

Christer Lennart Mossberg, *Scandinavian Immigrant Literature* (Boise State University Western Writers Series. No. 47). Boise, Idaho, 1981. 52 pp.

Immigrant experiences are central in that composite but simplified construct we often unreflectingly call the »American Experience.« Consequently, immigration has long been an important chapter in American historiography, and we have excellent studies both of immigration in general and of particular groups. The writings of immigrants are an important source for any understanding of their experience, yet these writings do not yet belong to »American Literature,« another simplified construct. A gesture of inclusion

was made by the editors of the 1948 two volume *Literary History of the United States* with the 18 page chapter »The Mingling of Tongues« by Henry A. Pochmann. In spite of this useful pioneering survey, most accounts of American literature are still written without any mention of the large body of non-English texts by immigrants. This is also true of most studies of the literature of the American West, even though »Over eighty novels and short story collections trace the Scandinavian farmsteading experience in Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas. . .

The quotation is from Christer Lennart Mossberg, *Scandinavian Immigrant Literature* (p. 5), a pamphlet in the Boise State University Western Writers Series. The editors of the series have made an important decision in thus including a largely unknown group of foreign language writers in their category of American »Western writers.«

Mossberg has written a doctoral dissertation (unpublished) on »The Immigrant Voice as Literature: Scandinavian Immigrant Fiction of the American West« (Indiana, 1979), and it is obvious that only a little part of the full story can be told in the less than fifty pages of a pamphlet. Mossberg has chosen to present the main themes of this literature and then show how these have been dealt with in selected works by a few representative writers of different periods. Within the limited scope imposed by the series format, Mossberg gives perceptive characterizations and readings of several Danish-, Swedish-, and Norwegian-American works of fiction, demonstrating that it is high time we begin to revise accepted notions of what comprises American literature. Such a revision may also show that accepted notions of American myths and literary themes do not necessarily apply to all of American literature.

There can be little argument with Mossberg's selection of authors and texts. But the premises for his selection raise a number of critical issues that require serious consideration. Thus Mossberg is not convincing in his attempts to define his field. There is no need to argue at length that Knut Hamsun is not an American writer in spite of his 4-5 years in the mid-West. On the other hand Mossberg includes Kristofer Jansen as a central figure even though his American career was an eleven year interlude. How to draw the line? Even more problematic are Mossberg's exclusions of writers who do not belong to the mid-Western Scandinavian immigrant community. Thus Hjalmar Boyesen is not an immigrant writer because he »embraced the American literary establishment.« Jakob Riis is not mentioned, but would obviously not qualify since his autobiography, *The Making of an American*, »reveals no special insight into immigrant life« (p. 6), as this is defined by Mossberg. Should Thorstein Veblen be considered a Scandinavian immigrant writer?

Mossberg approaches Scandinavian immigrant literature as »a collective, imaginative world which expresses the sacrifices and aspirations of the immigrant group.« I think this is a fruitful approach if one applies a liberal rather than a Leninist model. In a Leninist model there can be no tension or debate after a majority decision has been made: factionalism cannot be tolerated after the general outline of the immigrants' »collective imaginative world« has been decided upon, and Boyesen must be excluded from the party. But what are the experiences of Boyesen and Riis if not immigrant experiences?

Riis is apparently excluded for several other reasons as well. The title of Mossberg's dissertation has two important words that are not mentioned in the title of the pamphlet but are essential as guides to its content: »Fiction« and »West.« A regional limitation is certainly expected in the Western Writers Series, but Mossberg goes beyond such limitations and claims that writers must have »insight into Western immigrant life« in order to be »termed 'immigrant writers'« (p. 6). And to Mossberg Western immigrant life is synonymous with farming, which again would exclude such Western novels as Rølvaag's *Længselens baat* (1921) and Arnfinn Brufnot's *Inn i Amerika* (1980).

Since Brufnot's major work is poetry, however, that alone places him outside the scope of Mossberg's pamphlet, even though he does not explicitly admit to such limitations. The problem of genres requires some careful thought. No one will presumably argue seriously against the inclusion of poetry and drama in a study of immigrant literature, but the inclusion of diaries, autobiographies, travel accounts and sermons should also be considered. The first centuries of American literary history would have to be considerably revised if these and other genres were no longer to be included there. I suggest that as far as genres are concerned, the study of immigrant literature should be as catholic as the study of colonial literature traditionally has been.

The difficulties facing such study, however, are such that a carefully organized and well-funded large scale effort is necessary. Even for such a culturally and linguistically homogeneous group as the Scandinavians, there have been very few comparative studies. (Here Dorothy Skårdal, *The Divided Heart*, 1974, is a pioneer). Even these few, however, do not include the closely related Icelandic, while language is an efficient barrier to the inclusion of Finnish, even though Kotiranta's bibliography of Finnish-American literature (1970) runs to more than 100 pages. Since the American studies scholar with a mastery of Finnish, Icelandic, Serbo-Kroatian and Yiddish — not to mention Asian languages — is yet to be born, a project for the study and translation of immigrant literature would need the joint efforts of the American Studies Association as well as the Modern Language Association.

Meanwhile the publication of Christer Lennart Mossberg's modest pamphlet is a step in the right direction.

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