GARRISON KEILLOR AND AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

THESIS

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By

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Although Garrison Keillor is perhaps best known as the creator and host of Minnesota Public Radio's A Prairie Home Companion (1974-1987), the focus of this study is his literary career. Keillor's literary accomplishments include a successful career as a writer for The New Yorker and two best-selling books about the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, entitled Lake Wobegon Days (1985) and Leaving Home (1987). His literary style incorporates elements from several traditions in American literature--the precise, sophisticated "New Yorker style" practiced by writers such as E. B. White and James Thurber; the oral tradition prominent in the works of Mark Twain and the nineteenth-century literary comedians; and the satiric realism associated with the small-town literature of writers such as Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis.
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CHAPTER 1

GARRISON KEILLOR: THE MAKING
OF AN ARTIST

In the fourteen years since his first modest broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion* for Minnesota Public Radio in 1974, Garrison Keillor has gained international recognition as a radio personality and raconteur. At the time of his much-publicized retirement from radio in June 1987, Keillor's live Saturday evening musical variety show was broadcast nationwide to an audience of over four million listeners. Along with his tremendous success as a popular culture hero, Keillor has achieved recognition in the literary community as well. His published works include several dozen pieces in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and various other popular magazines; a collection of many of his *New Yorker* pieces entitled *Happy To Be Here* (Atheneum, 1981; Penguin, 1983); and two best-sellers, *Lake Wobegon Days* (Viking, 1985) and *Leaving Home* (Viking, 1987).

Keillor's twofold success in radio broadcasting and in writing is indicative of a dichotomy within Keillor himself. He is at once an introvert renowned for his shyness, and an extroverted showman with a voice and delivery known to millions. This duality of character
makes itself known in Keillor's literary endeavors as well. He is at once the nostalgic small-town Midwesterner regaling his readers with the goings-on in his hometown, and the disenchanted exile satirizing the foibles of his small-town neighbors. His style varies from that of homespun crackerbox philosopher and storyteller to witty, urbane sophisticate.

Keillor's background reveals much about the development of his complex character. He was born Gary Edward Keillor on August 7, 1942, in Anoka, Minnesota, the third of six children. His parents tried to instill in their children the conservative values of their small-town life and the strict fundamentalism of their religious faith. The Keillor family belonged to a small contentious Protestant sect called the Plymouth Brethren. According to Keillor, the austere Brethren prohibited "dancing, drinking, card playing, liberal education, and too-friendly association with nonbelievers" (Traub 111), yet he remembers the love and warmth within the group as well as the strictness. Still, the isolation from neighbors and classmates must have had a profound effect on Keillor as a boy, for he recalls how the Brethren "set themselves aside, apart from the world, out of religious conviction" (Beyette 2).

Although the Keillor family regarded television as an inessential, radio was a central form of entertainment in their lives. Radio brought the family together, and
live broadcasts produced a feeling of community with the world outside their insular group. Keillor recalls, "Shows like 'Jack Benny' and 'Our Miss Brooks' fired my imagination. I wondered who those people were, even the announcers who did the station identification. They had these wonderful, luxurious voices" ("Magical Country" 75). As a young boy, Keillor found that radio mystique irresistible: He would imitate those radio heroes, "using the curved handle of a Hoover upright vacuum cleaner as an imaginary stand-up microphone" (Zoloth and Dalzell 8).

Another important influence in Keillor's life was the family storytelling tradition. Because the family cut themselves off from so many other sources of entertainment--television, movies, and even newspapers and magazines to some extent--storytelling and kitchen talk were major forms of entertainment. Keillor learned much about the storytelling art from these family raconteurs. He recalls listening to the same stories over and over again and seeing how they improved with the retelling: "They'd tell these stories again and again until they finally got them polished so well they were professional" (Hemingson 20).

Perhaps the greatest influence on Keillor as a boy was his insatiable interest in reading. Although Keillor admits that he was slow to learn, once he had mastered the skill, his desire never flagged. He recalls his early
enthusiasm:

When I was fourteen, I was happy to read all day and every day and into the night. I hid in closets and in the basement, locked myself in the bathroom, reading right up to the final moment when Mother pried the book from my fingers and shoved me outdoors into the land of living persons. (Happy viii)

Keillor's enchantment with the printed word led him to his earliest ambition--to become a writer: "I have been writing since I was a little boy and always knew that was what I wanted to do" (Rothstein). Yet Keillor received little encouragement from his family, who "felt writing was not a fit line of work, that it led to a life that was fraught with temptation" (Beyette 2). Fortunately, his intense desire attracted the notice of his high school journalism teacher, Deloyd Hochstetter, who recognized Keillor's potential and gave him the encouragement he needed. Keillor got further inspiration from The New Yorker, a magazine which he first happened upon in the Anoka Public Library. He was so impressed with that stylish publication that he adopted the name Garrison because it seemed more worthy of his literary aspirations.

Keillor entered the University of Minnesota in 1960 and soon got involved in radio and in writing, thus beginning the seesaw between the two careers that continues
to the present day. To help pay his tuition, Keillor took a job with a student radio station, WMMR, in 1960. He published his first poetry in the campus literary magazine, The Ivory Tower, in 1962 and soon became a regular contributor of fiction and poetry. In 1963, after a brief hiatus from school, he became an announcer for the university radio station KUOM. It was on the station's Saturday morning program "Radio Free Saturday" that Keillor began to experiment with creative broadcasting, presenting some of his clever sketches and offbeat humor (Fedo 3537). In the same year he became fiction editor for The Ivory Tower. The following year Keillor became editor of the magazine, a position he held until 1966. After receiving a B.A. in English with a minor in journalism in the spring of 1966, Keillor tried to find work as a writer in New York but was unsuccessful. He returned to the University of Minnesota for a short-lived try at graduate school. He had married Mary Guntzel in 1965 and continued to work at KUOM while trying to write pieces that he hoped The New Yorker would publish.

In 1969, Keillor took a job with Minnesota Public Radio station KSJR in Collegeville, and he and Mary moved to the small rural town of Freeport, Minnesota. While at KSJR, Keillor worked the morning show. Under his control the program evolved from a drive-time show featuring classical music to an eclectic mix of bluegrass and
nonclassical numbers. Keillor expanded on some of the ideas he had begun to develop on "Radio Free Saturday" and began incorporating humorous sketches and fictional sponsors like Jack's Auto Repair into his broadcast. During his tenure at KSJR, Keillor first "discovered" the town of Lake Wobegon (Fedo 58).

From 1969 to 1971, Keillor experienced successes and setbacks. His son Jason was born and The New Yorker published one of his stories, but after complaints from the management of KSJR about changes he had made in the morning show, Keillor quit his job in order to write full time. After six months of financial and creative struggle, he went to work at KSJN, Minnesota Public Radio's flagship station in St. Paul. Keillor left KSJN in November of 1973, once again to write full time, but returned to host the morning show in July 1974 and continued in that position until April 1982. He began using the title "A Prairie Home Companion" for the morning show, and interspersed eclectic music selections with messages from phony sponsors, humorous sketches, and fictional letters from Lake Wobegon by Barbara Ann Bunsen.

In 1974, Keillor went to Nashville to cover the Grand Ole Opry for The New Yorker. When he returned to Minnesota, he had the idea for a weekly radio show with a format similar to that of the Opry. Bill Kling, president of Minnesota Public Radio, liked the idea, and on July 6,
1974, **A Prairie Home Companion** was broadcast live from Macalester College in St. Paul before an audience of twelve. The live audience grew, forcing the show to look for larger facilities. Keillor's biographer Michael Fedo chronicles the location changes during the early years: "The show moved from its first home at Macalester College to the Park Square Theater, which seated fewer than a hundred, to the three-hundred-seat Arts and Sciences Center auditorium, to the College of Saint Thomas, and finally to the World Theater" in downtown St. Paul in 1978 (81). Meanwhile, the radio audience grew, and in 1980 American Public Radio began broadcasting the show nationally. By 1987 when Keillor ended the show, it was broadcast live weekly on over three hundred stations.

The format of **A Prairie Home Companion** was that of the musical variety show. Guests ranged from regulars such as the Butch Thompson Trio, autoharpist Stevie Beck, and bluegrass band Stoney Lonesome, to Latvian folksingers, high school glee clubs, and mouth musicians, to well-known artists such as Chet Atkins, Emmylou Harris, and Leo Kottke. Musical performances were interspersed with casual chat, letters from listeners, episodes of "Buster the Showdog," and commercials for fictional sponsors from Lake Wobegon. "Advertisers" included the Chatterbox Cafe, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, the Fearmonger's Shoppe, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, and especially Powdermilk Biscuits, "made from
whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers" (Current Biography 222). The centerpiece and highlight of the show, however, was Keillor's monologue--a fifteen or twenty minute tale that he began every week with the formula, "It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon. . . ." The monologue was an opportunity for Keillor to display his considerable creative and storytelling talents as he ostensibly kept his audience up-to-date on the happenings in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon. Keillor sees the monologue as something that grew out of "the conflict between radio and writing" (Rothstein), and describes the interdependence of the two media in the development of that monologue:

For me, the monologue was the favorite thing I had done in radio. It was based on writing, but in the end it was radio, it was standing up and leaning forward into the dark and talking, letting words come out of you. And I wanted to take this radio serial that I had made up and bring it around back to the writing that I had always wanted to do. (Rothstein)

Meanwhile, Keillor was busy with another kind of writing. He continued to write for The New Yorker, and in 1977 Minnesota Public Radio published nineteen of his stories and poems in a volume entitled GK the DJ and offered it as a gift book for subscribers to public radio. But Keillor was obviously feeling the contradictions between
his two careers when he wrote the foreword to *GK the DJ*:

The air of futility about radio led me to resume writing, after several years of writing nothing. I wanted to do something that would last a little while after I had finished doing it. . . . Most of these pieces, then, were written against radio, with a mind towards escaping from the studio and becoming an artist. (1,2)

By 1981, Keillor had a substantial number of *New Yorker* pieces to his credit. The republication of many of those pieces in *Happy To Be Here* attracted the attention of the literary community, and Keillor finally gained acceptance as a writer as well as a radio personality. He continued to write *New Yorker*-style pieces, but like the stories in *GK the DJ*, they seemed to be written in opposition to his radio style. But with the publication of *Lake Wobegon Days* in 1985, Keillor succeeded in wedding the radio and written media to produce a commercially viable book. The subject matter was the Lake Wobegon characters of the weekly radio monologues, and much of the style relied on that storytelling art that Keillor had perfected on the show, but the book also showed evidence of the careful craftsmanship and sophisticated tone of the *New Yorker* pieces.

A number of influences were important in Keillor's development as a writer. *The New Yorker*, with its master
stylists E. B. White and James Thurber, was one of Keillor's earliest models. He held the writers of that magazine in such high esteem that he tried to imitate their style and standards. During his college years, when he published in The Ivory Tower and served as editor of that magazine, Keillor demonstrated the wit, sensitivity, and attention to craft that are hallmarks of The New Yorker. He developed an ear for voices and style, forming the basis for his talent in parody, a form that was popular among New Yorker writers and one that he adopted for many of his own New Yorker pieces. His determination to live up to New Yorker standards made him an "extremely . . . careful writer" who treated his craft "with the utmost seriousness" (Traub 112).

Keillor discovered another style when he created the Lake Wobegon fiction. He explained something of the difference between the styles to Diane Roback of Publishers Weekly: "I still love the New Yorker and love writing for them. . . . But there's another style of writing that I cannot do for them, which is to me more Midwestern, more colloquial" (138). Indeed, Keillor's "Wobegon" style springs from the oral tradition. These stories demonstrate the influence of those masterful Keillor family storytellers, those spellbinding radio programs of his youth, and the storytelling genius of Mark Twain and the nineteenth-century literary comedians.
While the style of the Lake Wobegon fiction draws on oral tradition, the subject matter and tone of these works are influenced by the traditions of small town literature. E. W. Howe, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson popularized a trend toward realism and satire in dealing with the small town. Keillor is certainly influenced by this "revolt from the village," for as one critic points out, "There is a bitter quality to some of his recollections of Lake Wobegon, only partly softened by humor" (Skow 73). Yet Keillor is reluctant to join forces with the village satirists. In his youth he felt the dual realities of his upbringing--the isolation and repression as well as the love and warmth--and perhaps feels an obligation to present his small-town characters with honesty. Keillor maintains that he had to mature from the youthful habit of "satirizing them in sort of a flat, sophomoric way, in the same way that Sinclair Lewis satirized them, as leading empty, shallow lives" (Beyette 2). Keillor's small town portrait, then, represents a gentler, more fundamentally honest development in small-town satire.

A study of Garrison Keillor is a study in contrasts. From shy, introverted writer to radio superstar, from gentle minister of truth to bitter satirist, from spinner of tall tales to elegant craftsman--these are the ranges of his talents. On one level, Keillor represents each of
several diverse traditions in American literature and humor, but his literary contributions go beyond the scope of those traditions. The Lake Wobegon fiction represents his attempt to unify those contrasting influences in a work of maturity and humor. The unifying vision that allows Keillor to unite these traditions carries over into the work itself. He writes from a wholeness of vision that creates a world not apart from the writer or his reader, but a world common to all.
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GARRISON KEILLOR AS NEW YORKER STYLIST

In the Introduction to *Happy To Be Here*, Garrison Keillor writes of his early admiration for *The New Yorker*, a magazine which he first encountered in 1956. Keillor recalls how his interest in "a magazine in which classy paragraphs marched down the aisle between columns of diamond necklaces and French cognacs" represented a kind of rebellion against the constraints of his fundamentalist background and Midwestern environment (x). For Keillor's family, the magazine glorified the secular literature in which they saw no value and celebrated a conspicuous wealth which they considered sinful. But for Keillor, "*The New Yorker* was a fabulous sight, an immense glittering ocean liner off the coast of Minnesota" (x)--an ocean liner which he must have envisioned as his passage from his limited world into the glamorous world of writing and writers.

Although the stylish, cosmopolitan magazine was surely impressive to a boy of his background, Keillor maintains that he most admired "not the decor or the tone of the thing but rather the work of some writers, particularly *The New Yorker*'s great infield of Thurber, Liebling, Perelman and White" (Introduction, *Happy x*). An aspiring young writer could hardly have chosen better models: James
Thurber, known not only for his parodies, fables, and "little man" portrayals, but for his graceful and direct style as well; A. J. Liebling, fast, hard-working, brilliant, and supremely self-confident; S. J. Perelman, famous for his incredibly complex sentences, his rich vocabulary, and his free associations; and E. B. White, master stylist of clear, polished prose and Keillor's own special "hero in the writing biz" (Roback 138).

While each of these men had his own unique methods and personality, their work is representative of an attitude and style commonly attributed to The New Yorker. Harold Ross, the magazine's first and most influential editor, was instrumental in establishing and maintaining that style. In The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century, Norris W. Yates writes,

Ross did more than any other editor . . . to encourage compression, the mot juste, informality, suavity, and irony in the writing of humor, and people now use the term "New Yorker style" to designate any writing that shows these attributes, whether it has appeared in the magazine or not.

(228)

Although Ross's term as editor-in-chief ended with his death in 1951, the appointment of staff editor William Shawn to that position insured the continuance of Ross's high standards. Thus the "'New Yorker style'--correct,
clean, clear, urbane, and witty" (Gale 15), remains an essential hallmark of the publication even today.

White and Thurber were the foremost practitioners of that style and perhaps deserve equal credit with Ross for setting the tone of The New Yorker. Hamlin Hill says of White: "His usage is faultless, and though he seems to be writing with careless ease, he weighs his every word and finds it wanted" (Blair and Hill 439). A similar attention to detail is revealed in Thurber's comments about his own method. Thurber describes how he would edit and re-edit his writing "to make the piece sound less as if you were having a lot of fun with it yourself." "You try to play it down," he explains. "In fact, if there's such a thing as a New Yorker style, that would be it--playing it down" (Tobias 174).

Keillor's admiration for the carefully concealed art of these writers led him to imitate that style in his earliest writing attempts (Schumacher 34). During his college years, he published much of his work in the University of Minnesota's literary magazine, The Ivory Tower. This early work reflects The New Yorker, and especially writers White and Thurber, in subject matter, format, tone, and style.

is a timid Thurberesque character named Howard Berdie, who locks himself in the church bathroom during his daughter's wedding reception. The reason for Berdie's withdrawal is never revealed, but that sense of pain and panic underlying so much of Thurber's work sets the tone in Keillor's short story. Several women attempt to reason with Berdie through the locked door—first his wife ("his master beloved") and her supercilious friend Faith, who alternately beseech and berate him, and finally his sister Allison, who convinces him to unlock the door. Talking to Allison, Howard realizes that his escape is only physical, "that she was in the bathroom with him, that she and all the rest of them had been there all afternoon and every other time he had been alone" (31). The debt to Thurber is evident; yet Keillor's rendering of a common theme is not without uniqueness and merit.

When Keillor became editor of The Ivory Tower in 1964, he was once again imitating several of his New Yorker heroes: Thurber had been editor-in-chief of the campus magazine, the Sun-Dial, at Ohio State University; Perelman had edited The Brown Jug, the comic magazine at Brown University; and White had been editor-in-chief of the Cornell Daily Sun at Cornell University. Keillor apparently took his job quite seriously, making a number of changes in The Ivory Tower. He changed it from a weekly to a monthly publication and raised acceptance standards for
contributions. According to Keillor's biographer Michael Fedo, "The magazine took on a decidedly New Yorker look, and in place of the 'Talk of the Town' column in the front of the magazine, the Ivory Tower frontispiece was called 'Broadsides'" (45). Like "Notes and Comment," the unsigned section of "Talk of the Town" for which E. B. White was largely responsible, Keillor's "Broadsides" offered "incisive witty observation, often on trivial matters" (Sampson 50). Keillor's use of the editorial "we" further established the New Yorker-like tone.

A sample "Broadsides" column, taken from the October 5, 1964, issue of The Ivory Tower, consists of six articles, ranging in length from two hundred to eight hundred words. The opening piece, "God By Magic," is a scathing editorial, castigating the Campus Crusade for Christ for promoting what Keillor calls "charlatan Christianity." In "The Man Who Loves His Children," Keillor adopts a tactic frequently used by New Yorker writers--the practice of taking a current event as a starting place and building on it "an intricate framework of fantasy or simple comment" (Weales 233). He starts with remarks made by William Miller on NBC's Meet the Press wherein Miller equated Senator Barry Goldwater's predisposition toward peace with his love for his family. Keillor brands this notion "Mr. Miller's theory of peace-by-reproduction" and carries the equation to logical absurdity by assessing Khruschev's predilection
for peace by the number of children and grandchildren he has. In the best *New Yorker* tradition, the piece is concise and understated.

"La Gloire" is a brief, ironic piece on a new fashion trend among the university coeds—the wearing of military apparel such as combat boots. "A Handful of Murmurs" provides Keillor with an opportunity to vent his sarcasm on a number of targets—from the university administration, to fraternities and sororities, to college football. "This Is Me. Whom Are You?" is a weird, free-associational ramble reminiscent of S. J. Perelman and Robert Benchley. In "Undercover" Keillor presents a brief, eloquent history of the Trott Brook schoolhouse, which is pictured on the issue's cover. The page columns are filled out with short items similar to the newsbreaks and comments that E. B. White wrote for *The New Yorker*.

Also in the October 5, 1964, issue, Keillor turns in a critical review of the first issue of a new magazine entitled *Means*. He prefaces his review with the often-quoted lines from "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses":

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The author shall: say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it; use the right word, not its second cousin; eschew surplusage; not omit necessary details; avoid slovenliness of form; use good grammar; employ a simple and
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straightforward style. ("Means" 10)

Twain's credo is remarkably similar to the editorial spirit of Harold Ross that still directs The New Yorker. Keillor expresses his adoption of that credo and his own disdain for the meaningless word and irrational metaphor in his pronouncement on Means:

Reading the magazine "Means," I am struck by page upon page of turgid prose stirring up the sands of jabberwock as the clouds of mindlessness shed the rains of inconsistency upon the King of the Inscrutable Sentence. ("Means" 10)

One particularly notable accomplishment for Keillor during his college years was an effort at creative journalism that resulted in the article "Two on Hockey: A Conversation with Minnesota Center Doug Woog," published in The Ivory Tower February 1, 1965. Like the best of the New Yorker writers, Keillor demonstrates his ability to take any subject and create a work of sensitivity and imagination. He manages to combine a sports report of a hockey match between Minnesota and Michigan Tech, an enlightening discussion of the rules and strategy of the sport, and a personal interview with Minnesota's star center, Doug Woog, in an artful format that conveys the "vision of grace and talent" that Keillor sees in the sport. Keillor recognizes the incongruity of trying to express his vision in light of the nature of the sport:
Hockey is not a sport that suggests long and careful sentences, each holding the tail of the sentence before in its trunk. It is hard, fast, and furious when the stakes are high, something like the Light Brigade under attack by a band of guerrillas--both ordered and chaotic. . .

(19)

Yet Keillor's poetic prose not only brings order to that chaos, but reflects the "lightness, syncopation, and style" inherent in the sport (28).

Keillor further demonstrates his versatility as a writer with his poetry. Some of his earliest literary attempts were poems that were published in his junior high school newspaper. Though Keillor's recent published works may include an occasional humorous or parodic rhyme, he was considered a serious poet by his friends and colleagues at college. In 1965 he won recognition for his work with two poems, "On Waking to Old Debts" and "Nicodemus," winning honorable mentions in a creative writing competition. In the spring of 1966, he won the Academy of American Poets contest, and his poems "At the Premier" and "This is a Poem, Good Afternoon" were awarded the one-hundred dollar Fanny Faye Wood Poetry Prize in a competition judged by the university English department (Fedo 50). Significantly, it was Keillor's poetry, not his fiction, which first won publication in a national magazine. His poem "Some Matters
Concerning the Occupant" was published in *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1968.

Still, Keillor's dream was to write for *The New Yorker*, and that dream was finally realized when "Local Family Keeps Son Happy" appeared in the magazine's September 19, 1970, issue. The piece is brief (less than 350 words), but it allows Keillor to demonstrate his ear for parody. The story is about a family who hire a live-in prostitute for their sixteen-year-old son to encourage him to stay at home and out of trouble. Written in the style of a small-town newspaper article, the piece typically includes a recipe. Keillor followed the success of "Local Family" with "Snack Firm Maps New Chip Push," another parody, which appeared in *The New Yorker's* October 10, 1970, issue.

Yet Keillor's first success with *The New Yorker* did not guarantee his being able to depend on his writing as a career. He recalls the financial struggle and creative anxiety of those early years:

I would sell a story and then wait two weeks and call and ask for the money. It bothered me that I was spending so much time doing what seemed like humiliating, adolescent things . . . [looking] through *The New Yorker* to get ideas on how to write another story they would want. (Fedo 58-59)

In his search for acceptable material, Keillor sometimes
drew on the formulas that were common to many *New Yorker* writers. Some of his stories incorporate the character of the Benchley/Thurber "little man" ("How Are the Legs, Sam?"; "Be Careful"; "The Drunkard's Sunday"). Many are built around the personal anecdote that was often the starting point for a White or Thurber story ("Found Paradise"; "Drowning 1954"; "Attitude"; "After a Fall"). But the most frequently used tactic for Keillor--at least in his *New Yorker* stories--is parody.

Parody is a form that most of the *New Yorker* writers utilized to some degree at one time or another. According to Gerald Weales, "*New Yorker* writers, depending on whether they wanted to demonstrate their ear or their imagination, vacillated between restraint and exuberance in their use of parody . . ." (236). Keillor knows the value of understatement, and his parodies usually begin with some restraint. As one critic notes, a parody by Keillor "could easily be for real. It's close enough and yet exaggerated enough to be absurd." Oftentimes the piece "sounds pretty authentic, even while it pushes the type to its extreme" (Thorpe 795). Yet Keillor rarely misses the opportunity to plunge into absurdity at some point in his creation, if only to make the parody obvious.

Keillor frequently targets material with no immediately recognizable style or syntax, pulling the reader along on vaguely familiar grounds, then purposefully going a
step beyond the familiar and into the absurd, revealing his playfulness. "Re the Tower Project" realistically imitates the inter-office memo in theme and style, opening with a familiar refrain: "Many of our personnel, conscious of the uncertainties of the construction business, have voiced concern relative to their future employment with the Company" (105). But Keillor builds from this solid-seeming beginning with suspect material:

What lies ahead on our horizon, they wonder, of the magnitude of the Fred M. and Ida S. Freebold Performing Arts Center, the Tannersfield Freeway Overpass, and other works that have put us in the construction forefront? They recall the cancellation in mid-contract of the Vietnam Parking Lot project, and they ask, "Will the Super-Tall Tower project, too, go down the drain, with a resultant loss of jobs and Company position in the building field? (105)

The use of funny names, an old comic device, may not be especially humorous here, but it does press the style beyond the expected, as does the darkly humorous reference to the Vietnam Parking Lot. Still, Keillor does not stray far from his target, for in a world where superlatives like "even better," "bigger then ever," and "extra, extra large" are commonplace, a project named the "Super-Tall Tower" hardly raises an eyebrow.
"Re the Tower Project" goes on to spoof typical spending justification arguments, offering a humorous example of international one-upmanship, with America fearing that the Chinese are getting ahead in their tall tower project. Finally, the "memo" addresses the environmental concerns:

Fourth, environmentalist groups have predicted various disastrous effects from the Tower--that the humming noise of its high-speed elevator will be "unbearable" to the passengers and to nearby residents, that its height will confuse migrating birds, that its long shadow will anger the sun, and so forth. (106)

Here Keillor stretches the believable to the realms of absurdity. In the conclusion he goes even further:

As for the sun, we feel that, with certain sacrifices, this problem can be taken care of. (107)

Occasionally Keillor employs the comic list or catalogue to evoke humor or to press the parody into absurdity. "Your Transit Commission" mimics a transit commission promotional pamphlet. He uses the comic list to introduce the first jarring note in an otherwise realistic introduction to city bus service:

Maybe you associate mass transit with surly drivers, exhaust odors, dingy ripped seats with
slimy stuff spilled on them, and sickening obscenities scrawled in plain view, filthy windows and paper-littered aisles, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with silent embittered persons and hostile teenagers lugging big ear-busting radios and tape decks, and sudden stops and lurches that send them all crashing and sprawling on top of you! (175)

Keillor exaggerates the believable with his descriptions of the drivers' new designer uniforms in "shocking pinks, brilliant blues, dazzling yellows and greens, dynamite reds and oranges" that are "co-ordinated to the overall design concept of your bus" (176). Still maintaining the style of his promotional pamphlet target, he leaps to the sublimely absurd:

Why take the first bus that comes along when a bus full of folks who share your interests is coming along a moment or two later? The Book Bus, for example, with its lively intelligent well-read ridership, or the Senior Bus, or the Teen Bus. Ethnic Minority Buses with drivers in colorful native dress. Encounter Buses with probing participants who demand honesty, who will stop the bus and sit there and wait for you to come clean. Support Buses. Disco Buses. Upwardly Mobile Buses with compartments instead
of seats... (177)

Another example of Keillor's parodic talent is the essay that critic D. Keith Mano calls a "burlesque masterpiece," "Shy Rights: Why Not Pretty Soon?" Here Keillor demonstrates his ability to take any form or style --rights activist literature in this case--and insert his own frivolous subject matter to achieve a humorous effect. Ironically, this piece becomes something of a self-parody in light of Keillor's own notorious shyness. The essay mimics the militant rhetoric of rights movements, while simultaneously undercutting that rhetoric with repeated retractions and qualifications:

... I wrote a letter to President Jimmy Carter demanding that his administration take action to end discrimination against shy persons sometime in the very near future. I pointed out three target areas--law, schools, and attitudes--where shy rights maybe could be safeguarded. I tried not to be pushy but I laid it on the line. "Mr. President," I concluded, "you'll probably kill me for saying this but compared to what you've done for other groups, we shys have settled for 'peanuts.' As you may know, we are not ones to make threats, but it is clear to me that if we don't get some action on this, it could be a darned quiet summer. It is up to you, Mr.
President. Whatever you decide will be okay by me. (119-120)

The humor in "Shy Rights" largely depends on the delightful incongruity between its form and its subject matter, and Keillor is adept at maintaining a clever balance between the strident tone of the one and the retiring language of the other:

Now is probably as good a time as any for this country to face up to its shameful treatment of the shy and to do something, almost anything, about it. On the other hand, maybe it would be better to wait for a while and see what happens. (124-125)

Keillor's talent at parody is extensive. He seems able to reduce any written material to its essence and then to subject it to his "kind derision" that "turns even claptrap into a . . . genre" (Mano). One of Keillor's funniest creations is "Jack Schmidt, Arts Administrator," whose opening line, "It was one of those sweltering days toward the end of the fiscal year when Minneapolis smells of melting asphalt and foundation money is as tight as a rusted nut" (3), plunges the reader into the world of a Mickey Spillane gumshoe oddly transplanted into the profession of "Arts Consultant." Keillor gives a revealing rendition of pop psychology jargon in "Sex Tips," with Harley Peters, U. S. Department of Agriculture Extension
Sex Agent, explaining that "sex is learning how to listen, sex is learning how to look at other people, sex is learning how to feel about yourself and about your own feelings and learning how these feelings feel about you." In "Don: The True Story of a Young Person," Keillor's keen ear is tuned to pretentious rock criticism à la Rolling Stone in the form of "excerpts" from a publication entitled Falling Rocks:

"Geek Rock is a style that departs radically from the punk genre even as it transcends it. It is music with a mythic urge, raw and dirty and yet soaring off into the cosmic carny spirit of primitivist America and the sawdust world of the freak show of the soul. . . . (25-26)

Other targets of Keillor's parodic wit are science fiction ("Nana Hami Ba Reba"), anthropological jargon ("Oya Life These Days"), battle comic books ("Mission to Mandala"), entrepreneurial sales pitches ("Maybe You Can Too"), the Foxfire folkways series ("Plainfolks"), and westerns ("Your Book Saved My Life, Mister"). The range of victims seems limitless. Yet Keillor's gentle parodic touch seldom carries moral judgment. As Mano has noted, "There is no anger in this attack: nor any righteous underfur. Keillor doesn't bother to affix blame. You feel, rather, a joy in the sheer diverseness of voices."
Not all of Keillor's New Yorker-style work is parodic, however, and not all of his victims are unscathed by his attacks. In 1977, a collection of his stories was published by Minnesota Public Radio under the title GK the DJ. These pieces represent an adaptation of the New Yorker style into a format appropriate for a largely Minnesotan audience more familiar with Keillor's radio persona than his magazine connection. Subject matter is more localized and more political; presentation is more personal and more direct, with satire largely replacing parody as an end in itself. Many of the selections rely on common-sense wisdom from a more homely tradition: Keillor's voice is a peculiar blend of New Yorker stylist and crackerbarrel savant harking back to his nineteenth-century predecessors, the literary comedians. GK the DJ exhibits perhaps a wider range of Keillor's talent than does Happy To Be Here or The New Yorker. Here Keillor drops the pose of cool detachment and writes about things that seem to matter to him.

Of the nineteen selections in GK the DJ, five had previously appeared in The New Yorker: "Local Family Keeps Son Happy," "Found Paradise" (reprinted as "Happy To Be Here" in the collection of that title), "On the Road, Almost," "My North Dakota Railroad Days," and "Drowning 1954." Each touches Midwestern roots, however, either in subject matter, setting, or diction. Other pieces in the collection share the "New Yorker style": "Testimony"
saturizes the Senate Watergate hearing testimonies through parody; "42nd in Hot Sauce" spoofs statistical comparison articles, with Minnesota as its subject; and "Thinking Metric," a statement on the metric system, uses puns and the convoluted logic characteristic of Robert Benchley's work:

There are 1,000 meters in a kilometer and 1,000 millimeters in a meter. Thus, a 200-millimeter cannon would require fifty rounds to fire a distance of one block (there are about ten meters to a block, fewer if part of the street is marked No Parking). Imagine trying to figure that out in feet and yards. Some streets have no yards at all. (18)

Much of GK the DJ, however, hits closer to home for the average Minnesota reader. "Neither the Best Nor the Brightest" takes a stab at namby-pamby letters to the editor--"modest, polite, constructive, viable letters--urging further study of this, respecting all points of view, pointing out that much progress has been made already" (10). Keillor bemoans the silence of P. Nelson, a frequent letter writer whose fiery invective once shouted from the editorial pages. "We Shall Not Be Curbed" mocks St. Paul improvement plans which call for the construction of curbs on all city streets by 1995, at a cost of over one-hundred million dollars to taxpayers, noting that even the Public
Works Department cannot give any truly convincing reasons why curbs are necessary. Keillor takes another stab at unrealistic city planning in "Me and Harry and Myrtle," suggesting that the planners are trying to sell the taxpayers a bill of goods. He makes his fairy tale analogy and his position clear with a homely figure of speech: "I'm all in favor of vitality, but some of these plans got no clothes on" (8). In "Procunia Pro Arte" Keillor has some fun with Minnesota's growth in arts awareness. He mockingly supports the adoption of a state writer, a position he would like to fill:

As state writer, I will have major responsibility for providing literary input to state government and generally improving the prose style of state officials. I will be empowered to name rest areas. I will be responsible for the inscriptions on all state buildings. I will also read to the governor before he goes to bed. . . . (13)

In his ability to adapt a New Yorker tone to a Midwestern audience, Keillor demonstrates his versatility and sensitivity, traits that he shares with his New Yorker heroes.

Keillor's earliest ambition was to become a writer --not just any writer, but a writer for The New Yorker. This ambition stayed with him through his apprenticeship days in college and through the lean years afterward when
he tried to make his writing support him and his family. In *Here at The New Yorker*, Brendan Gill explains the principle behind the success of the magazine and its writers:

The principle that one must be harder on oneself than one knows how to be is, I believe, the only secret means that *The New Yorker* possesses for the achievement of excellence, and it remains a secret after fifty years largely because it is so unappealing. (288)

Yet this is a principle that Garrison Keillor took very much to heart in his efforts to produce writing worthy of *The New Yorker*. As he told James Traub in an interview for *Esquire*, "I went through a great many drafts, and I studied every sentence, and it was work that I enjoyed doing, but it was also very . . . difficult" (112).

Thus Keillor devoted himself to producing the highly polished, yet seemingly casual, short prose piece that has come to be associated with *The New Yorker*. In the Introduction to *Happy To Be Here*, Keillor defends the value of this literature:

They were my heroes . . . [Thurber, Liebling, Perelman, and White] . . . and in my mind they took the field against the big mazumbos of American Literature, and I cheered for them. I cheer for them now . . . and still think (as
I thought then) that it is more worthy in the
eyes of God and better for us as a people if
a writer makes three pages sharp and funny about
the lives of geese than to make three hundred
flat and flabby about God or the American people.
(x-xi)

Whether or not Keillor still wholeheartedly accepts that
credo (a questionable case in light of his Lake Wobegon
fiction), he has at least earned the right to be linked
with the names of those who did. His work exemplifies
the stylistic standards set by his accomplished New Yorker
forebears, causing critic Mano to label Keillor the
"paradigmatic New Yorker stylist."
NOTES

1 Thurber once told Max Eastman: "The American woman is my theme and how she dominates the male, how he tries to go away but always comes back for more . . . (Eastman 105).
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CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCE OF ORAL TRADITION IN KEILLOR'S
LAKE WOBEGON FICTION

Beginning in 1974, with the inception of his weekly radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, and continuing for the next thirteen years, Keillor found himself regularly doing a kind of writing that had little in common with the precise, polished style he practiced for *The New Yorker*. Much of Keillor's creative effort was turned to the production of his weekly monologue about Lake Wobegon, the style of which he characterized as "more Midwestern, more colloquial" than his *New Yorker* prose (Roback, "Interview" 138). Indeed, far from imitating that concise, sophisticated *New Yorker* style, Keillor's Lake Wobegon fiction was first written for his folksy, longwinded oral presentation and thus borrows heavily from the oral tradition.

The influence of this oral tradition in Keillor's fiction derives from several sources. Keillor admits to the lasting influence of the family storytellers of his youth in the development of his own storytelling technique (Schumacher 34). The radio shows that he listened to as a boy must also have served as models for the style and substance that he would later develop in his own show and
which appear in his writing. Furthermore, his work demonstrates many of the techniques and characteristics common to the work of Mark Twain and the nineteenth-century literary comedians, whose popularity on the lecture platform compares with the popularity of the radio comedians of the twentieth century before television became widespread. The first of these influences—the family storytelling tradition and radio—were essential in Keillor's development as a storyteller and performer. The last of these influences—that great tradition of the humorous lecture brought to the state of high art by Twain and the literary comedians—legitimizes Keillor's art as a significant representative of a literary tradition that incorporates oral techniques.

The storytelling tradition in Keillor's family must have been the earliest influence in the development of his Lake Wobegon style. Keillor recalls listening to stories his relatives would tell, particularly those of his Uncle Lou or his Aunt Ruth, about how the family fortune was lost in a fire or how his grandfather drove the Model T off the road (Hemingson 22). Keillor remembers how much he enjoyed that simple entertainment:

I sat and listened to my old relatives tell stories about their childhoods, and I loved that. They couldn't tell enough for me. The night wasn't long enough, they didn't stay late enough.
I loved it all. (Schumacher 34)

Keillor consciously imitated this tradition of telling stories about the family, but, perhaps because of his wider audience, he felt the need to depersonalize and fictionalize them:

I started out telling true stories from my childhood, dressed up as fiction, and then discovered Lake Wobegon as a place to situate them so as to put more distance between them and the innocent persons I was talking about. (Borger 8)

In spite of the fictional veneer, Keillor's stories still resonate with the quiet generosity and philosophy of those family storytellers, whose purpose, Keillor explains, "was to imbue us with compassion" (Traub 112). Keillor acknowledges his debt to those relatives, yet he sees his writing as a means of transmitting their ideals outside their closed family circle to the world at large:

As I get older, more and more often I hear my father's voice coming out of me, and I find myself saying things he would say. I write things that seem to me to be something my father would have said, or my Uncle Lou would have said--sort of an apotheosis of what they would have said if they had been writers. (Roback "Interview" 139)

Another substantial influence in the development of
Keillor's Lake Wobegon fiction was radio. His hero was announcer-commentator Cedric Adams on WCCO in Minneapolis. (Keillor memorializes Adams in "Drowning 1954," a short story in which he describes how he played truant from swimming lessons at the YMCA in order to visit the station where his idol worked.) Adams was highly revered as a broadcaster, columnist, and writer of books during the 1950's, and, like nineteenth-century literary comedians such as Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne) and Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw), and twentieth-century radio humorists such as Will Rogers and Fred Allen, he "came across as a homespun savant" (Bordsen 18). Keillor's own homespun radio delivery is patterned after the folksy style of shows featuring Cedric Adams, Bob DeHaven (another Keillor hero), and Arthur Godfrey (for whom Adams occasionally substituted).

Along with this stylistic influence, radio may have given Keillor some creative ideas that would later appear in his own show and in his writing. Arthur Godfrey's playful handling of sponsors' messages may have been the genesis of Keillor's commercial spoofs (Fedo 14). And one particular show, "The Red River Valley Gang," emceed by Bob DeHaven, employed a standard comic opening that may have given Keillor the idea for his Lake Wobegon monologues. DeHaven and banjo player Irv Wickner opened the show with a discussion about Wickner's uncle in North
Dakota and all the happenings there. The skit used a formula opening and closing, much like Keillor does in his monologue, but DeHaven admits that their piece "wasn't nearly as effective as the letter from Lake Wobegon" (Fedo 14). Thus at least a part of the concept and style of Keillor's Lake Wobegon fiction can be traced to the influence of the radio shows of his youth.

In addition to what he must have learned from the practiced art of his storytelling relatives and through the talents of his radio heroes, Keillor surely absorbed much of his technique from reading the literary works of such storytelling masters as Mark Twain and James Thurber. Furthermore, at least indirectly, Keillor's art derives from the literary comedians, whose humorous essays and lectures were so popular in the late nineteenth century. In The Rise and Fall of American Humor, Jesse Bier indicates that the literary tradition of these platform humorists has been more widely drawn upon than many scholars previously suspected. Bier notes that "Twain read his southwestern forebears and comic contemporaries closely" and often put their techniques to use in his own work. Thus as students of Twainian art, "a host of twentieth century humorists regularly put themselves in debt to these literary comedians" (105).

Certainly some evidence of this nineteenth-century influence is observable in Keillor's work as it incorporates
techniques set out in Twain's "How to Tell a Story." In this essay Twain outlines the primary elements in the effective telling of a humorous story--features he had learned to employ in his own stories and which he had observed in the stories of such talented contemporaries as James Whitcomb Riley and Artemus Ward. Keillor's art employs several of these features, most notably the wandering storyline and the pause. Twain's definition of the humorous story as one that "may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular" (239), is an accurate description of many of Keillor's Lake Wobegon stories. As Washington Post book critic Katherine Paterson has noted, "Keillor takes his sweet time to tell each tale, digressing into footnotes or parentheses or just plain changing the subject whenever he chooses" (2).

This apparent aimlessness is demonstrated in the first section of the chapter entitled "Summer" in Lake Wobegon Days. The story begins with a description of the routine of a Lake Wobegon summer evening. Appended to this description is a lengthy footnote detailing the etiquette of porch society. The description of the summer evening routine slides into a discussion of the weather and the absence of air conditioners in most Wobegon homes; another footnote explores the theology behind this tendency to shun modern appliances. The discussion of the weather
leads into the subject of gardening, always a topic of great interest for Wobegonians. Keillor describes the spring gardening fever that leads to the annual overabundance of vegetables throughout Lake Wobegon by July and August, and how one year this plethora of vegetables compelled him to carefully take aim and hit his sister with a rotten tomato. This incident is accompanied by a footnote detailing other notorious crimes of his youth, such as the time he stole money to buy a cheeseburger and the time he tied the clean sheets together and trailed them around the yard. The footnote, and the section, ends with the gentle insight that knowing right does not make doing right any easier, or, in Keillor's words, "The pleasure of obedience is pretty thin compared to the pleasure of hearing a rotten tomato hit someone in the rear end" (136).

In this manner Keillor constructs many of his Lake Wobegon tales, digressing and meandering, yet suddenly and unexpectedly reaching some insight or bit of wisdom. En route to that insight, he may lead his reader (or listener) through a gamut of emotions. As Mother Earth News interviewer P. Hemingson points out:

[T]he same story that starts out with laughs can mope to a sad, tragic, note . . . to something disarmingly human and touching . . . then warm and reminiscent . . . then still and quiet
... and back—closing a loop you probably hadn't even noticed being formed—to a humorous tie-in with its beginning. (17)

Twain regarded the pause as "an exceedingly important feature" in the telling of a story, one requiring delicacy of handling ("Story" 242). Keillor's skill in the use of this technique for humorous and dramatic effect is apparent in his radio monologues. In a monologue based on the material in "Summer" in Lake Wobegon Days, he tells the story of how he hit his sister with a rotten tomato. Keillor had been throwing tomatoes at his brother when his sister stopped picking tomatoes to scold him:

"You're gonna get in trouble!" ... and then...
... she bent over and started picking...
(long pause) ... What a target! ... (long pause) ... There she was, bent over. I picked up the biggest tomato that I could find ...
one so big it had been lying on the ground for weeks ... gotten all brown underneath ...
worms in it. It was real juicy ... (long pause) ... It was hard to pick up without getting it all over yourself, you know? ...
I picked it up and I took aim ... and I went into my windup ... and just at the moment that I was about to throw it, my mother called to me from the kitchen window in a sharp voice...
... and I had to decide what to do. ... (long pause) ... I think I made the right decision. ... (long pause) ... Because the sound of that tomato hitting right on target is a sound that a person doesn't get to hear often in their lives. ("Tomato Butt," Audiotape)

Like many of the elements that make the oral presentation effective—rhythm, inflection, emphasis, mannerisms, and facial expressions—the pause does not usually translate well to the printed page. In the Introduction to Leaving Home, Keillor describes the way his stories should sound: "They were written for my voice, which is flat and slow. There are long pauses in them and sentences that trail off into the raspberry bushes" (xvi). Keillor attempts to translate the pause to the printed page through his use of punctuation. The dash may be used to indicate a pause, but more frequently the comma serves this function. A Lake Wobegon comma carries more temporal weight than a period, and Keillor frequently strings together independent clauses with commas as a means of indicating extended pauses. In the following passage from Lake Wobegon Days, the commas indicate pauses more significant than do the periods:

The pressure cooker has been running full blast for days, Ralph is out of Kerr lids, but vegetables fill up the fridge, the kitchen
counter--quarts of tomatoes have been canned, still more tomatoes move in. The Mister reaches for the razor in the morning, he picks up a cucumber. Pick up the paper, underneath it are three zucchinis. They crawled in under there to get some shade, catch a few Z's, maybe read the comics. (134)

Thus does Keillor employ two of the major features that Twain noted in "How to Tell a Story"--the meandering storyline and the pause. But Keillor's adherence to the comic literary tradition goes further still. Jesse Bier has noted "the overwhelmingly verbal cast of American humor," especially among the literary comedians (99), and in his article "The Literary Comedians and the Language of Humor," David B. Kesterson defines this "verbal cast" in terms of the techniques by which language can be put to the service of humor. These comic techniques, such as understatement, anticlimax, reversalism, antiproverbialism, striking imagery and colorful expression, distorted syntax and clever phraseology, and incongruous mixtures of all kinds, are the hallmarks of Keillor's comic art.

Keillor is particularly adept in the use of understatement and anticlimax, occasionally using the techniques in combination as did his literary comedian forebears (Bier 109). In his narration of a childhood
incident in a grain elevator in which he came perilously close to losing his life, Keillor describes his sixteenth birthday dinner just a week after his miraculous survival:

I looked around the table and imagined them eating this pork roast and potato salad with me gone to the graveyard, imagined the darkness in the tight box and the tufted satin quilt on my cold face, and almost burst into tears of sheer gratitude, but took another helping of pork instead. Our family always was known for its great reserve. (Lake Wobegon Days 10)

Here Keillor uses vivid imagery to build pathos, then deflates it with the anticlimax of the homely image of roast pork, following it all with wry understatement.

The techniques of understatement and anticlimax also appear in "The Royal Family," a story from Leaving Home. The story is about Grace Tollefson Campbell and her three children who have returned to Lake Wobegon after being deserted by their husband and father and are forced to survive through the charity of family and community. But one day Walter, the youngest boy, receives a letter which addresses him as "Your Royal Highness" and which informs him that the sender is working to restore him and his family to their rightful inheritance as the Royal Family of Scotland. Keillor, with typical understatement, writes, "A boy doesn't get a letter like that very often" (142).
When the family receives a chart supposedly tracing the succession of Scotland's House of Stewart down to the Campbells in Lake Wobegon, Keillor piles up incongruities and anticlimaxes: "The Royal Family of Scotland living in Lake Wobegon in a green mobile home, furniture donated by the Lutheran church" (141). The effect becomes even more humorous in oral performance with pauses emphasizing the anticlimaxes: "The Royal Family of Scotland . . . living in Lake Wobegon . . . in a green mobile home, . . . furniture donated by the Lutheran church" ("Royal Family," Audiotape).

Keillor makes use of reversalism or contradiction in the story of Myrtle Krebsbach's fight with her sister-in-law Beatrice over Myrtle's late mother's crystal vase. After a violent altercation that results in the destruction of the vase, the women make amends, vowing that "they were sure glad Mother wasn't alive to see this, it woulda killed her" ("High Rise" 75). In his recollections of the church services he attended as a child, Keillor writes, "When I was a kid, we sat quietly on Sunday morning sometimes for forty or fifty seconds at a stretch" ("Easter 17). And reversalism is again the tactic in his account of the exploits of Lake Wobegon explorer Father Pierre Plaisir: "He and his six amis had come to the New World to gain gloire and honneur through nouveaux exploits despite les dangers, but instead got lost and spent June
and July looking for the route back to where they had come from . . ." (Lake Wobegon Days 24).

Keillor occasionally uses antiproverbialisms and aphorisms, especially in his characterizations of the inhabitants of Lake Wobegon. Of the Wobegonian tendency to abandon the winter wardrobe and determinedly await the coming of spring despite winter's tenacious hold he writes, "There comes a point where you have to stand up to reality and deny it" ("Seeds" 40). Sounding somewhat like literary comedian Josh Billings ("Americans love caustick things; they would prefer turpentine tew coloner-water, if they had tew drink either. So with their relish of humor; they must hav it on the half-shell with cayenne" Billings 427), Keillor describes the Lutherans' avoidance of irony: "Lutherans of Lake Wobegon don't use much irony, like they don't use much curry powder: some, but not a lot" ("Thanksgiving" 160).

Striking imagery and colorful expression are noticeable throughout Keillor's work. In "The Killer," he tells how, as a boy, every summer he always hoped that somehow his performance at school would miraculously improve and he would be recognized as a genius. But then October would come and he was once again lost as the teacher began quizzing the class: "I didn't understand anything. I was scared that he'd call on me and fear made the air around me hot and dry, causing teacher suction . . ." (128).
In "Christmas Dinner," he describes Arlene Bunsen's relationship with her son-in-law Rick in colorful terms:

She smiled her brightest smile, the smile she has used all her life on people she'd like to slap silly. She'd like to give him a piece of her mind, but she can't, because he has hostages, her grandchildren. So she kills him with kindness. She stuffs him like a turkey. (174)

Keillor may use distorted syntax and coarse language, especially when his humor tends toward satire: "In the Sanctified Brethren church, a tiny fundamentalist bunch who we were in, there was a spirit of self-righteous pissery and B.S.ification among certain elders that defied peace-making" ("Brethren" 155). Or his phraseology may be clever and inventive, drawing on incongruity for humor, as in his description of the Lutheran ministers going down with the ship on Wally's (of the Sidetrack Tap) sinking pontoon boat: "[E]ight Lutheran ministers in full informal garb took their step for total immersion." Keillor follows up with anticlimax: "As the boat sank, they slipped over the edge to give their lives for Christ, but in only five feet of water" ("Pontoon Boat" 108).

Thus Keillor employs a number of the comic techniques that were staples of his literary comedian predecessors. But perhaps a more subtle similarity exists between those nineteenth-century humorists and Keillor that has to do
with tone and substance. Like the folksy radio announcers that Keillor listened to as a boy, the literary comedians regularly adopted the pose of the wise fool or the horse-sense philosopher, whose delivery was homespun but whose perception of the human condition had great acuity. Part of Keillor's pose is in his avoidance of an artful or literary tone in his works. He recognizes the inappropriateness of the literary touch in the oral performance:

The most disastrous thing that a person could do in telling a story for the radio would be to be literary, to do flourishes and put in strange, symbolic touches of the sort that people get master's degrees in fine arts for. That would be just awful. I can't think of anything worse than to stand up in front of people and try to show them that you can turn a phrase. (Bunce 38)

This studied artlessness carries over into his printed work, as Keillor tries to reproduce that casual, homespun delivery in his writing.

Like his philosophizing forebears, Keillor uses this folksy style to bring his readers or listeners around to subtle or not-so-subtle truths. In *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire*, Jennette Tandy describes this tendency among the literary comedians: "They made
along with their witticisms an interpretation of human nature as they saw it, and an arraignment of the foibles of man and the imperfections of the social order" (133). Keillor's position on humor is perceptive but compassionate; he states, "Comedy that doesn't care about the world doesn't interest me" (Klose K4), and he practices that conviction. As one critic observes, "He seldom goes for the easy laugh, and he is never cruel. He pokes fun at the foibles of his characters, but never makes fun of the people themselves" (Schumacher 33). If Keillor has an instructive purpose, it must be in part to bring his audience "a shock of recognition of our common humanity" (Miller 528).

Finally, Keillor shares another important link with Mark Twain and the literary comedians that has to do with the relationship between the oral performance and the literary work. Keillor writes stories for oral performance which may be published later as literary works. In much the same way, nineteenth-century literary comedians wrote humorous lectures and essays which they performed onstage and which also appeared in print. These platform humorists often depended on the lecture platform as a means of establishing or supporting their identities and popularity, following their lecture tours with the publication of letters and essay collections, humorous books, novels, and travel books. (Artemus Ward: His Book by Charles Farrar Browne, Bill Nye's Boomerang by Edgar Wilson Nye, Josh
Billings' *Allminax* by Henry Wheeler Shaw, and many works by Mark Twain such as *The Innocents Abroad*, are among the most celebrated examples.) Interestingly, the evolution of the written script to the live performance to the published work is remarkably similar in Twain and Keillor. Twain's lecture entitled "The American Vandal Abroad" from his 1868 lecture tour was "mainly a transcript of material shortly to appear in *The Innocents Abroad,*" and the material he used in the latter part of his 1871-72 tour later appeared in *Roughing It* (Fatout xvi-xvii). In much the same way, Keillor's monologue transcripts provided the basis for his books *Lake Wobegon Days* and *Leaving Home.*

Keillor maintains that his monologues "all start out as writing" (Roback "Interview" 138), but like Twain, who a century earlier realized that for oral performance written stories needed "to be limbered up, broken up, colloquialized, and turned into the common forms of unpremeditated talk" (Fatout xxv), he avoided reading those stories onstage, striving for a more spontaneous presentation. But unlike Twain, who achieved the appearance of speaking extempore through practice, Keillor does not carefully rehearse his stories: "I do not stand in front of the mirror in my room and practice what I'm going to say" (Traub 112-113). He has explained his difficulty in following Twain's example, while at the same time admiring the practiced approach: "My problem is that I
have to tell a different one every week, and I think you don't really learn to tell a story well until you've told it ten or twelve times" (Hemingson 20).

If the written work does not translate well to the oral performance, the converse is also true. Mark Twain noted how poorly the oral performance translated to the printed page after seeing one of his speeches published in the paper:

You do not recognize the corpse. You wonder if this is really that gay and handsome creature of the evening before. You look him over and find that he certainly is those very remains. Then you want to bury him. You wish that you could bury him privately. (Fatout xx)

Keillor acknowledges this distance between the oral performance and the literary work, noting that the human voice is a powerful element in the artful delivery of a story that can only be approximated on the printed page:

When I tell stories on the radio, people are focused on my voice, so there's the sound of the human voice to sort of carry them over the imperfection. But in writing on the page, you have to create that voice artificially, and it's a very delicate job. (Rothstein)

The varied sources of oral tradition that influenced Keillor—those family storytellers, the old radio shows,
and the literary works of Twain and others--provided him with the techniques necessary to do that delicate job--the creation of that artificial voice on the printed page. The Lake Wobegon fiction is not, and cannot be, simply a transcription of the oral performance that Keillor does so well. It is rather a literary achievement that is enriched by the oral tradition. But perhaps Keillor's own assessment of the stories in Leaving Home best defines the relationship between the literary creation and the oral performance:

I wrote these stories and then performed them on the show--not from a script, but from an imperfect memory. I felt that they were better as stories than they were in performance. I want them to appear in the best way they can, which is in print. (Roback "Leaving the Shores" 34)
NOTES

1 Another interesting comparison may be drawn in both Twain's and Keillor's repeated retirements from and re-entries into their respective careers on the lecture platform and in radio.
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CHAPTER 4

LAKE WOBE GON IN THE TRADITION
OF SMALL-TOWN LITERATURE

While his witty, sophisticated work for *The New Yorker* and his homespun narrative approach in the Lake Wobegon tales represent dual styles, Keillor's attitude toward Lake Wobegon represents a dichotomy of purpose or tone. On the one hand, critics have likened his work to that of satirists like Sherwood Anderson (Fiske, Black) and Sinclair Lewis (John Miller, William Miller) or even with Mark Twain at his most darkly satiric (Larson and Oravec). On the other hand, his work has been called "nostalgic" (Youngren 36) and "wistful" (Bunce), presenting a picture of small-town life resembling a Norman Rockwell painting (Vincent). These apparently conflicting assumptions about Keillor's work are representative of the prevailing attitudes toward the small town that have surfaced in American literature--a realist's rebellion against the "stultifying conformity" and "moral repressiveness" of the small-town existence, and a romantic nostalgia for the presumed sweetness and innocence of simple village life (Hilfer 3).

In *The Revolt from the Village: 1915-1930*, Anthony
Channell Hilfer traces the romantic tradition that permeated the vision of the small town in the first two centuries of this country's literature and how that tradition altered over a period of years with the trend toward realism. Hilfer explores the significance of the works that heralded this "revolt from the village" (Van Doren) -- works such as E. W. Howe's *The Story of A Country Town* (1889) and Mark Twain's *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1899). Twain and Howe were at the forefront of a movement that began to turn its back on the saccharin characterizations of the romantic vision and to strive for the gritty, often unpleasant texture of realism. Twain's Hadleyburg is peopled with self-righteous hypocrites whose actions and ethics are anathema to the idealized vision of small-town piety and honesty. Howe's Twin Mounds is dull and ugly and endlessly wearing on the human spirit, unlike "the sentimentally pictured little place of idyllic beauty and charmed life" so common to earlier literature (Herron 366). But though these small-town portrayals were revolutionary for their time, they were only the beginning of a trend toward the satiric treatment of village life that was to follow in the next few decades.

Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), a collection of often bitter poems spoken by the inhabitants of a country graveyard, was one of the next major contributions to this trend away from the traditional
idyllic picture of small-town life. In 1919, Sherwood Anderson followed with *Winesburg, Ohio*, a group of tales that revealed the desperate isolation of the village life. But the work that truly established the village revolt and perhaps changed forever the way we view the small town was Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, published in 1920. Lewis's vision of small-town life was stark and unforgiving and left no doubt that pure romanticism of the village life belonged to the past.

Keillor shares some of the characteristics that are generally attributed to these village rebels. Often his work reveals some disenchantment with the glamorization of village life and strives to portray the small town in a more realistic light. In *Lake Wobegon Days* Keillor constructs a history of the town and its founders that is not especially flattering. Lake Wobegon, like Howe's Twin Mounds, was settled by losers. Howe's character Lytle Biggs explains that "men who are prosperous, or men who live in elegant houses, do not come West," but rather "the unfortunate, the poor, the indigent, the sick," and especially those who "failed to grow up with the country where they came from" are the pioneers of the Midwestern village. Similarly, Keillor's Lake Wobegon founders are portrayed as somewhat lacking in intelligence. From the earliest explorers who lost their way and wandered into the area; to the founders of New Albion (an earlier
settlement on the shores of Lake Wobegon), who were simply too tired to go further; to the later Norwegian settlers who stopped there because it reminded them of home, forgetting that they had left home to get away from similar poor, rocky land; to the German settlers who simply misread their maps and were too stubborn to admit their mistake; everyone ever connected with Lake Wobegon has been something of a failure. Thus Keillor, like Howe, debunks the romantic notion that the small towns were somehow valiantly hewn out of the wilderness by noble, hardy pioneers, and paints an unimpressive picture of these early settlers.

Even Keillor's physical descriptions of the town have a realistic edge that resembles the work of Sinclair Lewis. In Main Street, Carol Kennicott's first impression of Gopher Prairie is an anticlimax to her expectations:

The huddled low wooden houses broke the plains scarcely more than would a hazel thicket. The fields swept up to it, past it. It was unprotected and unprotecting; there was no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness. Only the tall red grain-elevator and a few tinny church-steeples rose from the mass. (Lewis 21-22)

Keillor describes the similar dismay of one early visitor to New Albion:

It is a 'City' of leaning fences and mishung doors, of buildings begun and then forgot, of
handsome unpainted houses, of timid little shops huddling behind magnificent facades. (Lake Wobegon Days 41)

Yet the later settlement of Lake Wobegon is similarly bleak. It is "a town with few scenic wonders such as towering pines or high mountains," but which boasts as its highest point "the gold ball on the flagpole atop the Norge Co-op grain elevator" (Lake Wobegon Days 9). Like Gopher Prairie, Lake Wobegon's citizens live in "small white frame houses sitting forward on their lots" (Lake Wobegon Days 3), and its business district imitates grandeur with its "latticed brickwork, brickwork meant to suggest battlements, and brick towers meant to look palatial" (Lake Wobegon Days 4).

Yet more basic to the real poverty of the small town is the limited vision of its citizens that is expressed in a general smugness in their underachievement and "their complacent pride in their dreariness" (Hilfer 164). Howe's Jo Erring notes that in Twin Mounds, "the man who owns a piece of land and a team is supposed to have accomplished all that it is possible for a man to accomplish" (100). Keillor's Wobegonians display a similar pride in their lack of accomplishment. He writes of Florian Krebsbach's inordinate pride in the mere 42,000 miles on his 1966 Chevrolet: "It may be odd that a man should be so proud of having not gone far, but not so odd in this town" (Lake
Wobegon Days 7). Keillor explains this tendency toward the limited vision:

Left to our own devices, we Wobegonians go straight for the small potatoes. Majestic doesn't appeal to us; we like the Grand Canyon better with Clarence and Arlene parked in front of it, smiling. (Lake Wobegon Days 7)

Ironically, this stunted small-town vision is countered by a delusional vision of greatness. The inhabitants of Lewis's Gopher Prairie envision their town as a burgeoning village soon to rival the cities, whereas Carol Kennicott recognizes it as "merely an enlargement of all the hamlets which they had been passing" (21). In Keillor's Lake Wobegon, the delusional vision clings to the town from its very inception as "NEW ALBION, THE BOSTON OF THE WEST," whose promotional pamphlets pictured "a town with great buildings, stately homes under broad trees, avenues thronged with traffic" (34), but whose great vision was somehow lost in the reality of harsh winters, poor soil, and groundless speculation. Yet the remains of that bright hope still surface in such acts of faith as the purchase of two parking meters for the wide main street downtown, a futile act due to the abundance of free parking nearby.

Another target for Lewis's satire that comes into play in Keillor's work is the insularity of the village. Lewis relates how the spirit of community could be
overwhelming at times, directing even the most minute of everyday affairs such as what the citizens would eat, based on what was available at the local markets. Carol Kennicott finds out very soon that "at Dahl & Oleson's Meat Market you didn't give orders--you woefully (sic) inquired whether there was anything today besides steak and pork and ham" (Lewis 65). Dr. Kennicott explains to Carol the principle underlying these self-imposed strictures: "I make my money here and they naturally expect me to spend it here" (Lewis 75). Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery in Lake Wobegon operates on the same principle. Keillor explains the irony of the belief that small towns represent the epitome of free enterprise in America, for "the truth is that Lake Wobegon survives to the extent that it does on a form of voluntary socialism with elements of Deism, fatalism, and nepotism" (Lake Wobegon Days 95). The citizens of Lake Wobegon, like those of Lewis's Gopher Prairie, learn the importance of loyalty:

If people were to live by comparison shopping, the town would go bust. It cannot compete with other places item by item. Nothing in town is quite as good as it appears to be somewhere else. If you live there, you have to take it as a whole. That's loyalty. (Lake Wobegon Days 96)

Religion is another aspect of the small-town life that comes under attack by the village satirists. Howe
is most persistent in his condemnation of the mean-heartedness of the "Christian" spirit among his characters. For the people of the bleak hamlet of Fairview, religion is not a source of hope and joy, but rather "a misery to be endured on earth, that a reward might be enjoyed after death" (13). Twain's Hadleyburg, on the other hand, is a startling example of the complacency and pride that often go hand in hand with small-town religion. Indeed, the citizens of Hadleyburg have so much pride in their own incorruptible righteousness that that pride becomes the source of their downfall. Keillor's commentary on religion varies from his descriptions of the strict hardheadedness of the fundamentalist Sanctified Brethren sect, to the petty rivalries and suspicions between the Protestant Lutherans and the Catholics in Lake Wobegon. In Leaving Home, his descriptions of the Brethren trying to outdo each other in the length of their silent prayers before dinner ("Brethren" 156), and of the Lutheran ministers' studied philosophical countenances, even in the face of outrageous disaster ("Pontoon Boat" 107-08), are further examples of Keillor's ridicule of the pretensions often hiding in the guise of religious belief.

But the village environment is most damaging on an individual level, and, like the village rebels, Keillor has much to say about the "conformity, banality, emotional sterility, and fear" that direct the lives of small-town
inhabitants (Hilfer 252). "Sumus quod sumus" (We are what we are) is the motto on the town crest, and an appropriate motto it is, for Wobegonians see no prospect for individual or community intellectual growth (Lake Wobegon Days 6). The greatest good of the community often seems to require the individual to give up any ideas of personal or community betterment, as Carol Kennicott found when she tried to make over Gopher Prairie and as Judy Ingqvist's friend Katy found when she and her family moved to Lake Wobegon. Katy could not get a job teaching as her husband Merle did, so she "stayed home, raised their kids, was active in things, and found that Lake Wobegon didn't like her to be too active" ("New Year's" 190).

This denial of any possibility for individual development has a particularly damaging result: "Someone's personality is forever fixed and tagged by some ancient joke or scandal about him or by some peculiarity of manner or physique" (Hilfer 163). This tendency is demonstrated again and again throughout the literature of the village realists. Twain's character David Wilson is forever branded a "Pudd'nhead" because of a single remark he made on his first day in Dawson's Landing (Pudd'nhead Wilson 5-6). Similarly, dozens of the citizens of Spoon River's cemetery cry out against the injustice of the lives they led under the burden of a misgotten name or reputation. Keillor's townspeople are likewise pegged and pigeonholed with little
hope of escaping the narrow confines of the roles assigned to them. Dave Ingqvist, pastor of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church, and his wife Judy suffer the pressure of their position as leaders of the faith, anxiously waiting each year to see if they will be denied their trip to the Annual Ministers' Retreat in Florida, where "they will sit in the sun like lumps of bread dough and say forbidden things" ("New Year's" 189).

Keillor shows the individual reaction against the confining spirit of the village in a footnote in *Lake Wobegon Days* which sets out a document entitled 95 THESES, a tract purportedly written by a former Wobegonian. The writer rails against the banalities of his upbringing such as the "wretched food" and the "endless boring talk about weather, regularity, back problems, and whether something happened in 1938 or 1939" (253). He complains that the petty vices and fears that were instilled in his nature have made him over-fastidious, over-apologetic, and overnice as well as fearful of friends and strangers alike (254-8). But the most significant failings of his parents and of the town are their bigotry, their religious complacency, and their barren philosophy that forever burdened the individual with a sense of guilt and a poverty of spirit that denied any personal worth.

Carol Kennicott discovered that people of the small town seem to take "vows of poverty and chastity in the
matter of knowledge" (Lewis 199). Value is found only in conformity to the herd mentality, and "to be 'intellectual' or 'artistic' or, in their own word, to be 'highbrow,' is to be priggish and of dubious virtue" (Lewis 199). Keillor recognizes the same tendencies in Lake Wobegon, "where smart doesn't count for much" (Lake Wobegon Days 97). The individual's only hope for development seems to lie in escape. Keillor explores the possibilities for escape in Lake Wobegon Days when he describes how he left to go to college and tried to create for himself a new identity: "I didn't care where I was from so long as it was someplace else" (19).

This idea of escape is a common one among the village rebels. Jo Erring wishes to leave Fairview, knowing that he doesn't want to be like any of the people there, "for none of them are contented or happy" (Howe 100). George Willard knows he must leave Winesburg in order to pursue his dreams, and Carol Kennicott escapes to the sophistication of the city, only to face disillusionment and return to Gopher Prairie. Keillor repeatedly addresses the issue of exile in his Lake Wobegon stories. In the persona of the narrator of Lake Wobegon Days, he speaks with the voice of the self-imposed exile, one who has left the village but who still carries it around within himself. And if an overriding theme operates in the stories from Leaving Home, it is the theme of exile. As Keillor
describes this exile, it is an exercise in personal growth accompanied by a wistful longing for the familiar:

It's a wonderful thing to push on alone toward the horizon and have it be your own horizon and not someone else's. It's a good feeling, lonely and magnificent and frightening and peaceful, especially when you leave someone behind who will miss you and to whom you can write. ("Dale" 71)

The wistfulness of the exiled villager is frequently characterized by a nostalgia for the life left behind and even a tendency to romanticize that former life. Thus a certain ambivalence about the village life appears, not only in Keillor's work, but in the works of the so-called leaders of the "revolt from the village" as well. In fact, Hilfer maintains that all of the writers identified with that revolt had ambivalent attitudes toward the village and that "an ambivalence between nostalgia and revolt was natural" (4). Hilfer further notes that, after 1930, some of those same writers who formerly seemed intent on exposing small-town life for its shallowness and repressiveness were busy idealizing that village life in the years following (4).

Keillor's position can be seen as a culmination of these buffeting attitudes, for his Lake Wobegon stories address the problems of small-town life with wide-eyed
realism while simultaneously picturing that life as still desirable and worth preserving. Significantly, his picture of village life lacks the insistent tone of depression in Howe's work, or the sense of isolation in Anderson's Winesburg, or even the emotional and intellectual sterility in Lewis's Gopher Prairie. Rather, Lake Wobegon represents Keillor's desire to get away from simply satirizing the small town for its faults and move toward displaying it "with admiration and piety but also some humor" (Beyette V2). Don Druker, radio coordinator for the National Endowment for the Arts, which helped underwrite A Prairie Home Companion, explains an essential difference between Keillor and the village rebels:

Writers like Sherwood Anderson with Winesburg, Ohio were saying that if you want corruption and dark passion and original sin, you don't have to go to the big city to find it. Garrison stands that on its head. If you are looking for transcendence and affirmation and eternal values, you don't have to go to a university or a big city to find them. You can find them in your own home town. (Fiske H23)

Keillor regards his treatment of Lake Wobegon as more mature than the "flat, sophomoric way" in which Sinclair Lewis sometimes treated his subject (Beyette V2). Though his descriptions of Lake Wobegon may closely resemble
Lewis's descriptions of Gopher Prairie, a more generous nature is evident in Keillor's tales. As critic John E. Miller has observed:

Where Lewis saw shabby and unpainted or pretentious and overstuffed houses in Gopher Prairie, Keillor observes the happy, lived-in homes of Lake Wobegon's approximately nine hundred souls. (26)

And while Lewis would have satirized the modest homes of Keillor's Wobegonians with their "cast-iron deer, small windmills, clothespoles and clotheslines, [and] various plaster animals such as squirrels and lambs and small elephants" (Lake Wobegon Days 3), Keillor "views it all as the expression of well-meaning people trying to bring some beauty and significance into their lives" (John Miller 26).

Sometimes Keillor expresses his sympathetic view of the small town by revealing the flaws in city life. In "Eloise," a story from Leaving Home, he describes a scene between Eloise Krebsbach Best and her husband Chuck that takes place at their home in Minneapolis. With wry humor, Keillor relates how the neighbors stop mowing lawns and busy themselves with quiet activities so they can overhear the Bests' argument (136). Thus he takes a trait often associated with small-town life--nosiness--and puts it in the city to demonstrate that human nature rules
regardless of setting.

In "A Glass of Wendy," another story from _Leaving Home_, Keillor describes how, in the cities, people are always trying to counterfeit elements of the village like the small-town tavern, but that "the antiques come from an antique factory and the concept was developed by a design team." He explains that "the city is full of new places made to look old, but those aren't the same as a joint where people have sat for fifty years, and all of them people you know. It's the difference between a lie and the truth" (31).

Perhaps Keillor's most damaging satire of small-town life is contained in _95 Theses 95_, yet even here he softens the attack. Significantly, the tract is placed, not in the main text, but in a footnote. Keillor regards the footnote as an important tool in his fiction, allowing him "freedom of digression." He explains, "There is supporting material which can be read in sequence or earlier or just glanced at or eliminated entirely, and that can go into footnotes" (Roback 139). Thus he ranks the seriousness of the attack in _95 Theses 95_ by putting it in a position where it may be "eliminated entirely" by the reader.

The form and style of _95 Theses 95_ further dull the bitter edge of the satire. It is, of course, a parody of Martin Luther's 95 theses, and as such, alerts the reader
to its intended humor. Furthermore, Keillor gently pokes fun at the writer of the manifesto, who intended to nail it to the Lutheran church door in Lake Wobegon, but who, fearing detection and hating to damage the wood, instead slips it under the door of the Lake Wobegon Herald-Star. The tract has lain on editor Harold Starr's desk for several years without being published, and during that time the author has written to recover it several times, to no avail. Keillor reveals that "like so many writers of manifestos, he forgot to keep a copy, and over the years his letters have descended to a pitiful pleading tone quite unlike his original style" (Lake Wobegon Days 252).

Keillor is harder on Lake Wobegon's exiles or would-be exiles than he is on the townspeople themselves. The pretensions of the town's deserters make them easy targets. Like Johnny Tollefson, who dreams of leaving Lake Wobegon and becoming a writer, most exiles fabricate a background which denies the mundane small-town existence. When Johnny goes off to St. Cloud State College, he imagines himself as Tony Flambeau, son of Emile and Eileen Flambeau of the Flambeau Family mystery series. He redesigns his family relationships and background to suit the person that he wants to be:

What great parents! Actually, they're his best friends. But she [Eileen] was right: it is time for him to strike out on his own. Here at St.
Cloud he will have the freedom to develop more as an individual. Which is exactly what they want for him. How lucky to have such wonderful parents! *(Lake Wobegon Days 156-7)*

But Keillor points out that the danger we face when we redesign ourselves is that we may lose our identity—that part of us that others recognize:

> We pretend to be someone else and need them to say they know us, but one day we become that person and they simply don't know us. From that there is no bus back that I know of. *(Lake Wobegon Days 237)*

Keillor’s portrayal of Lake Wobegon and its inhabitants is less an idealized picture of a life that never existed than it is a representation of small town life that is fundamentally more honest and realistic than the so-called realism in the literature of the early part of this century. Keillor’s vision of small-town life does not overlook the ignoble side; it simply treats that ignobility with humor and understanding, as an expression of human nature. C. Hugh Holman maintains that life in the Midwest tries the human spirit in a number of ways—through its harsh, unforgiving weather, through its insular community ties, and through its restrictive, dominating religion. In response to this oppression, Midwesterners have resorted to "romantic idealization and self-mocking and sardonic
laughter" (Holman 247). Keillor has managed to blend these approaches to achieve a superior realism that rises above bitterness and touches on the universal.
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CHAPTER 5

THE UNIFYING VISION OF GARRISON KEILLOR

In 1985, with his new book Lake Wobegon Days near the top of the best-seller list and his radio show A Prairie Home Companion still growing in popularity, Garrison Keillor mused about the diversity of his success: "It's kind of strange in middle age to find myself popular in two such dissimilar things. I have a hard time figuring out the why of this" (Healey). Yet a study of Keillor's background and the traditions that influenced the directions he has taken in life offers some insight into the nature of this duality.

Keillor's strict fundamentalist upbringing fostered a religious sensibility as well as a sense of isolation from the rest of the world. The radio broadcasts of his youth provided an important link with the world outside his narrow religious group and gave him a crucial understanding of the power of live radio to forge a sense of community among listeners. The storytelling tradition in his family focused his attention on the entertainment value of the human voice and instilled in him a reverence for the oral tradition. His interest in reading supported his fascination with the art of storytelling, yet at the
same time, it drew his attention to a literary art that derived from a different tradition. Finally, his ambition to become a writer focused the conflict between his desire to adhere to those values instilled by the family and the compelling need he felt to write. With such a background of conflicting desires and influences, it is small wonder that Keillor found this dichotomy of purpose continuing into his adult life in the form of two careers.

Ironically, the conflicting impulses in Keillor's life have been the impetus for his greatest achievements. In order to come to terms with the contradictions of these opposing influences, Keillor has worked to blend them. The result is seen most clearly in the Lake Wobegon fiction. In Lake Wobegon he brings together elements of the traditions of live radio and oral storytelling art with a literary tradition that focuses on the printed page. He blends the clever, sophisticated writing style of the New Yorker tradition with a colloquial Midwestern style. And he works out his ambivalent feelings about his family, his religion, and his small-town upbringing by presenting a mature, balanced picture that neither denies their faults nor ignores their value.

By uniting the talents required in the ephemeral medium of live radio with the somewhat different talents necessary in writing for the printed page, Keillor has developed not only an immensely popular radio style, but a literary
creation that continues to grow in the imaginations of his audience. Obviously, Keillor's radio persona was dependent on his writing abilities in the creation of the weekly monologue that held such a central place in the program, but his writing talent also appeared in the mock commercials and parody songs that he regularly wrote to highlight the radio show. Conversely, his radio career has contributed to his literary work, not just by providing the impetus for the creation of his fictional town for the weekly monologue, but also in developing his sense of timing in the writing and telling of a story. Furthermore, the immediacy of live radio establishes a sense of community in the audience (Larson and Oravec), and, at his best, Keillor is able to incorporate this sense of community into the written work. Thus when Byron Tollefson shakes his head over the big-city boys in Minneapolis who "didn't know anything, thought they knew everything, talked in that smart voice and so damn persistent until you lost patience and wanted to smack them" (Lake Wobegon Days 157), we nod our heads in agreement, feeling more a part of Byron's world than of theirs.

Although the conflict between Keillor's two different writing styles is even more pronounced than that between his radio and writing careers, these styles are in fact very skillfully blended in the production of the Lake
Wobegon fiction. The concise, direct, and painstakingly written work Keillor does for *The New Yorker* certainly has little in common with the rambling, digressive and apparently spontaneous oral style that dominates the Lake Wobegon stories. Yet in the written stories Keillor has achieved something that goes beyond the radio monologues. He has incorporated elements of his *New Yorker* style into the Lake Wobegon narrative, giving it a depth and complexity of style suitably lacking in the oral performances. The talent for parody that appears so often in Keillor's *New Yorker* pieces surfaces in *Lake Wobegon Days* in such segments as the letters and journal entries of the early settlers of New Albion (41-46), the inflated verse of New Albion's first poet (27-29, 36, 54), and the parody of Martin Luther's theses entitled *95 Theses* (251-274). This talent for capturing the essence of a person's speech or writing style further appears in his characterizations in the Lake Wobegon stories. Speech and thought patterns are the primary means of defining character, with physical detail taking a secondary role. Thus when we read of Carla Krebsbach turning through the pages of her high school annual, looking at the pictures of her eighty-seven classmates, and thinking, "Wouldn't it be nice if there were eighty-six people in the Class of '86? It would be like a good omen," and then worrying that she has wished someone dead ("Dale" 61), we see a full-blown personality
captured in just a few words.

As with his diverse writing styles, the tone in Keillor's Lake Wobegon fiction reveals some inner conflict. The stories frequently have the ring of nostalgia and may seem to glorify the small-town life. Yet the fiction is filled with satire of the town and its inhabitants. Keillor muddies the romantic vision of Lake Wobegon by persistently pointing out the town's shortcomings, but he dulls the bitter edge of the satire by deflecting the blows and turning them against the satirist. As one critic has observed, "Keillor has wedded parody to romance and created something seamless. The result is sweet satire, a satire with a strange capacity to score repeated direct hits without doing harm" (Singer). Keillor demonstrates this "sweet satire" in a description of Lake Wobegon that presents a romantic vision of idyllic beauty and then undercuts it with a wry statement that brings the picture into focus: "The sun makes a trail of shimmering lights across the water. It would make quite a picture if you had the right lens, which nobody in this town has got" (Lake Wobegon Days 2,3). Thus Keillor presents a picture of small-town life that juxtaposes the rose-colored nostalgia of the romantic with the narrowed perception of the satirist, creating a more complex and a more mature vision.

Keillor's vision of Lake Wobegon is, in a sense,
hyperopic: distance allows him to see it more clearly. Yet physically, Lake Wobegon is presented as an indistinct picture—we know less about the physical appearance of the town and its citizens than we do about the attitudes and idiosyncrasies that direct their existence. Keillor captures the personalities of his characters through their thoughts and speech and presents them within the framework of his stories. His purpose, he says, is to provide the vehicle, while allowing the audience "to supply all of the details and the sensual surface" (Bunce 38). Edward Fiske suggests that "Keillor has created his mythical Lake Wobegon—and encouraged others to create their own through their own imagination." By inviting the reader to become a co-creator, Keillor insures an empathetic audience and further extends that sense of community that permeates his fiction.

This sense of a shared community is the key to what makes Keillor's humor different from traditional American humor. William Lee Miller outlines several common trends in humor—"banana peel" humor, which laughs at others' misfortunes; the humor of superiority, which raises one person up by mocking another; satirical humor, which seeks "to undermine the evils and puncture the foibles of this world by subjecting them to derision"; cynical humor, which regards life as meaningless and responds with a bitter laugh; and irresponsible humor, which avoids the obligations
of life by making a joke of them. Yet Miller contends that Keillor's humor fits into none of these categories (528). Indeed, these types of humor tend to separate the humorist from his subject, placing him on the outside looking in. Keillor describes this type of humor as "comedy that is cruel, that picks on weaker people," and he maintains that it is "false comedy" (Klose K4). Keillor's comedy, on the other hand, "manages to joke about small-town life from the inside, without condescension" (Pareles). Indeed, Keillor's attitude toward Lake Wobegon is never superior, and by including the audience in his fabricated community, he never allows his readers to react with condescension. We may share a laugh over the foibles of his characters, but we never ridicule them as persons, for "that would be like ridiculing his [and our] closest friends" (Schumacher 33).

Keillor's humor has a healing quality that not only allows us to laugh at our human weaknesses, but requires that we laugh at them, "for this deadly serious business of life must not be taken too seriously" (Wall 1019). And Keillor's humor, like his vision, unifies the conflicts within us and within our world. While most humor is divisive, Keillor's is a humor "that unites, that brings a shock of recognition of our common humanity" (William Miller 528).

Out of the diverse traditions of his background,
Garrison Keillor has emerged as a writer whose work defies categorization. His work derives from a number of conflicting traditions--live radio versus the written work; the precise, literary style of *The New Yorker* versus the rambling, digressions of the oral tradition; and the sharp satire of the early realists versus the gentle nostalgia of the romantic tradition. In the Lake Wobegon fiction Keillor has unified these conflicts of medium, style, and tone to produce a work that represents no single tradition but rather a combination of several. No longer does he seem torn between radio and writing, having found an outlet that unites the best elements of each. The written format of the Lake Wobegon fiction has allowed him to wed the colloquial style of his monologues with his *New Yorker*-style parodic talent. And the wisdom of maturity has cleared his clouded perception of his small-town origins, lifting him above simplistic satire or romantic idealization. Keillor approaches his Lake Wobegon fiction with that wholeness of vision that comes with maturity, that ability to recognize and reconcile the conflicts and incongruities of life. Finally, Keillor encourages his readers to share his vision by fabricating a community that extends beyond the imaginary realms of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, and into the community of mankind.
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