Journal of American Studies of Turkey
6 (1997) : 69-70.

Book Review

The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America by Orm 0verland. Published by the Norwegian American Historical Association. University of Illinois Press 1996,442 pages.

Michael Oppermann

Orm 0verland has provided a comprehensive study of a hitherto neglected aspect of American Literature. His *History of Norwegian America* carefully examines and reevaluates the Norwegian heritage in the States, from its beginnings in the first half of the 19th century to its gradual decline in the 20th century. Presented in six parts, the study closes with a lucid introduction to six Norwegian writers who, contrary to established Norwegian Americans such as Carl Sandburg, wrote most of their material in their mother tongue. Simon Johnson, Dorthea Dahl, Jon Norstog, Johannes B. Wist, Waldemar Ager and even the fairly established Ole Edvart Rolvaag have been sadly neglected by the critical discourse.

The book title *The Western Home* is a direct translation of the term "Vesterheimen" which, in the original Old Norse, meant as much as "The Western World"; it was used, however, in the sense of "Our Western Home." Coined in 1875, the term soon acquired the meaning of a specifically Norwegian America. 0verland uses the term in a two-fold manner; for him, it designates the Norwegian-American social and cultural community (rather than the individual Norwegian Americans), and it also depicts the dream that "gave life to this community" (380). For 0verland, this dream equals an idealistic version of a vital and lasting Norwegian-American culture within the larger American cultural context. However, 0verland has to concede that the writers in question were just as transitional as the culture that defined them and that they helped to create. Nevertheless, he regards their contribution as timeless because they managed to turn Norwegian into an American literary language. In addition to that, they created a record of emotional and social life of a significant ethnic group on its way to becoming integrated into American society, to the point of becoming Americanized. In that respect, the transitional nature of a Norwegian-American literature points to "The American Experience" per se. 0verland regards his *Literary History of Norwegian America* as part of an ongoing history that continues to be written in new ethnic contexts as immigrants keep on coming to the US; "transition," in other words, appears as an archetypal American pattern.

0verland clearly opts for an extension of the canon of American Literature; he puts forward the view that a contemporary conception of American Literature should not be narrowed down to works that were originally written in English. 0verland convincingly argues that such a theory ignores the fact that "throughout American history majorities have naturally spoken, written, and read other languages than English for periods in the life of many cities, towns and rural areas" (ix). Accordingly, 0verland defines American literature as the literature of those "who are American by choice or by birth regardless of language" (ix). Thus, the author presents the first complete narrative of an American non-English literary culture. Substantial and profound as it is, 0verland's study is clear proof of the fact that the equation of American literature with literature in English means the exclusion of a considerable number of significant writers and writings. For this reason, *The Western Home* should be the beginning of a new critical debate on the entire concept of American literature.

0verland carefully links literature with social and aesthetic developments in America and abroad. His style is clear and lucid so that his *Literary History of Norwegian America* should find many readers even outside the academic community.