses, it resembles the writings of Nietzsche, the lapsed Lutheran, more than it does those of Luther. The Lake Wobegon "95" directs its criticisms not against sin and corruption in the world but against the very ideas of sin and corruption as defined by the morality of Lake Wobegon. As such, it comes closer to Nietzsche's outrage over morals than to Luther's moral outrage. The author of the "95" venomously criticizes the mores of the culture in which he was raised, a culture which he feels has hobbled him for life. "You misdirected me," he complains, "as surely as if you had said the world is flat and north is west and two plus two is four: i.e., not utterly wrong, just wrong enough so that when I took the opposite position ... I was wrong, too ... *You gave me the wrong things to rebel against*" (author's italics) (#74).

Just as in Nietzsche's philosophy of rebellion, repudiation of the ancestor's religion is the cornerstone of the "95." The author comes to see the Lutheran morality of his youth as the source for all that is defective in his later character. The pleasure-denying ideals he learned in his boyhood have, he believes, resulted in a "nice, quiet, fastidious" person who cannot enjoy himself. As he says of his upbringing in Thesis 21: "Suffering was its own reward, to be preferred to pleasure. As Lutherans, we viewed pleasure with suspicion ... We were born to suffer." Perhaps most importantly, the author of the "95" believes the Lutheran moral code fostered what he terms "repression:"

You taught me to be nice, so that now I am so full of niceness, I have no sense of right and wrong, no outrage, no passion. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," you said, so I am very quiet, which most people think is politeness. I call it repression. (#9)

For the author of the "95," repression is the most harmful legacy of his Lutheran background, and it has inevitably confused what he calls his "sexual identity." He writes, "You have taught me to feel shame and disgust about my own body, so that I am afraid to clear my throat or blow my nose" (#5); and in another thesis, "You taught me an indecent fear of sexuality. I'm not sure I have any left underneath this baked-on crust of shame and disgust" (#15). Nor can he later be more specific about his grievances regarding the sexual mores of his hometown. He cannot even write theses 80-82, which deal with sexuality. The author of the "95" is still so much a creature of his culture that he is unable to put into words his ideas regarding sexuality. Even after a lifetime of attempted change, the self-censorship and guilt of Lake Wobegon remain strong within him.

The author of the "95" also sees the religion of Lake Wobegon as fostering a suspicious, spiteful, and judgmental attitude towards others. Its code divides the world into the moral and immoral, the holy and the sinful, the good and the evil, and those falling outside the accepted realm are treated with disdain. Lake Wobegon's morality fosters a general attitude of dismissive judgment designed to make those who judge feel superior. Thesis #68 reads, "Everything was set in place in your universe, and you knew what everything and everybody was, whether you had ever seen them or not. You could glance at strangers and size them up

instantly ... [Y]ou knew who they were, and you were seldom generous in your assessments."

The observations contained in Lake Wobegon's "95 Theses" have much in common with Nietzsche's own views on religion, which I would like to briefly examine. I also want to consider Nietzsche's thought as a reaction to a Lutheran upbringing that must have been similar in some respects to that experienced by a boy growing up in central Minnesota.

Nietzsche grew up in an atmosphere imbued with the spirit of German Lutheranism. Because his father and grandfather were Lutheran pastors, much of his youth was spent in and around Lutheran parsonages – for the first five years of his life in his father's home, and at his grandfather's parsonage during summer vacations after his father's death. Nietzsche's family assumed that he would become a clergyman as well, but his schooling took him in another direction. He received an excellent classical education in preparatory school and eventually became more interested in philology, philosophy, and psychology than religion. Although he registered at Bonn University as a student of theology, he decided not to pursue a career in the clergy. In fact, by the age of 20 he was no longer attending church (Hayman 66). His education and his temperament had led him away from the career his family desired, introduced him to a wide and varied world of ideas and values, and started him on a long road of rebellion.

Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers to call himself a psychologist and to consider morality and religion in explicitly psychological terms. For Nietzsche, to examine religion psychologically meant to consider the psychological aspects of religious faith. The psychologist drops all belief in the transcendental, other-worldly quality of the ideas he is studying – God, faith, sin, good – and asks instead how these ideas function in the world as it is, how they serve those who use them. The answers Nietzsche came up with are not at all flattering for Christianity. In fact, Nietzsche finally sought to overturn all Christian values, to see the Christian "good" as unnatural and unhealthy, and to see the Christian "evil" as its desired opposite. In his reversed system of values, Christianity opposes itself to Nature and is, in his terminology, "decadent."

Nietzsche's philosophy, as he developed it in *The Genealogy of Morals*, *The Antichrist*, and other works, asserts that Christianity is the morality of the weak, the poor, and the sick. For Nietzsche, Christianity is

a "slave ethic," a moral code of the outcast and downtrodden that is opposed to the "noble" ethic of the strong, privileged and healthy. As a result, Christianity is fundamentally a religion of vengefulness and spite: "At the bottom of Christianity is the rancor of the sick, instinct directed against the healthy, against health itself" (Portable Nietzsche 634).<sup>1</sup> According to Nietzsche, Christianity reverses natural affinities and instincts and allows its adherents to convert their own neuroses into virtues and to view the healthy as the sick, the dirty, and the sinful. Christians are able to vaunt their own manner of living as pious and holy. In Nietzsche's words, "By letting God judge, they themselves judge; by glorifying God, they glorify themselves; by demanding the virtues of which they happen to be capable ... they give themselves the magnificent appearance of a struggle for virtue ... [I]n truth, they do what they cannot help doing" (621). Christian morality, Nietzsche writes, is only "misfortune besmirched with the concept of 'sin'; ... physiological indisposition poisoned with the worm of conscience" (595).

Christianity is perhaps most importantly for Nietzsche a "negation of life," or "a form of mortal enmity against reality" (598). "The only motivating force at the root of Christianity," he says, is an "instinctive hatred of reality" (613). The weak, neurotic, and unhealthy withdraw from life and focus their thought on another world, a "true" world beyond this one, which is for Nietzsche only a "nothingness," a negation of what is. As an adjunct to this negation of life, their ideology despises the body and all sensual pleasures. Nietzsche summarizes the essence of Christianity as "a certain sense of cruelty against oneself and against others; hatred of all who think differently; the will to persecute ... the hatred ... of pride, courage, freedom, liberty of the spirit; Christian is the hatred of the senses, of joy in the senses, of joy itself" (589).

Though Nietzsche admired certain aspects of Jesus's teaching, he viewed the interpretations of that teaching by later Christians as progressively more degenerate, ending with the worst of all: his own Protestant, Lutheran tradition. Luther, according to Nietzsche, inspired a so-called "peasant revolt" that ended the promising Renaissance attempt to "re-evaluate all values" and bring back to life the noble ideals of the ancient world. For Nietzsche, Protestantism (which he defines as "the partial

1. All Nietzsche quotations are from *The Portable Nietzsche*.

paralysis of Christianity – *and of reason*" [576]) was a particularly German invention, and he sees a Protestant influence pervading all succeeding German philosophy, particularly that of Kant. Kant's moral philosophy, with its idea of the categorical imperative, shares with Christianity the concept of morality as "the essence of the world," a concept that Nietzsche considers one of the two most "malignant errors of all time" (577). In Nietzsche's words, "What could destroy us more quickly than working, thinking, and feeling without any inner necessity, without any deeply personal choice, without *pleasure* – as an automaton of 'duty'?" (578). For Nietzsche, Kant's moral ethic takes away a necessary requirement for action in life: the ability to see oneself as an end rather than simply a means. The Nietzschean essence of the world is the self or spirit and its will to power.

That is a very crude summary of Nietzsche's views on religion. It is enough, however, to allow us to see some of the similarities between Nietzsche and the author of *Lake Wobegon's* "95 Theses." The tone and content of Nietzsche's philosophy could hardly be farther from the humorous *Lake Wobegon Days*, but it is very close to the "95 Theses." The "95" contains the same protest against a culture perceived to be stultifying, harmful, and unnatural. Both the "95"'s author and Nietzsche reject the attitudes towards life typical in *Lake Wobegon*: repression and avoidance of sensual pleasure, disgust with the body, rejection of this life for an afterlife, and spite towards those of other faiths and values. Like Nietzsche, the author of the "95" is a keen observer of human psychology and sees the origin of *Lake Wobegon's* high ideals in base psychological motives. He sees the division of people into good and evil as serving a utility for those like his parents who must so hierarchize the world. The category of evil allows their own inclinations to shine as virtues.

Also like Nietzsche, the author of the "95" comes to despise the values of his native culture and his own Lutheran tradition. He sees how they have restricted his own life and adopts the reverse values. But even then he is constrained by his past:

I adopted the mirror-reverse of our prejudices and I apply them viciously. I detest neat-looking people like myself and people who look industrious and respectable. I sneer at them as middle-class. In elections, I vote automatically against Scandinavian names (#68).

Though he has completely reversed Lake Wobegon's values, his lack of generosity is no improvement on his parents. His is only a new sanctimony similarly based on disappointment and frustration. He recognizes that his Nietzschean project of self-overcoming or self-conquest has been a failure conditioned by the very things that he was rebelling against. Although he is intelligent enough to be conscious of the origins of his problems, he seems to be a permanent psychological casualty of what he calls "the long drought" of his youth.

"95 Theses" rejects the moral values and customs of Lake Wobegon as harmful and unnatural, but what about *Lake Wobegon Days* as a whole? Does it harbor the same sentiments? What is the relationship between this serious, subversive footnote and this humorous, rather nostalgic book?

One way to try to answer these questions is by comparing the different personae Keillor uses in *Lake Wobegon Days*. The first-person narrator of the book, Gary, has a personal history similar to that of both Keillor himself and the "95"'s author. The narrator, like Keillor, is the product of a Protestant sect even more rigid than Lutheranism, and he shows the same impatience to shed his native religion.<sup>2</sup> He also attempts to escape the narrow, religion-based morality of his youth and construct a new self outside of Lake Wobegon. "Most of Lake Wobegon's children leave, as I did," the narrator writes, "to realize themselves as finer persons than they were allowed to be at home" (14).

The narrator's process of self-reformation is both explicit and comic. After moving to the Twin Cities to attend college, he sees a Lake Wobegon friend and ducks away to avoid him. He comments: "I was redesigning myself and didn't care to be the person he knew" (19). The young Gary also tries to impress the women of Minneapolis with fake foreign accents and phony family backgrounds. In his stories his father becomes a diplomat, then a bank robber, and his family becomes Italian. He imagines how his family will one day blow their cover and drop the "grim theology of tight-lipped English Puritans" and begin dancing (20). Similarly, both Gary the narrator and the Tollefson boy (yet another version of Keillor's self) fantasize about life with the Flambeau family, free spirits featured in a series of children's books. The Flambeaus treat their

2. Keillor's family were members of a protestant sect called the Plymouth Brethren, a group of dissenters from the Anglicans.

son as an adult and "do what they *feel* like doing – *when* they feel like it, not like in Lake Wobegon" (154).

Unlike the author of the "95," though, the narrator of *Lake Wobegon Days* successfully fashions a new self. He goes beyond the values taught him in his Lake Wobegon childhood and conquers the self they controlled. Consequently, he is able to look back at his hometown with less spite and even with a hint of nostalgia. The author of the "95" is not so fortunate. He remains unhappy and cannot overcome his feelings of bitterness regarding his past.

It might be argued that the Lutheran author of the "95" provides an all too convenient mask for Keillor, a means of displacing from the public persona and radio show host, "Garrison Keillor," the subversive implications of the "95 Theses." Keillor, this argument runs, is allowed to have his cake and eat it too: he can vehemently criticize Lake Wobegon in the "95," and at the same time praise the more positive aspects of the town in the main narrative. I think Keillor escapes this criticism, however. By distancing the author of the "95" from himself, Keillor addresses a larger theme. He makes the issue something more than his own efforts to come out from under the shadow of an obscure Protestant sect. In fact Keillor uses "95 Theses" to examine a more general and vital issue: the issue of the self's relationship to the cultural past it inherits and by which it is shaped.

The "95" asks a question that Keillor would not otherwise pose so directly in *Lake Wobegon Days*: where do we stand in relationship to our ancestral heritage? Keillor himself in one of his humor pieces wrote a humorous version of this question as a mock book title: *The Christian Faith: Is It Helping Us or Holding Us Back?*<sup>3</sup> The persona of the 95 would, I believe, say that Christianity is definitely holding us back, but in *Lake Wobegon Days* as a whole, the issue is ambiguous. Keillor treats the religious figures of his novel with respect while at the same time criticizing the repression that characterized his own fundamentalist family. Keillor stops short of Nietzsche and does not completely dismiss religion.

Garrison Keillor is not a Nietzsche, nor does he subscribe to any clear "ism." He is, however, very much aware of the cultural and intellectual

3. We Are *Still* Married, list of books "Coming Soon," opposite the title page.



forces of his time and has proved as much in his satire. His understanding of psychology most likely comes via the large influence of Freud and psychoanalysis rather than Nietzsche. Nietzsche is mentioned at least once in Keillor's works, though, in a satiric essay on alternative weddings entitled "Your Wedding and You." There in a recommended list of readings is *The Portable Nietzsche*, along with such works as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, and Joyce Carol Oates' *Them* (Happy to Be Here 166-167).

However different they may seem, Nietzsche and Keillor both question the Christian heritage and, more specifically, the Protestant tradition that shaped their lives. Both use fictional persona – Zarathustra in Nietzsche's case, the anonymous author of the "95" in Keillor's – to voice their strongest messages of rebellion. The author of the "95" writes his message to Lake Wobegon asking, like Nietzsche, for a "revaluation of all values." Seeking perhaps to spark a new reformation that owes more to psychology than religion, the anonymous author of Lake Wobegon's "95 Theses" valiantly and eloquently lists the faults of his hometown. But, insulated behind layers of complacency and stupidity, the town never receives the message. Lake Wobegon will have to wait for another reformer. To show as much, Keillor makes his remarkable "95 Theses" a footnote hanging from the body of the text like a shameful appendage, because that is surely how the residents of Lake Wobegon would see it. The status of "95 Theses" as a note to the text reflects its status in the community as a whole. It is outside the mainstream and outside the public narrative of Lake Wobegon.

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