

Wobegonian Modesty and Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*

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Lake Wobegon survives to the extent that it does on a form of voluntary socialism with elements of Deism, fatalism, and nepotism.

– Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*¹

The humble Midwestern town also survives on modesty and a range of satellite sentiments and postures, depending very much on them in Garrison Keillor's 1985 book *Lake Wobegon Days*. It is, firmly, a work of pastoral—a literary representation of social, emotional, and aesthetic dualities and tensions in the frame, or in mind, of rural or regional place. Its vital and interesting connection to this mode depends, critically, on its *not* being the work of blandly sentimentalist affirmation or sugared “nostalgia for the simple life”² that mode is commonly seen as. Structurally, too, it is more complicatedly a somewhat loose or meandering assemblage than a novel, organised—such as it is—variously by the seasons, the growth of its narrating figures, and progression through the town's semi-factual history. It is not quite part of, but gamely enacts in a local sphere, “the long tradition in America of insisting on taking into account the whole being of the American and the entire swath of the country's history.”³ The book is, accordingly, quite long, at 502 pages. Tellingly, it opens with a preface

directly from Keillor's perspective (something he later distorts and toys with throughout the book), which describes the Hemingway-esque loss of a manuscript—two unrepeatably perfect short stories—at the Portland train station. The faintly apologetic preface ends by telling readers that “this book, while not nearly so fine, will have to suffice”⁴ until what was lost at the train station returns. The book is, then, begun with and framed in its entirety by an exaggerated, undercutting modesty, a mood and morally-aspected social posture deeply associated with the Midwest and both held, and held at a distance for scrutiny, by Keillor. Michael J. Rosen persuasively suggests that “it is humility on the part of writers that distinguishes Midwestern literature—a place where writers understand that their value is the value of their region.”⁵ Shyness, determined self-deprecation and overwhelming restraint are feelings and tendencies purposefully layered, not always ingenuously or approvingly, through the work, through Keillor's personae, his style, his characters, and the town of Lake Wobegon's history, geography, and social practices: a meditative, halting bringing-through of the region and its value.

The literary calculation of this layering mitigates and makes inadequately partial the description of Keillor as a “yarnspinner”⁶ or of his work as predominantly or essentially “a throwback to a time when America was genuinely innocent”:⁷ as, in general, “being for Americans what *All Creatures Great and Small* has been for the English.”⁸ Crucially, it unsettles and ironises Keillor's own assessments of the town and state as, for example, a “barren frozen plain populated by cranks and fanatics.”⁹ Modesty, deference, self-sacrifice and self-deprecation are, to both comic and melancholy effect, the central weights of Wobegonian existence, towards which all other things are inclined. The general satirical ambivalence and exaggeration of the characterisation fails to support Joseph A. Amato's judgement that “radio audiences from coast to coast have been wooed into believing that Minnesota has an undisturbed core of niceness.”¹⁰ If Keillor's books and monologues about Lake Wobegon (and, in a way, Minnesota) have a core, it is one of ironically weighted modesty, and modesty is not—as Keillor goes to some lengths to emphasise—synonymous with niceness: it is primarily deference and defensive remoteness, or strange acquiescence. Lake Wobegon's stylised tension of social reciprocity and illustration of identities complicatedly (even excessively) grounded in place are what principally make Keillor's work pastoral in mode, and modesty is critical, indeed overwhelmingly vital, in these operations. What Keillor's controlled gestures do, on the whole, is connect the constantly balancing, shy activity of his Lake Wobegon prose with Emerson's pastoral-like remark that “it is not metres, but a metre-

making argument that makes a poem.”¹¹ The cross-currents of hesitation, pride, bashfulness, grace and self-doubt, tending inexorably towards modesty, dialectically create the nature of the town, the people, and the books.

Lake Wobegon Days, as a prolonged, mock-ethnographic evocation of a town ordinarily shown in short monologues or pieces like those lost at the station, is, then, as much made up as marked by this especially thorough, peculiarly emphatic modesty: one recurrent in various forms, on different levels, and at varying intensities, to the extent that it is the main scheme—the organising and animating practice—of the book. Keillor himself described the book, characteristically and tellingly, as “a collection of pieces which are trying to make themselves into a novel.”¹² For all Keillor’s disclaiming of the competent formal integrity of *Lake Wobegon Days*, I would wish to moderate Judith Yaross Lee’s judgement that his ambivalence towards Minnesota and Minnesotans “finally interfered with the coherence”¹³ of the work, in that I see ambivalence and equivocation as the commanding, controlling aspects of his prose and its “elaborate play of difference [and] unreconcilable slippage.”¹⁴ On it, indeed, rests and depends the “dialectical, tensive structure characteristic of all worthwhile pastoral.”¹⁵ The significance for narrative, tone, and structure of modesty holds, it could well be said, for the range of Lake Wobegon work Keillor has produced: his novels, his short stories, brief comic flights in the *New Yorker* form known as “casuals,” and his weekly monologues. These act, semi-seriously, to fulfil the regional author’s inclination to tell “stories of people and places whom the conventional regional narratives usually leave out,”¹⁶ and Midwestern modesty is bolstered in some cases by what James Thurber identified as the *New Yorker* house style of “playing it down.”¹⁷ I think this expansive, multiply-constituted feature in Keillor’s thought and prose can, however, be most completely shown in *Lake Wobegon Days*, in large part *because* the book’s form is uncharacteristic in Keillor’s conventionally pastoral oeuvre of works “short, sophisticated, playful or comic in tone,”¹⁸ and so requires a pushing forth of its key elements, a harder but never too bold strike of its major notes. Keillor’s mode of adeptly sustained, circuitous equivocation in *Lake Wobegon Days* occupies the space and moves with the weight of a novel, but is a more open, deferentially sociable, author-effacing work: it verges, in a stylised way, on the communitarian, on appearing to be the generously dedicated work of a volunteer local historian.

Keillor’s weekly monologues, part of the variety show *A Prairie Home Companion*, unfailingly begin and end with gestures towards that central modesty. “It’s been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my

hometown, out there on the edge of the prairie," Keillor says, introducing ten or fifteen minutes of partially improvised, typically circuitous accounts of Wobegonians' comings and goings. The humility topos, an expectation-lowering, apologetically solicitous sentence, reiterated every week and followed by a summation of the weather, builds and stabilises around the show a sense of oddity, and a little "nagging insecurity,"¹⁹ about such close observation of the town and the proffering of that observation as entertainment. As Keillor wrote in *We Are Still Married* of his relaxed, restrained opening line, "you couldn't go straight from that into talking about dreams of boundless grandeur and the many-rivered generosity of life, but, then, it was that way when I lived there, too."²⁰ The word "quiet," too, draws uneventfulness evocatively close to its human effects: there's been nothing to speak of, nor to write home about, nothing much to raise voices, nothing to break Lake Wobegon's stolid carapace against fuss. The recounted events are not always mundane, but Wobegonians' deep-set fatalism, closed-mouthedness and acute resolve not to consider themselves or their experiences as special hold the town under that level: under the permanent, questionably beneficial roof of the "quiet week." This modesty conforms to the Midwestern small town's reported character as a place where "the texture is subtle, the flatness finely calibrated and frequently interrupted, although none of these nuances is particularly obvious unless you have spent time there."²¹ The monologues close with the sentence, "that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average": a statement of mild pride reorganised—given a precautionary ironical shake—by the town's emphatic ordinariness. As Keillor writes in *Lake Wobegon Days*, "in our hearts, our / loyalties to home have always been more modest, along the lines of the motto on the town crest—'*Sumus quod sumus*' (We are what we are)."²² Alongside, or perhaps slightly underneath, the resignation and gentle apology of the motto lies a stoic defiance: a cognisance of the strictly binding, utterly communitarian effect of Wobegonian social logic. A social logic which, it must be said, many Wobegonians themselves understand largely as admission of a "deficiency in common."²³ It is a virtue and a grimly limiting foible: the nudging co-presence of the two playing out a both appreciative and energetically critical treatment of the modest existence, framing for envy and pity a realisation of small-town ideals, notions of egalitarian serenity, and the desire for freedom from bustle.

Lake Wobegon Days presents the town more directly than do the monologues, which, by way of a studiedly familiar manner, slide listeners into the lives of characters. Keillor writes of a town with a population of 942; that the figure is just short of 1000 seems deliberate in a place nourished

by Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. The introduction to the town notes that "the view is spoiled somewhat by a large GRAIN ELEVATOR by the railroad track".²⁴ demography and geography form the broader contours of an evocatively, meticulously "not-quite" place. As Keillor writes, adjusting and combining for comic effect the factual exploits of Count Paolo Andreani and Giacomo Constantino Beltrami,²⁵

in 1836, an Italian count waded up the creek, towing his canoe, and camped on the lake shore, where he imagined for a moment that he was the hero who had found the true headwaters of the Mississippi. Then something about the place made him decide he was wrong. He was right, we're not the headwaters, but what made him jump to that conclusion? What has made so many others look at us and think, *It doesn't start here!*?²⁶

The town—at once indifferent and fuelled with the busy richness of its creator's intent—exudes gentle unimportance, rebuffs significance and engineers its unnoticed state. Its ambivalence in this respect extends to its omission from maps of Minnesota due to the incompetence, drunkenness, and hurriedness of early surveyors²⁷ and then to the decision of the legislature to eliminate the quadrangle it lies in when reportioning the state. That quadrangle is tiny Mist County, the "phantom county in the heart of the heartland."²⁸ The implication of a fog or a haze and the gentle pun on "missed" locate the town on the edge of the real, able to be tilted in this direction or that as suits Keillor's purposes. His purpose, in large part, is to articulate through gentle satire what Kent C. Ryden describes as "an important ongoing facet of regional identity, an identity that is paradoxically based as much on things that are *not* there as on things that are."²⁹ Wobegonians took their deletion from maps and records with equanimity verging on indifference, and, indeed, were praised by a visiting Minnesotan governor in 1980 for their "patience in anonymity."³⁰ John Bayley offered in *The Uses of Division* that "to possess an 'inside' a work of literature must display as a part of its achievement some kind of reticence, and the tensions of reticence",³¹ it is a pleasantly deft irony that Lake Wobegon's tentativeness about existence grants it an inside, and one made the more capacious by the fullness and comic, determinative ubiquity of Keillor's reticence. That reticence and tolerance of imperfection and oddity painted into almost every corner of Lake Wobegon prepares for and is the vital part of the mechanism of the town's shading in and out of fiction; this activity confers on it that "sense of place that exceeds the idea of 'setting'."³² That the town *accepts* its balancing between existence and non-existence excuses and enables Keillor's sometimes subtle, sometimes humorously

obvious weaving together of genuine Minnesotan cities and towns, real people, actual American history, and places, events, and figures of airiest imagination. "The Midwest's lack of an evident 'big' history, the kind of history that seems so self-evident"³³ elsewhere, accommodates the rustling ironies and inventions Keillor modestly practises. The "touting [of] Visitors' Day in Lake Wobegon"³⁴ practises the knowing, inclusively ironical posing of the town, for which the basis is so meticulously—near relentlessly—prepared. Prime Wobegonian social habits of discretion and understatement operate to crucial effect, rippling easily and smoothly throughout the narrative, soaking beyond the social into its fixtures and its state as a place. The shimmering of the sun across Lake Wobegon, Keillor reflects in *Lake Wobegon Days*, would make "quite a picture if you had the right lens, which nobody in this town has got."³⁵

The idea of praising Lake Wobegon in verse or oratory, granting it beauty or glory, cannot pull against or free of the town's current of humility and ordinariness. Transcendentalism is channelled, forming layers of burlesque effect, through resolute mundanity; the pastoral step of bringing sophisticated lucidity to bear on or into the company of simplicity is, in Keillor's habit, a stumble or shuffle. *Lake Wobegon Days'* poet Henry Francis Watt, who accompanies Prudence Alcott to Lake Wobegon, renders his observations in the 648 line "Phileopolis: A Western Rhapsody", which makes even his friends sleepy, soon slumps to "such rhymes as 'sibylline/porcupine' and 'cereal/immaterial,'"³⁶ and is rejected with bland politeness by *The Atlantic*. The magnitude of Henry's effort produces a surging, restraining counter-reaction of banality, the equal and opposite of his intent. There is typically—almost obligatorily—an element of self-mockery, a disclaiming of aptitude, in Keillor's depictions of literary labour, and Henry's work, being focused on Lake Wobegon, is particularly hobbled and wryly kept in check. His address at the founding of Lake Wobegon's (or New Albion, as it then was) college is similarly fastened or weighted down: although a rolling, Emersonian, two-hour peroration, lit by "myths of mission,"³⁷ it survives only in the comically abbreviated notes taken by a student, R. Williams, who perhaps thought he would be examined on the subject:

a. Gratitude. Much accmp. Much rmns.

1. Orpheus. Made nature sing.

2.

B. How puny comp. to Works of God, Moon, stars&c.³⁸

Toward the end of *Lake Wobegon Days*, Keillor writes of John, a

nineteen year-old Wobegonian, who “woke up early, read Walt [Whitman] over coffee to prime the pump, and hit the legal pad until he was overwhelmed by how much had come out.”³⁹ As much as Henry Francis Watt, John, who turns from billowing, anxiously prolific imitations of Whitman to short stories about an anguished literary drunk called Nils, effects a deflationary reflexive presence in the book. The more closely so as Keillor notes early in the book that Lake Wobegon “has its origins in the utopian vision of nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalists, but now is populated mainly by Norwegians and Ger/mans”:⁴⁰ a précis of the trajectory of John’s, and Keillor’s, writing, as *Lake Wobegon Days* does gradually shift towards a “strong regional accent.”⁴¹ The town’s schoolchildren have a rather solemn song, which Keillor transcribes, beginning “Hail to thee, Lake Wobegon, the cradle of our youth”⁴² and vowing truth, honour, and conquest. “And also.” Keillor writes, they sing,

We’re going to fight, fight, fight for Wobegon

And be strong and resolute,

And our mighty foes will fall down in rows

When we poke ’em in the snoot! (Rah! Rah!)⁴³

The demotic counterpoint is immediate, with polish, artifice, or height demanding for propriety’s sake, after a fashion, the mingling or supervening show of something rough, naive and low. “The poet stands as much in need of the rustic’s presence as the rustic stands in need of the poet’s wit.”⁴⁴ An authorial voice early in the book (at its closest to Keillor) muses, “if I had said, ‘Along the woodland I must go to see the cherry hung with snow,’ they [his parents] would have said, ‘Oh, no, you don’t. You’re going to stay right here and finish up what I told you to do three hours ago. Besides, those aren’t cherry trees, those are crab apples.”⁴⁵ These humbling, catching checks on literary immodesty, grace, and ambition in Lake Wobegon serve to self-deprecatingly offset Keillor’s own style, his own output of prose (grown suddenly more substantial with this book) about the town. This, critically, prevents the prose from rising out of its reflexive pastoral situation: its “hit-and-miss poetry, a display of personality”⁴⁶ is both a deft and an awkward acting out within itself, upon itself, of social reciprocities, of style and lack of or indifference to it, and of cleverness counting and counting for nothing.

The Lutheran sect Keillor belonged to as a child, and to which his presence in the book belongs, are the Sanctified Brethren, distinct in their resolute, even fierce, plainness from Lake Wobegon’s Catholics. “‘Christians,’ my Uncle Al used to say, ‘do not go in for show,’ referring to

the Catholics."⁴⁷ What sanctification involves or entails for the Brethren is meticulous ordinariness: purposeful inconspicuousness to the point that they are "a sect so tiny that nobody but us and God knew about it, so when kids asked what I was, I just said Protestant."⁴⁸ What makes the Brethren special is a radical commitment to the notion that they are not special, a stern beating back of privilege or ambition or immoderate (which is to say, more than mild) pride. It extends—behind which extension one can sense an authorial smile—to a near prohibition on "novels, which tended to glamorize iniquity."⁴⁹ The ironic tension of Brethren and broader Lutheran life is very much part of the town's pattern, Lake Wobegon's deadpan yoking of opposites and shading into each other of the mundane and the strange. "We're humble to the point of being ridiculous. We look like POWs,"⁵⁰ Keillor writes, his conscious, literary holding of seriousness and levity in suspension betokening and celebrating, for all that he is a calculating ironist, their accidental, ingenuous suspension in life. The literary deftness of Keillor's not-quite-Wobegonian yet consummately Wobegonian identity and posture is, I would argue, as much sincere articulation as it is wry artifice: it is witty tact as a lightening vehicle for sentiment, which is familiar to both pastoral and to social exchange (its informing practice). The Christmas delicacy of Lake Wobegon's Norwegian Lutherans, lutefisk, "dried cod soaked in lye solution for weeks to make a pale gelatinous substance [is] beloved by all Norwegians, who nonetheless eat it once a year."⁵¹ It is simultaneously treat and penance, indulgence and self-denial, a sensible-minded but also eccentric moderation of each with the other, and a part of the governing, modest scheme of leavening and keeping in check. The early attempt at introducing Christian religion into the Wobegon area, made in *Lake Wobegon Days* by the profoundly earnest Prudence Alcott, established these terms of spiked solemnity and mischievously overturned seriousness: Alcott, a correspondent of Henry David Thoreau, "had a vision of a man in hairy clothing who told her to go west and convert the Indians to Christianity by the means of interpretive dance."⁵² The signature of inclusion in or connection to Wobegon, even or especially in matters religious, is the peculiar working of an all-pervading modesty, a more-than-instinctive undercutting and counterpointing.

Lake Wobegon's only group of genuine social outsiders and, it is generally agreed, rebarbative lowlives, are the Norwegian bachelor farmers, generously (given their muteness and coarseness) described by Peter A. Scholl as "latter-day Virgilian shepherds,"⁵³ whose "only concession to town is a slight duck of the head for modesty's sake."⁵⁴ They find the world farcical, habitually mutter to hell with it, scornfully dismiss their fellow townsfolk, and yet are described as "watching the parade

through the eyes of the last honest men in America: ridiculous.”⁵⁵ The scouring self-doubt and deep grain of modesty Keillor builds into the frame of Wobegonian society lets in the possibility—inflated into a likelihood—that the awful cynic has a point, and that you (Keillor’s presence in the book, the reader) and the world in general deserve disgruntled, headshaking mockery. An acute consciousness of the social odium and potential literary tedium of, as Sinclair Lewis phrased it, “sneering and knocking his own town”⁵⁶ tautly underpins this side of the books. The characterisation of the bachelor farmers sets them as a bedrock of brutish anti-social behaviour upon or over which other Wobegonians contrive such things as uniqueness, pleasantries, tolerance: artifices the farmers view with grizzling disgust and accusatory suspicion. They are marginal figures with a claim to centrality, a claim to being the authentic, unpretending Wobegonian type; a type of humanely, involvingly satiric design intended to turn the reader’s gaze upon themselves, to insist that you do not see without in one way or another seeing or contemplating yourself. It is not, I think, incidental that “Wobegonians” has a Swiftian clunking sound to it, and the slight unease sometimes produced by Keillor’s depiction is part of the moral challenge conventional of satire. For all that they are “people who if you were showing a friend from college around town and you saw them you would grab his arm and make a hard U-turn,”⁵⁷ the shame evoked by the sight of them produces its own shame, so distantly conceivable and stigmatised is any superior posture or trace of immodesty. The “new scorning of farmers”⁵⁸ in the Midwest, which John R. Stilgoe sees as active from the early twentieth century, is a social gesture Keillor does represent, and he represents scorn fizzling out—deprived of energy or oxygen—in contact with Wobegonian ideology. As William Least Heat-Moon puts it, “the American prairies and plains eat pretension and dreams of aristocracy with the slow patience of inevitability.”⁵⁹ Keillor depicts this idea or process most forcefully, perhaps most economically, in the scene in *Lake Wobegon Days* in which the town’s inhabitants gather, wearing coloured hats, to be photographed from above in the shape of the American flag:

One cause of resentment was the fact that none of them got to see the Flag they were in; the picture in the paper was black and white. Only Herman and Mr. Hanson got to see the real Flag, and some boys too short to be needed down below. People wanted a chance to go up to the roof and witness the spectacle for themselves. “How can you go up there if you’re supposed to be down here?” Herman said. “You go up there to look, you got nothing to look at. Isn’t it enough to know that you’re doing your part?”⁶⁰

The peculiarly flattened Wobegonian social landscape tempts but ever so firmly resists perception from above, disassembling when such a perspective is tried, touching on the firm communitarian compact—the prevention or obstruction of a sardonic angle of regard—cultivated both among Lake Wobegon's people and between them and the readers of and listeners to Keillor's work.

Towards the end of *Lake Wobegon Days*, Keillor tells in a 37-page footnote the story of a former Wobegonian who compiled his objections to his upbringing and the town in "95 Theses 95," "a neatly typed manifesto that he brought home in late October 1980."⁶¹ The author had planned to nail it to the door of the Lutheran church, but "then something in his upbringing made him afraid to pound holes in a good piece of wood ... so he took it downtown and slipped it under [the newspaper editor] Harold Starr's door with a note that said, 'Probably you won't dare publish this'".⁶² a timid, deferentially well-behaved gesture replicated or suggested in Keillor's transcribing the Theses in a long footnote. The placement no less strongly suggests an undercurrent and a holding beneath or unsaid, a consequence of the suffocating social rules and habits the Theses list and bemoan. The satirical, anti-sentimental cut of the footnote—its contrastively more direct assertion of ludicrousness—is a rejoinder, verging on a rebuke, to the general approach of the book: its failure to adequately critique Wobegonian mediocrity, bitterness, pettiness, needless suffering such as "the purgatory of lutefisk,"⁶³ and social and emotional repression. The Theses act to regulate, within the book, the vision of Lake Wobegon as "an ideal of Norman Rockwell hominess,"⁶⁴ and they obdurately counter one reviewer's judgement that Keillor's stories "propound the idea that small-town life is somehow more real and virtuous than urban or suburban life, and that everyone's life would be better if they traded in their studio apartments and ambition in Gomorrah for contentment and picket fences in anytown."⁶⁵ It gives a compressed assessment of the town's life and mores which counters, or substantially sharpens and darkens, Keillor's usual perspective, cultivating the sense that the proper, intended view of Lake Wobegon is one of suspension, slightly awkward ambivalence, modest openness to the blurred universality and the uniqueness of experience: consequently, the town exists less in a picture—for all its putative stillness—than in the motion of a mechanism. There seems no satisfactorily detached or involved point from which author, characters, or readers (allowing for a degree of common interpretation on the part of readers) can decide on the town's situation: Keillor designedly refuses and discourages a conclusively satirical, critical, or sentimental view, his suggestive oscillation maintaining the humorously thin conceit of honest authorial non-

intervention or naivety. “The poet represents himself as a shepherd with varying degrees of directness”.⁶⁶ it would be immodest, impolite, and somewhat untrue, after all, for Keillor to place himself entirely in the role of either outsider or insider, the writer from the city or the Wobegonian who never truly left. The visiting preacher Bob, whose caustic assessment is that “this quiet, churchgoing town, on the surface peaceful and hard-working and decent, is in fact a whited sepulcher, a Sodom and Gomorrah, a sinkhole of sin and corruption and degradation and debauchery,”⁶⁷ is discredited by the certainty (as much as by the febrile exaggeration) of his sermon: its separation from the tilting ironical even-handedness, the authenticating equipoise, that even the author of the Theses shows.

Seasonal change in Lake Wobegon, which is very much a farming and gardening town, yields twinned assurances of predictability and disastrous surprise, which in turn breed a philosophical attitude, a blunt and unbudging fatalism, in the people. “Life is full of disappointments. You learn this growing up on a farm. Forty acres of corn burns up in July or is flooded out or beaten to a pulp by hail. You learn to look at it and say, ‘Well—.’”⁶⁸ The occasional demonstration of human powerlessness in the face of nature is not strange to Wobegonians, by way of its familiarity, its place in religious deference to mystery, and its acceptability as a curb on laxity, pride, and too-great success. An emphatic commitment—a precept and a superstition—to the idea of a “severance between doing well and being good”⁶⁹ cooperates with this placidity to form what can amount to a philosophical cocoon. The town has, in Keillor’s telling, very largely rejected, ignored, or been ignored by the merger of urban and rural life in post-1950s Minnesota,⁷⁰ with its technological gifts and encroachments: it is, enduringly and intensely, a farm and industry town. That Midwestern agrarian life cyclically giveth and taketh plenty, the weather tilting between the comfortable and the bitterly severe, deters the Wobegonian temperament from rising too high: it is capable of effecting “a big mood swing, from belief in eternal happiness with a loving God to atheistic nihilism and despair in twenty-four hours in a town of less than one thousand population. Fall is a powerful season.”⁷¹ Besides, conspicuous success and bounty bring suspicion, resentment, apprehension, and the question of what to do, exactly, with an enormous, luxurious surplus of rhubarb or tomatoes. The ordinariness of hard labour in the sun, and the shared catastrophe of tornadoes or drought, drives a sense among Wobegonians that weather should be experienced as a community: that it should not, for example, be escaped by the decadent means of air conditioning. “‘If you’d work up a little sweat out there, the shade ought to feel good enough for you,’ is Dad’s thinking. Air-conditioning is for the weak

and indolent. This isn't the Ritz, you know. Be thankful for a little breeze."⁷² This ethic of sufficiency is played largely as virtue, although its fixedness and ubiquity assumes comic aspects. The state of the weather is typically the opening theme of Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" monologues, introductorily suggesting collective experience, and chapters of *Lake Wobegon Days* are named after and treat the seasons. "Summer" opens with this brief verse:

In winter we sit in the house
 Around a blazing fire.
 In summer we sit on the porch
 Like birds on a telephone wire.⁷³

Keillor's use of "we" (with great frequency) has developed a pregnancy, a generosity of implied inclusion through his encouragement of readers and listeners to identify, the more interestingly and deeply because qualifiedly, with Lake Wobegon's people; the effects and postures of being Wobegonian, Norwegian, and even being Lutheran are, quite designedly I think, peculiarly extended in the reception of his work. The quiddity and ubiquity of Wobegonian traits are in a permanent, flickering exchange, both not only true but—and this is the peculiar, artful thing—reciprocally true: the granting of one shuffles credibility into the other. As Paul Alpers writes of Theocritean bucolic (a mode whose relevance I do not mean to entrain in general), its coherence "lies in the play between these two songs, the balance and poise they give the whole poem, and the friendship they establish between the two singers."⁷⁴ This reciprocity and equipoise—collaboratively equivocating with the stories' readers, the "other singer"—is largely the basis, I would argue, of the resounding believability of Keillor's "we" statements regarding Lake Wobegon, as the town's people take those events inevitably experienced together, such as the seasons and grinding labour, as an ethical guide, curving for better or worse towards middling, flat togetherness, for what remains of life.

The notion that nobody is better than anybody else operates ironically, with lightness and thudding weight, in the social mood of Lake Wobegon. The town's "We are what we are" motto encourages modesty, humility, and honesty and acceptance but quite as sturdily discourages ambition, self-transformation, aspiration: its implied social virtues are suspended—equivocally and a little provokingly—between the admirable, even enviable, and the unhappy. If Midwestern literature has tended to represent, often satirically, the sputtering out of the region's "dynamism, its urgency,"⁷⁵ then Lake Wobegon sits very near the exhausted end of the process. Keillor can, in this respect, bring troublingly and humorously to mind Nabokov's

description of his characters as galley slaves, rowing to his stern authorial drumbeat. “Judy Ingqvist does not sing ‘Holy City’ on Sunday morning, although everyone says she sounds great on ‘Holy City’—it’s not her wish to sound great, though she is the leading soprano; it’s her wish that all the sopranos sound at least okay. So she sings quietly.”⁷⁶ A barrier against individual achievement and conspicuous success is the consequence, the instinctively paid and very largely unexamined (except by the fuming author of the Theses) cost of the town’s invincible, all-pervading egalitarianism; personal vitality is sacrificed for a risibly lukewarm social order. The playing out of this irony is comic and lightly melancholy, teasingly proffering and withdrawing the simplicity of Wobegonian life—a life concertedly modest in most of the word’s senses—as a model or an escapist possibility. Going away to college does not advance one in “Lake Wobegon, where smart doesn’t count for so much.”⁷⁷ Henry Francis Watt, “leading citizen of his day, a cleric, scholar, poet, orator”⁷⁸ and founder of New Albion College, the “Parnassus of the prairie,”⁷⁹ walked the town’s miry roads and, mistakenly “prepared for magnificent and learned discourse,”⁸⁰ buttonholed farmers and people on their way to the privy. Wobegonian rectitude, which is smotheringly synonymous with Wobegonian life, consists in steady, uncomplaining, uncomplicated employment and contentment, more or less, with the state of things. “Farming was the most godly livelihood and show business was the least,”⁸¹ a belief that casts around the young Johnny Tollefson, a figure who left Lake Wobegon for college and then for worldly success, a suggestion of the Prodigal Son when he returns for Christmas. Smoking, wearing corduroy, giving Dostoevsky and Thoreau as presents, he is only able to connect with Wobegonians when he discusses the redemptively strenuous labour of his dishwashing job. When an older, successful Keillor, towards the end of the book, returns to Lake Wobegon, the report—written by Aunt Flo—in the *Herald-Star* is as follows:

Mr. Gary Keillor visited at the home of Al and Florence Crandall on Monday and after lunch returned to St. Paul, where he is currently employed in the radio show business. Mr. Lew Powell also visited, who recently celebrated his ninety-third birthday and is enjoying excellent health. Almost twelve quarts of string beans were picked and some strawberries. Lunch was fried chicken with gravy and creamed peas.⁸²

The printing of a news item about the event suggests an appreciation of Keillor’s worldly fame, but the story itself gently brings him down (in a small way, literally so) to earth. This is the lighter side to the irony prepared by Keillor the author, the profoundly middling, securely modest cast to the

town which keeps the author of the Theses “constantly adjusting my feelings downward to achieve that fine balance of caution and melancholy.”⁸³ Indeed, later, in *We Are Still Married*, Keillor would write that “the punishment for being different was heavy. It might be postponed for a while, but when it fell on you, it fell hard, as when I wrote a book about Minnesota, called *Lake Wobegon Days*, and the local newspaper put me in my place but good. They marked my front yard with orange rinds and nailed a dead cat to the porch.”⁸⁴ Irascible responses to a 100th anniversary celebration of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s birth illustrate a precedent: “I find it ironic that this guy Fitzgerald high-tailed it out of here and trashed it and went off to New York and Paris and now they’re claiming him to celebrate great Saint Paul,’ Paula Rabinowitz of the University of Minnesota English department told me when I asked her how she felt about the celebration.”⁸⁵ The reaction illustrates the less delicate origins, the anchors in the real, of Lake Wobegon’s daisy-cutting attitude, and the stimulatingly awkward reciprocity between the so-deeply-set character of Keillor’s subject and his prominence as a figure and the success of his work.

It is in several ways, then, through modesty that Keillor effects the dissipations, shifts, equivocations, and suspensions that paradoxically support—by destabilising—the form and feeling of his half-created town and his works about it. To judge, as Joseph A. Amato has done, that “Keillor has invented a sentimentalized countryside”⁸⁶ is to interpret a part as the whole, one side of a well-matched conversation as the truth. This effulgently full influence of a social reciprocity on, and in, the prose, people, and place of Wobegon—so conspicuous and tonally important in *Lake Wobegon Days*—is the thick, engaging connection between Keillor’s writing and the pastoral. The irony bedded in that fertile connection, and rising into the prose, imparts to the whole of the novel “the richness of a joke though not its surprise”.⁸⁷ a studied competition of effects and perspectives and a multiplicity of intent that parcels honesty in ironies, the uneasy and strange in the familiar, the clever in the ingenuous, the elaborate in the plain. Its axis is modesty. As the author of the 95 Theses complains, having grown up in a veritable Sargasso Sea of Keillor’s reciprocating social ironies: “No extremes. Don’t exaggerate. Hold your horses. Keep a lid on it. Save it for later. Be careful. Weigh the alternatives. Wear navy blue.”⁸⁸ Lake Wobegon’s claim to representativeness—on which much depends, these being books that trade on a degree of identification—stands on its profoundly humble, deftly ironical hospitality to contrasts: its “duck of the head for modesty’s sake” to the other, and its both witty and decorous “proportion of tones.”⁸⁹ Keillor’s authorship is itself incorporated into and

subjected to the socially mindful practice of undercutting, the vigilant, etiquette-like operation of the scheme that keeps Lake Wobegon strung between multiple possibilities, uniting “disparate claims and perspectives as if in a single mode of song”:⁹⁰ *locus amoenus* and site of grim hardship; artifice and naivety; satire and sentimentalism; elegy and tale of glee; pride and shame; urbanity or “imported elegance”⁹¹ and assertive rusticity. If, as it is tempting to suggest, Keillor’s work is a playing out of what Empson saw as a fundamental assumption of pastoral, that “you can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people,”⁹² it is an approach that encompasses much, achieves “the copious touch,”⁹³ by deliberately claiming little, enlarging its inside by shyly, suggestively and sociably juggling its properties in a way that involves and meshes writerly and readerly desire and reticence.

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NOTES

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- ² Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79.
- ³ Martha Banta, *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 9.
- ⁴ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 141.
- ⁵ Michael J. Rosen, “Is there a Midwestern Literature?,” *The Iowa Review*. 20:3 (Fall, 1990): 101.
- ⁶ Peter A. Scholl, *Garrison Keillor* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), x.
- ⁷ Spalding Gray, “Plenty Wholesome and a Little Perverse,” review of *Leaving Home*, by Garrison Keillor. *The New York Times*. 4 Oct. 1987. BR9.
- ⁸ Doug Hanson, quoted in Stephen Wilbers, “Lake Wobegon: Mythical Place and the American Imagination.” *American Studies*. 3.1 (1989): 17.
- ⁹ Garrison Keillor, *Wobegon Boy* (London: Faber and Faber: 1999), 145.
- ¹⁰ Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 79.
- ¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 2003), 264.

- ¹² Judith Yaross Lee, *Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 94.
- ¹³ Lee, *Garrison Keillor*, 95.
- ¹⁴ Frederick Garber, "Pastoral Spaces," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities* 30 (1988), 439.
- ¹⁵ Harold E. Tolliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 5.
- ¹⁶ Kent C. Ryden, "Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity." *Geographical Review*. 89.4 (October 1999), 523
- ¹⁷ George Plimpton and Max Steele, "James Thurber" (interview). *The Paris Review Interviews: Writers at Work*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 88.
- ¹⁸ Paul Alpers, "Theocritean Bucolic and Virgilian Pastoral," *Arethusa* 23.1 (Spring 1990), 20.
- ¹⁹ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 511.
- ²⁰ Keillor, "Who Do You Think You Are?," in *We Are Still Married* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 133.
- ²¹ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 521.
- ²² Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 3-4.
- ²³ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990), 167.
- ²⁴ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 2.
- ²⁵ Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 112.
- ²⁶ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 4.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ²⁹ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 512.
- ³⁰ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 136.
- ³¹ John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 15.
- ³² Rosen, "Is there a Midwestern Literature?," 99.
- ³³ Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 530.
- ³⁴ Lee, *Garrison Keillor*, 13.
- ³⁵ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 3.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

- ³⁷ Banta, *Failure and Success in America*, 179.
- ³⁸ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 70.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 465.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- ⁴¹ David Sexton, "When Here is Nowhere," review of *Lake Wobegon Days*, by Garrison Keillor. *The Times Literary Supplement* (7 March 1986), 7.
- ⁴² Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 8.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁴⁴ Alpers, "Theocritean Bucolic and Virgilian Pastoral," 296.
- ⁴⁵ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 23.
- ⁴⁶ Marcus Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 359.
- ⁴⁷ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 152.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 335.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁵³ Scholl, *Garrison Keillor*, 126.
- ⁵⁴ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 224.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.
- ⁵⁶ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1920), 20.
- ⁵⁷ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 224.
- ⁵⁸ John R. Stilgoe, "Boyhood Landscape and Repetition" in *Landscape in America*, ed. George F. Thompson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 183-202.
- ⁵⁹ William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairieErth (a deep map)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 162.
- ⁶⁰ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 147.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 373.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 374.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 376.
- ⁶⁴ J.D. Reed, "Home, Home on the Strange," review of *Lake Wobegon Days*, by Garrison Keillor, *Time* (2 September, 1985), 70.
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⁶⁶ Alpers, "Theocritean Bucolic and Virgilian Pastoral," 34.

⁶⁷ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 485.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁹ Banta, *Failure and Success in America*, 57.

⁷⁰ Blegen, *Minnesota*, 575.

⁷¹ Keillor, "The Killer," in *Leaving Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 127.

⁷² Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 196.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁴ Alpers, "Theocritean Bucolic and Virgilian Pastoral," 26.

⁷⁵ Andrew R.L. Clayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 119.

⁷⁶ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 142.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 408.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁸⁴ Keillor, "Who Do You Think You Are?," in *We Are Still Married*, 141.

⁸⁵ Leo J. Hertzell, "Dancing in Saint Paul," *The North American Review*, 281.6 (Nov-Dec 1996), 40.

⁸⁶ Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 130.

⁸⁷ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 56.

⁸⁸ Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 387.

⁸⁹ T.S. Eliot, "Andrew Marvell," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 302.

⁹⁰ Paul Alpers, "What is Pastoral?," *Critical Inquiry*. 8.3 (Spring 1982), 447.

⁹¹ Tolliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes*, 308.

⁹² Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 137.

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