LIFE IS ULTIMATELY tragic and the world is insensitively cruel. This has become the conclusion about the nature of life as depicted in immigrant literature. Whatever the race or nationality, to emigrate, to forsake one’s native land forever, to experience permanent family separation, to part forever with friends, to desert ancestral firesides — this became an undertaking with uncertain consequences, including the peril of tragic failure. And the heavy heart of the emigrant often became “the divided heart” of the immigrant. The self was suspended in the tension between nostalgia over the past and anxiety concerning the future. How did the self endure this tension with its contrasting temptations — to homesickness or to horizons of hope?

There were a few independent souls who abandoned America and returned to their homeland. Such was the case of the Norwegian immigrant author Kristofer Janson, in Minneapolis, and his young friend, Knut Hamsun, who dreamed of becoming a writer. There were also those who lacked the spirit of independence, those in bondage to inadequacy, who sought solace in dreaming.
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over the past and who died of unspeakable loneliness and lie buried, often in unmarked graves, their only monument the fictional characters in immigrant novels. But the immigrant who neither returned to his native land nor died prematurely from lost dreams and a broken heart was the determinedly practical person. He drowned his thoughts of the past in deeds of vigorous action, having a relatively well-defined purpose and pursuing it with high and sustained courage.

Immigration statistics tell us that most Norwegians came to the Midwest to plow and plant the fields; some planned and started small businesses; a very few seized the pen, giving a measure of meaning to the immigrant’s life and setting worthy goals and purposes for his being assimilated into a new society.

In this latter and smallest group of single-minded, purposeful activists was Waldemar Theodore Ager who came to America in 1885. He did not write with a pen, however, but with an endless number of pencils across nearly two score years as editor of the Norwegian-language weekly newspaper Reform in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. At the same time, he was author of six novels, eight collections of short stories and essays, and one historical narrative. A significant symbol of the compulsory thrift that marked the life of one publishing a newspaper and books in a foreign language, while providing for a family of nine children, was a legacy of Ball and Mason glass fruit-canning jars full of one-inch pencil stubs, their sharp points shaved with a pocket jackknife. The graphite of these No. 2.5 pencils communicated Ager’s cardinal convictions upon the blank sides of scrap paper, printing-press spoilages in all shapes and sizes forever lying about in a job-printing shop. In his frugality he also used the blank sides of circulars that came third class in the mail.

His abiding legacy, however, is the total corpus of
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writings during a half-century: the complete file of Reform, his collected short stories and poems, his essays and novels, his perceptive articles of literary criticism, and the unforgettable character of the person that emerges from these writings. The stature of the man as literary artist has been favorably judged by Einar Haugen: "In originality and talent he stands far above all who have produced in Norwegian-American literature, with the exception of Rølvaag."¹ And Ole E. Rølvaag himself, beginning in 1910, often praised his ability. In a letter to a friend shortly after the publication that year of Ager's first successful novel, Kristus for Pilatus (Christ before Pilate), Rølvaag said: "Artistically speaking, Wal­demar Ager has reached a peak which it will be difficult for the rest of us to attain."²

This novel deserves initial attention for two reasons. In the half-century of Norwegian immigrant writing, from Gunnar by Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen in 1874 to Rølvaag's publication of Giants in the Earth in the original Norwegian in 1924 (I de dage, Riket grundlægges), it was Ager who became the first writer to be published in Norway in a contract with an outstanding publishing house. That occurred in 1911 with Kristus for Pilatus by the prestigious publisher H. Aschehoug in Kristiania (Oslo) under their preferred title Pastor Conrad Walther Welde. This novel, too, is notable as the early revelation of Ager the man. For he was forever haunted by the persuasion that life is ultimately tragic and that the world is insensitively cruel. This is what the author apparently intended to demonstrate.

The clue to the origin of Ager's first novel, with its realistic portrayal of tragedy, is a famous painting which hung on the wall of his study: Muncazy's "Christ before Pilate." Whenever Ager swung in his swivel chair from his roll-top desk, he was brought face to face with that picture. Reared in a home of a devoutly religious mother,
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he was undoubtedly aware of a quotation from Isaiah 53:3 that has often served as a word-picture of Christ: “He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

As Henrik Ibsen chose a priest of the church as hero in his first great drama, Brand, Ager chose a Lutheran pastor as hero in his first successful novel. In the parsonage study of Pastor Welde hangs Muncazy’s painting. Among people in the congregation and community, characterized by selfishness and cowardice, pride and prejudice, gossip and slander, Pastor Welde habitually looks up at the painting and asks himself, “Am I for Christ, or am I, as Pilate, washing my hands of any genuine responsibility?” Welde, like Brand, refuses to compromise. He seeks to act as a genuine and faithful minister of Christ, with the consequence that he is misunderstood and eventually disliked on every side. Christ is again rejected, crucified. The congregation gets rid of their minister, who dies as a young man, a seeming failure. The story is not only a slashingly serious satire about the conflict between the spiritual and material worlds in church and in society: in this novel Ager is making peace with reality. Given the nature of the world and the character of human beings, the life of the idealist is perennially threatened by tragic failure.

An author’s first successful novel is usually, and sometimes considerably, autobiographical. Ager, like Pastor Welde, also walked the streets of his community committed to idealistic causes. But after a score of years, first as printer, then as business manager of Reform, and seven years as its editor, he was telling himself in the writing of the novel that the achievement of ideals presents a permanent prospect of possible failure.

Kenneth Smemo of Moorhead (Minnesota) State University has succinctly summarized the triple task Ager imposed upon himself: “Throughout this multi-faceted activity of a life-time Ager agitated passionately for three
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major idealistic causes — all doomed to failure. First, he advocated total abstinence and the legal prohibition of alcoholic beverages — to be achieved by public education, enlightenment, and by law. Second, he sought the retention of a permanent Norwegian-American subculture in America, a bilingual society based on the folk culture, the traditions and attitudes of the Norwegian people, tempered by America's physical and social setting. Third, he steadfastly encouraged cultural creativity within this hybrid culture, especially literary, utilizing the mother tongue and drawing on the life experiences of the ethnic group in its American setting.”

If such causes were “all doomed to failure,” causes inherently dubious by their very nature, can one speak of tragedy when eventual failure comes? The answer calls for comprehension and precision in dealing with the classic concept of tragedy. In her incisive review of Oscar Handlin's The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People, Karen Larsen noted the essential immigrant problem: “In the midst of innumerable individual tragedies, the movement as a whole was saved from becoming tragic by the tenacity and, at the same time, flexibility with which the immigrant groups were able to attain a certain harmony, unconscious perhaps, between the efforts to maintain their cultural identity and the struggle to find their place in the land of their adoption.”

Waldemar Ager was a great and good man. He was great in the estimation of first-generation Norwegian immigrants. And his contemporaries could testify that he was a good man. For though he was aggressive in his commitment to ideals and causes, he was essentially a kind man. Even in self-defense he was oversensitive about doing someone harm and suffering moral headache as a consequence. He had an aptitude for being humorously sarcastic but was never malicious. Yet
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this great and good man had a tragic flaw in his character: he was unable to compromise. He possessed admirable tenacity, but he lacked the necessary commensurate flexibility. Thus fate, in the form of inevitably changing circumstances, brought his life down to an unhappy, indeed a sad, ending in the dark decade of his declining years.

That darkness was all the deeper because of its contrast to the brightness of earlier years when Ager's star was in ascendancy. He had come to Chicago in 1885 at the age of sixteen. There he went to work as an apprentice in the printing shop of the Norwegian newspaper Norden. As a highly motivated young adult, he was resolved to pursue self-education. He had left school in Norway at the age of thirteen to engage in a variety of jobs to assist in the family economy. In Chicago, he purchased an inexpensive Royal Exercises No. 127 composition notebook in brown paper cover. This book now contains quotations from his chosen company of the great, copied, for permanence, in flawless handwriting with pen and ink. Unable to pursue formal education, Ager resolved to gain it on his own. As a Don Quixote, crazily idealistic with poised pen, he charged in all directions, copying wisdom from Welhaven, Ibsen, Bjørnson, Kierkegaard, Wergeland, Goethe, Shakespeare, Bacon, Sophocles, Seneca, Virgil, Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Voltaire, Pascal, and the “ubekjent” (unknown).

The idealistic adolescent soon sought out a temperance society. Because he worked in a print shop, he was made secretary. He began a news sheet for the group and was writing at the age of eighteen. His contributions of skits and poems were printed anonymously. And at the weekly meetings of the society, he began reciting declamations and making speeches. He was learning to think on his feet before a crowd. This was one more
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apprenticeship for a lifetime record of unnumbered addresses and lectures.

An eight-by-eleven-inch certificate of membership in Broderbandet (Brotherly Band), the local chapter of Skandinaviska Templarselskapet (Scandinavian Good Templar Society) carries the name “Theodore Waldemar Ager.” He became editor of Templar Bladet (The Templar Paper), and the front page for the May issue of 1891 carries a story by “Wm. A.” In that year, on October 28, he became a naturalized citizen in the Cook County courthouse under the name William Ager. This vacillation about the name he would use reflects the immigrant’s problem. Wishing to become Americanized, he often changed an obviously Norwegian name for an Anglo-Saxon one. Waldemar Ager, by becoming William Ager, would become William the Conqueror. But this idea was short-lived; he would later lament over Norwegian immigrants who Anglicized their names or chose new ones. A good citizen is proud of his ancestry and his ancestral name.

Like any aspiring immigrant youth, the young Ager felt another urge in the Americanization process. That was assuring that one had, among other things, the correct and acceptable wardrobe. In an early Chicago family photograph, he stands as a fashionable dresser with a bowler hat.

Because of a bout with malaria, his doctor strongly advised Ager to change his place of work, which was located near the ill-smelling Chicago River, and to move to a more healthful climate. By good fortune, he was offered the job of printer in the shop of Reform, a Norwegian-language weekly newspaper in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The masthead of this paper carried a sketch of a serpent: symbol of the evil of alcohol entwined about the church, the school, the home, and the congressional building. The motto of the paper was in
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Norwegian-English words, “Totalafhold — Prohibition” (Total Abstinence and Prohibition). The editor, Ole B. Olson, a forceful speaker, was already aware of Ager’s idealistic bent of mind and felt fortunate to have such a person in the shop.

In this move, destiny was kind to Ager, for it brought him to a more suitable community in which to pursue his temperance work and his budding concern that the Norwegian immigrant preserve the mother tongue as the vehicle for maintaining one’s cultural heritage.

When, in 1892, twenty-four-year-old Ager stepped out of the day-coach of a Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Omaha passenger train, he entered a city with seventeen sawmills and lumber companies supplied by nearby logging camps. There were eighty-nine saloons, and on his way to the Reform office in the newly built brick Drummond-Laycock Building on Barstow Street, the newcomer would pass twenty-nine of them on this main street.

Ager responded to this situation with affirmative action. Having been an enthusiastic temperance worker in Chicago, the young bachelor soon after arrival called together the first of his newfound friends. That was the night of June 23, 1892. Ager explained to the twelve who assembled the purpose and constitution of Det Norske Templarselskap (The Norwegian Templar Society). Then and there they organized themselves as local Chapter 23, voted to call themselves Excelsior, and signed as charter members.

In the years to come, Ager would associate himself with two more societies: Varden (Beacon), the local chapter of the national Afholdsforbund (Total Abstinence Alliance), and Viking, which was the local chapter of the Independent Order of Good Templars. Viking was the more formal society, with an elaborate lodge ritual. Ager gave most of his time and attention to Excelsior and
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Varden, because they were more informal and structured to local needs and desires. They also offered more possibilities than the primary purpose of encouraging each other to practice total abstinence. Their meetings were social gatherings, providing the newly arrived immigrants a place for easy fellowship where Norwegian was the language spoken. One also suspects that a hidden purpose of these societies was the hope that Norwegians would marry Norwegians. Ager, who always practiced what he preached, married Gurolle Blestern seven years after the charter meeting of Excelsior, at which gathering she had been elected vice-president. She had come from Tromsø, Norway.

Eau Claire was also a fortunate location for young Ager because it was heavily populated by Norwegians and therefore a good place to foster and nurture an enthusiasm for ethnic loyalty. In his detailed study of Norwegian immigrant settlements, Carlton C. Qualey observes: “Norwegians went to this area as early as 1852, although the bulk of the immigrants arrived in the sixties and later. The early attraction was undoubtedly the immediate cash income to be derived from labor in the lumber camps centering at Eau Claire. An early settler remarked that for many Norwegians, life there was simply a change of location from Norway, not a change of occupation. . . . Waldemar Ager makes the interesting observation that the Norwegians gradually displaced the Irish and French Canadians in Eau Claire after the Civil War.”

This was the city where Ager would remain for a half-century of life and work. Here an infant would be delivered at home by a Norwegian doctor or a Norwegian midwife, baptized and confirmed in Norwegian at First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church. If one did not attend public school, one went to the Norwegian School, where reading, geography, arithmetic, and Bible history
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and Catechism were taught in Norwegian. Getting married, one appeared before a Norwegian county clerk for a license, went to the Norwegian church or parsonage for the wedding, and then visited a Norwegian photographer. One would trade at Norwegian grocery stores, search out the Norwegian clerk at the dry goods store, belong to a mutual aid society (Norden Lodge Number One), and keep up with the news in the newspaper Reform. When ill, one would see a Norwegian doctor, who wrote out a prescription in Norwegian for the Norwegian pharmacist. Eventually one was brought to a Norwegian mortuary, after which there were funeral services in Norwegian in the home, at the church, and at burial in the Norwegian cemetery, as distinct from other cemeteries — the Swedish Lutheran, German Catholic, Irish Catholic, or the Jewish. This was the milieu of Eau Claire, known as “Sawdust City,” in which all primary relationships could be in Norwegian. More than a quarter of a century later, in 1926, Ager would narrate the story of the logging days of Norwegian immigrants in his novel Gammlelandets sønner (Sons of the Old Country).

In that first decade, 1893 to 1903, in a community so conducive to the exercise of his deep commitments — to the temperance movement and to the maintenance of the Norwegian language — Ager moved up from printer of Reform to business manager, to co-editor. At Reform Trykkeri (Reform printing shop), he brought out his first little book in 1894. It was a 143-page volume of short stories and poems, obviously a temperance tract, entitled Paa drikkeondets konto (Charged to the Evil of Alcohol).

On July 5, 1899, Waldemar Ager and Gurole Blestern were married. In the wedding picture, the groom has in the knot of his necktie the St. Andrews cross-shaped gold pin of membership in Det Norske Templarselskap. That year Ager brought home to his bride his first attempt at a novel, a lengthened short story, I strømmen (In the
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Stream). Given the single-minded purpose of the author, it was naturally the tragic story of an alcoholic. Though the narrative has its melodramatic aspects, Ager’s insight into human nature was sure. The point of the story is not just a warning of the peril of tragedy for the habitual drunkard but the raising of the question, why? This is the question posed in Ludvig Holberg’s comedy, Jeppe paa bjerget (Jeppe of the Hill). In that play, written in 1723 in Copenhagen, the most quoted line of Jeppe is “People around here talk about Jeppe and his drinking, but they never say anything about why Jeppe drinks.” According to Holberg’s domestic comedy, the blame lies squarely at the feet of his cruel wife, Nille. In his little novel, Ager was not content with depicting merely a domestic situation. He implied that well-informed people could testify that his character, Lidahl, was drinking before he was married. The writer was saying, “Life is not that simple.” Therefore the drunkard deserves something more than our easy condemnation; such a one deserves our understanding.

Thus, in Ager’s authorship, temperance literature takes a sharp turn away from being merely judgmental, the drunkard being classified with the criminal and his brutality emphasized. Ager would treat the unfortunate slave to alcohol as a human being. He saw that it was inhuman to add to the burden of the alcoholic by also laying upon him a lack of understanding and concern. If the attitude was genuine, one would, as Ager did, join the temperance movement, and at the same time would work politically through the Prohibition party to make it illegal to manufacture and sell alcoholic beverages. He was never abusive with habitual drinkers, but he spared no words against the real culprits — the liquor industry and the saloon — who were in power because of political ties. For Ager, therein lay the tragedy of American society. In such a world, he epitomized his own teaching:

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that we refrain from being insensitively cruel to individuals caught in the grip of compulsive drinking.

In tandem with this ideal of encouraging the Norwegian immigrant to join the temperance movement was the ever-present parallel ideal of persuading him to maintain his ancestral heritage, doing so by keeping alive the use of the language of his native land. These were Ager’s agitations — for total abstinence and resistance to total assimilation. These two concerns became the themes of his short stories and novels: the degeneration of the immigrant who surrenders his soul to the saloon and the alienation of the immigrant who wastes his cultural inheritance, thus cutting himself off from the roots of his past. The characters in his fiction would be the maladjusted, the lost souls of tragic misdirection in their lives. As Gerald Thorson has said, “When their lives were tragedies in Ager’s eyes the cause was most often intemperance or loss of spiritual heritage. Ager’s two chief interests in life then, are not only major themes in his writing; they form the basis of an understanding of his concept of tragedy.”

Waldemar Ager’s third ideal, the creation of immigrant writings as a unique genre of American literature, was born of optimism nurtured by a false hope. His goal was the development of a unique culture on American soil. It would be the alternative to either a diaspora culture, a replica of Norwegian culture, or the opposite, the immigrant denial of his past in favor of total assimilation. He not only proclaimed the ultimate objective, but, to sustain his vision, he threw himself into this creative activity with tremendous energy.

Destiny again came to his assistance, providing him with the means of implementing his ideals. As a result, the decade 1903–1913 became his brightest period, with accomplishments and honors rewarding his strenuous efforts in several directions.

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In 1903, following the premature death of Ole B. Olson from cancer, Ager assumed the editor’s chair. Now thirty-four years old, he would be in total charge of Reform, the way he would always prefer. And he would remain firmly in that captain’s chair for the balance of his life. In the following decade, the subscription list would grow and the stockholders of the Fremad Company, which owned the paper, would be satisfied. Ager took advantage of the favorable circumstances. Carl H. Chrislock has written: “The situation in 1900 confounded earlier expectations. Far from having faded away, as would have happened if rapid assimilation had prevailed, the Norwegian-language press was expanding its readership and would continue to do so for another decade and a half.” The immigrants had a tendency to concentrate in settlements, and this factor prolonged the bilingual community.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, however, emigration from Norway declined sharply and steadily. Also to be detected at this time was the fact that American-born Norwegians were now outnumbering their countrymen born in Norway. This new factor became a concern for Waldemar Ager and other leaders of the immigrant community. Indeed, some action had to be taken: “On January 28, 1903, a group of one hundred Norwegian-Americans, meeting in Minneapolis, resolved to create the Norwegian Society of America (Det Norske Selskap i Amerika). . . . The Norwegian Society hoped to unite all Norwegian-Americans around the worthwhile cause of Norwegian language, literature, and immigrant history.” This triple-pronged purpose was dear to the heart of Ager: to encourage the maintenance of the original language, to stimulate aspiring writers to achieve a creative Norwegian-American literature, and to begin a promotional journal. With unlimited capacity for work, he seized the opportunity to be editor of and
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contributor to *Kvartalskrift* (Quarterly). The first issue of this magazine was published in Eau Claire in January, 1905. Here, most assuredly, was one more medium in which Ager could propagate what had long been his program for Norwegian Americans. His objectives were obvious in such articles as “Our Cultural Possibilities,” “Preserving Our Mother Tongue,” and “The Language Is Most Important.”

Thus the decade from 1903 to 1913 was one of feverish activity and immense satisfaction. As editor of *Reform*, Ager reached a growing number of rank-and-file Norwegians, and, as editor of *Kvartalskrift*, he addressed the elite of the Norwegian Society of America. As its president, he gave leadership to the Norwegian-Danish Press Society (1909–1912). He made his breakthrough as an author in 1910 with *Kristus for Pilatus*, which was published in Norway in 1911; for it, he received the literary award of Det Norske Selskap i Amerika. He accepted a growing number of invitations to speak and, in 1912, became the first citizen of Eau Claire to appear in *Who’s Who in America*.

The year was 1913. Ager, now aged forty-four, was sailing steadily on the crest of a wave of popularity, full speed ahead. He was being listened to. *Reform* could now report a subscription list of 10,000. He had gathered a sheaf of book reviews from Norway, Denmark, and the Norwegian-American press — reviews which commended his *Kristus for Pilatus*. He was respected and honored in temperance societies and fraternal organizations. As a speaker, he not only was a man with a cause, but he had wit, humor, satire, gentle irony, and was easy to listen to. Entertainment as well as the proclamation of ideals attracted crowds. His popularity, both in Norway and America, led Governor Francis McGovern to appoint him to a position in charge of the Wisconsin exhibit at the Eidsvold Constitution Centennial Exhibition in
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Kristiania in 1914. In this capacity, he gathered materials portraying the contribution of the Norwegian immigrant to Wisconsin and to the nation.

During the two-month-long festivities in Norway, Ager was feted at banquets and invited to lecture on Norwegians in America. He appeared in temperance halls with acclaim, speaking on his favorite theme, the evils of the liquor traffic. But he remained aware of the tragic nature of life; this is evidenced in his chosen texts. In the press, he quoted Welhaven:

Hvo, som gaar foran i en
Alvordyst, han seirer ei,
Han kjæmper kun og falder.

(He who goes in the front
Of a worthy cause
Is not victorious;
He only fights and falls.)

Ager knew that the high tide of the movement to maintain the Norwegian language and the preservation of the ancestral heritage was beginning to recede. For in Eau Claire there was a definite rift in the church family and in the town’s Norskdom (“Norwegianism”). On February 4, 1913, resigned members of First Norwegian Lutheran Church voted to build a new church for Grace English Lutheran. Now while he was in Norway, his home church was busy with plans to host the Fourth Biennial Convention of the Young People’s League of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America on August 20-23, 1914. According to the program for the occasion, fifteen addresses, lectures, and sermons were in English and only three in Norwegian. This invasion of spoken English under the aegis of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America came to Ager as a sinister sign of the times.

Indeed, promotion of ethnic pride and efforts to pre-
serve a foreign language were fast declining across the nation. In the midst of World War I, strong anti-German propaganda became fused into an all-inclusive anti-foreign hysteria. This trend reached its height when proclamations were issued prohibiting the use of a foreign language in schools and in public addresses.

Now came rumblings of discontent in the Norwegian Lutheran church, for when Grace Church was dedicated, its members could report that the congregation had grown from 137 to 560. Clearly something had to be done, as more and more children and young people could speak and understand only English. Pressure to resign began to focus on Pastor Peder Tangjerd, who did not feel competent to preach in English. So, in 1917, he resigned and the Reverend Peter R. Syrdal was called. He wasted no time in setting the congregation on a new course symbolized by the fact that henceforth there would be two confirmation classes: one conducted in Norwegian, the other in English. He was capable of preaching in both Norwegian and English, thus could institute dual Sunday services. At the next annual meeting of the congregation, January, 1918, Ager led a few in lodging a vigorous protest. They declared that it was clearly understood Grace Church had been organized for those who wished English, but that “First Church” had been organized as a Norwegian church and should continue to use the native language. Ager’s proposal did not prevail. His close friend in the cause was John Gaustad, who after the defeat resigned as secretary of the congregation but later, under pressure, withdrew his resignation. Henceforth the friendship of these two men deepened.

Fortunately for Ager, if the tide of one ideal had turned and was receding, the tide of his other ideal was coming in with surprising speed. Politically he had identified himself with the Prohibition party and in one campaign
was candidate for lieutenant governor of Wisconsin on the party’s ticket. (Otherwise he was habitually Republican.) On January 16, 1919, came the ratification of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution.

One of the most renowned speakers in the cause of prohibition was the Great Commoner from Nebraska, the so-called “silver-tongued orator,” William Jennings Bryan. Certainly one of the highlights of Ager’s speaking career came on the night of May 17, 1916, at Brooklyn’s Academy of Music, when he shared the speaker’s platform with Bryan. Immense personal satisfaction came to Ager at the news of the ratification of the eighteenth amendment. His sense of achievement was accompanied by public recognition of his accomplishments. Three months later, in the *Eau Claire Leader* for March 23, there appeared an article entitled “200 Celebrate Waldemar Ager’s 50th Birthday.”

“All the speeches were laudatory of Mr. Ager’s great and unselfish work. It was the habit nowadays, said District Attorney Gilbertson in his brief talk, to measure this world’s success by dollars and cents. This formula, he held, could not be used measuring Mr. Ager’s success, but his achievement, he pointed out, lay in the unmeasured extent of service to mankind, his unselfish and arduous labors, ill-paid, in behalf of his fellowmen, to whose service he had consecrated his whole life.”

This paragraph is the clue to the authenticity of Ager’s idealism: his unconcern with personal material aggrandizement. As if in part to make amends, his many friends from far and near had contributed to a purse of nearly one thousand dollars. In a letter to his sister Camilla a few days later, March 26, he told of the joyous event and the money gift. Then comes the first suggestion of sinister shadows of future events. Explaining to her that he would put the money away “for a rainy day,” he speaks of his apprehensions: “I can expect to be out of a job at
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almost any time since there has risen a great ill-will against foreign-language newspapers, so that many refuse to advertise, many cancel their subscriptions to Norwegian newspapers, and immigration is stopping altogether.”

Thus the decade 1913 to 1923 was one of continuing activity for Ager on many fronts. He experienced ambivalent feelings about future prospects. Although for him there was satisfaction in the last hours of legal liquor on January 16, 1920, one could see in the wake of prohibition the rising tide of offenses against liquor laws, the high cost of enforcement, the diminution of respect for law. How fully he was aware of the continuing life among the antiprohibition forces is not clear. In an interview in 1923, he seemingly confidently believed that the battle had been won.

At a banquet in Eau Claire on the evening of October 17, 1923, Consul Olaf I. Hove, a long-time personal friend from Milwaukee, conferred on Ager the medal of knight in the royal order of St. Olav. Ager’s efforts in the temperance movement and in the preservation of the Norwegian heritage had the result of influencing the immigrant generation to the extent that it had reflected credit upon the Norwegian people. In appreciation of this contribution, he was now inducted into knighthood, an honor reserved for very few.

With a staff correspondent of the Milwaukee Journal, dated March 17, 1923, Ager discussed Reform and its purpose: “It was started as a temperance paper, but now I regard that question as settled and so I devote more space to general news. The main thing about the temperance question was to get the saloon out of politics. With that accomplished, the people will settle the rest of the problem without much trouble. I am an old-fashioned prohibitionist — never thought we would win in my time, but we did.”

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At the same time there was no stopping the decline in the second part of Ager’s program — the preservation of the Norwegian language and the maintenance of the ancestral heritage. Interest in and support of the Norwegian Society of America had so diminished that Kvartalskrift, its periodical, ceased publication in 1922. The parallel decrease in subscriptions to Reform came with the ebbing of immigration, because of restrictive American laws and the swing toward swifter assimilation of the Norwegians, especially among the second and third generations.

In regard to Ager’s third objective in life — the creation of a special genre of American literature, one reflecting the immigrant experience and written in his language — of this there seemed to be little evidence of anything significant enough to attract attention. In 1923 Ager’s good friend Ole E. Rølvaag was busily concentrating on the development of a novel destined for a secure place in American literature. In a letter to Ager, written at Marcell, Minnesota, July 20, 1923, Rølvaag said: “I have not written a word yet, but as the saying goes, God willing, we shall blaze away at it about the first of September.” The English translation of the novel would become known as Giants in the Earth (1927).

Ager himself would keep busy with the writing of novels. His Gamlelandets sønner (Sons of the Old Country), published by Aschehoug in Norway in 1926, did not fare well, and repeated attempts to publish a translation in English continued to fail.

With each passing year Ager was now more alone with his ideals. His concern to preserve the Norwegian cultural inheritance was equally shared by Rølvaag of St. Olaf College, Knut Gjerset of Luther College, and Kristian Prestgard, editor of Decorah-Posten, a Norwegian-language weekly that would survive another two score years. These three — Rølvaag, Gjerset, Prestgard — in-
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spired the calling of a meeting at St. Olaf College on October 6, 1925, out of which was born the Norwegian-American Historical Association. Inasmuch as the name of the organization, its secretary's reports, and its publications would be in English, the uncompromising Waldemar Ager now became the leading dissenter. History was turning a corner and he could not turn with it. Hence, in a full account of the early development of the Association, published in *Norden* in December, 1930, Waldemar Ager's name is significantly absent. Former colleagues could change with changing times, but Ager could not.

Now came the year of destiny. On the 12th of April, 1929, at a special meeting of the stockholders of the Fremad Publishing and Printing Company in Eau Claire, all of "the property, assets and valuables of all kinds and description" were transferred to Waldemar Ager as the sole owner. It was said by one familiar with the transaction that what Ager received was less than what the corporation owed him in back salary. One more foreign-language newspaper was definitely on the decline. Financial adversity was for the moment eclipsed by Ager's elation over the fact that he was now in sole ownership and in complete command. Seven months later came the stock market crash which led to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

During the month of April, when Fremad properties were being transferred to him, the ever-restless Ager was at work on his final novel. It was given a strange title, *Hundegjøne* (Dog's Eyes). Written under adverse circumstances, with no time for rewriting, the manuscript was dispatched to Aschehoug, Oslo, and published in time for the Christmas trade.

The plot in the book follows the pattern of many of Ager's stories: that of an immigrant who at first is apparently succeeding in a material sense but whose home
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lacks any evidence of spiritual or cultural vitality; the marriage of the central character ultimately becomes unbearable; he turns to the saloon for solace. There he finds the friendship of men similarly alienated from family. This story has much less of the melodramatic and moralistic, the sentimental and the didactic preaching that had marked Ager's earlier temperance writings. The account is characterized by a maturity of understanding expressed in a developed artistic style.

The main figure in the novel has the name Christian Peterson. The usual meaning of Christian is a man of upright living and respectability. But Peterson is a derelict out of the streets and saloons of Chicago. Complications deepen as the story unfolds, unraveled in the recollections of Christian Peterson. He had fled in despair from an unfaithful wife, and from the purgatory of the saloon in the ugliness of Chicago, to the desolate edge of the Dakota prairie. There, in a one-room twelve-by-sixteen-foot shack, he resolves to write down his memories in search of an explanation for his failures.

It is thus in a mood of introspection that the story takes shape. The book begins with Chris Peterson sitting alone in his poor dwelling; during a spell of loneliness he gets the notion that he wishes to see a human face. So he looks in a mirror on the wall near his bed. He is startled at his appearance and writes (the novel is written in the first person): “The eyes startled me — they were like the eyes of a dog — a dog that pleads.”

As Peterson reviews his life looking out on the prairie through the open door of his one-room house, it is easily surmised that Ager now was summoning his memories for review while looking out on Prairie Lake through the wide-open door of his summer cottage, there alone to take stock of his life.

It would seem that Ager’s recollections on entering the last decade of his life were cast in the shadows of
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sadness. It is possible he found some solace in the memories of another idealist, Henrik Wergeland, the prophet and poet of Norway's emerging nationalism in the early nineteenth century. One of his most oft-quoted poems, "Mig selv" (Myself) may well have come to Ager's mind: "I min hunds øje sænker jeg min sorger som i en dyb brønd" — "Into my dog's eye I lower my sorrows as in a deep well."\(^{18}\) Herein is the clue to the meaning of the title *Hundeøine*. Significantly, the novel begins with these three words, "Jeg sitter alene," the words in English becoming the title of the novel in its translation, *I Sit Alone*. Those words reveal the mood of the author. Through most of his years he had suspected that life was ultimately tragic. He would now experience how insensitively cruel the world could be.

One cannot speak of the dawn of Ager's last decade of life. It began with twilight and moved toward darkness, like any day in the world of nature in midwinter in northern Norway. The mood throughout the United States was one of frustration and fear. The country was in the depth not only of a serious depression, but also of a breakdown in law and order, resulting from prohibition. With it came bootleg liquor, political graft, and the rise of the gangster world with its violence. Franklin D. Roosevelt was mindful of Aristotle's definition of politics as the art of achieving the possible: "He was telling the country that to accomplish anything worthwhile . . . there must be a compromise between the ideal and the practical."\(^{19}\)

But Ager did not know how to compromise; actually he was determined not to do so. All his life, as a man of righteous indignation over moral and social issues, he had refused to compromise his ideals even in the slightest degree in his public addresses, editorials, and books. He was no different now from what he had been when he wrote Ole A. Buslett, a fellow would-be poet

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and author, on December 1, 1894: “I must write about something I love or hate; in that way one has the satisfaction of having spoken his mind, even if he remains sitting with his books.”

Now the turn of events would take its toll. Dearest to Ager’s heart was the weekly newspaper Reform in which he had invested his own life, and to a certain extent that of his family. In February, 1930, at the beginning of the depression, he wrote in a letter: “Here things have been going so poorly it’s almost desperate.” In addition to the worrisome situation in the Reform office, he added a paragraph on another problem: “I get the impression it [Hundeøine] has not done so well in Norway. This is due partly to the fact that I have been away from there so long and a new generation has grown up. I have received no clippings of reviews from Aschehoug and that’s a poor sign.”

Ager’s third ideal — the creation of a unique genre of literature by and about the Norwegian-American immigrant pioneer — was also suffering in the depression. Ole E. Rølvaag, a colleague in that struggle, went through a series of heart attacks in the summer of 1931. On July 18, Ager wrote a letter inviting his friend to come to his summer cottage at Chetek for some rest, fishing, good food, and conversation. On August 10, Rølvaag answered thanking Ager for the invitation, but indicating that he would have to decline at present. However, he would consider the invitation again when the weather was cooler. He concluded: “It would be fun to spend a night talking with you.” That was their last exchange of letters. Rølvaag died on November 5, 1931.

Ager wrote to his son Trygve a short letter on a scrap of paper, now yellowed and fragile: “I was at [Rølvaag’s] funeral Monday — I had been in his upstairs study several times before, but this was the first time I had noticed he had my photograph, framed and under glass, on his
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wall. It was one of three photographs he had in the room. It was sad. Terribly sad. I can hardly believe he is gone. It was a very big funeral, but stiff and formal.”

On November 12, 1932, evidently in answer to Mrs. Rølvaag’s request for her husband’s letters, Ager said he had found a considerable number of them deep in the inner recesses of his own roll-top desk, saved there to be read again on some future occasion. Now he confesses that he nearly cried when he sat looking over these letters. The fact that a year after Rølvaag’s death he had fought back tears bespeaks a great loneliness. Apparently there was no one with whom Ager could now discuss the future of Norwegian-American literature written in the context of the immigrant’s experience. Now there was no future. Rølvaag’s Giants in the Earth would be the sole surviving book in what now appeared to be a lost cause, an abiding collection of Norwegian immigrant literature. The evidence was already in: that book alone would continue to be a minor classic.

Ager’s own novel, I Sit Alone, now on the market two years, was reportedly doing poorly. In a letter written in February, 1933, speaking of his book, he wrote it had been “a complete failure so far as sales are concerned, and in spite of good reviews.” A letter of November 2 of the same year states: “According to their [Harper’s] report to me, they haven’t sold a dozen copies in the past year.”

For reformers like Ager, the mournful knell of doom for the prohibition amendment came a month later. During the whole of 1933, the acrimonious debate between wets and drys had continued. Now on December 5 the Utah ratification convention cast a resounding “yes” vote for the twenty-first amendment to the Constitution that repealed the eighteenth. The new amendment now had the necessary three-fourths-of-all-states majority required for adoption.
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To the question, what was Ager’s reaction to the repeal of the eighteenth amendment and the end of prohibition, there is no easy answer. He himself was hesitant in replying, as if in search for precision in a memory grown dim. When the answer finally comes, it is ambivalent. Ager was not blind to the evil consequences of prohibition. He was fully aware that his ideals would not always prevail, life is not that simple. He now lived in the tension of the co-existence of conflicting feelings, dreading the return of the saloon, at the same time having a feeling of revulsion over the high cost of enforcing prohibition. Here was the haunting question: how could good intentions result in so much evil? Life becomes increasingly tragic for one who only feels ambivalence.

In addition to the perilous plight of Ager’s long-cherished ideals, there was the practical plight of a continuing decline in subscriptions to Reform. It was still a temperance paper, a fact that now more than ever turned away advertisers as well as readers. It was as yet printed wholly in Norwegian, a language that was fast disappearing. In the depth of the Great Depression there were other more vital needs for the $1.50 annual subscription.

The year before, in a letter dated March 25, 1932, Ager wrote: “Do you know what I am doing now to somewhat relieve myself of all the worries I carry home from the office? I am playing solitaire.” He who once socialized with a few good friends over pinochle and whist now sat alone.

Meanwhile came a surprising respite from his multiple anxieties. At the end of the dark days of 1933, he was asked by Nordmanns-Forbundet to give a series of lectures in Norway in the new year. The invitation came in time to brighten the Christmas season. His feeling of well-being, however, was short-lived; any realistic answer to the invitation had to be Ager’s frank reply, “Can’t afford it.” Within a month the clouds of gloom

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again lifted; a late January letter promised that all expenses would be paid. Eventually, when he was on his way to Norway, it was with a new hat he had purchased on credit at Lund's Clothiers on Barstow Street. To the relief of everyone in the family, one of his daughters decided to accompany him. It was to be a strenuous journey, with heavy schedules, inconveniences, and unexpected demands. It was easy to forget to exchange a soiled collar, shirt, or handkerchief for a clean one. His appearance in the depression years had at times been a matter of concern, for he was excessively careful to live inexpensively and was becoming somewhat absentminded in his preoccupation with stubborn problems.

In the early fall of 1934, the Eau Claire Leader, a morning daily, arranged to publish occasional articles in English reporting his travelogue. Ager referred to his experiences as "Marvelous Adventures of Two Innocents Abroad." He and his daughters were passengers on the Bergensfjord, arriving at Bergen on September 27 after an ocean journey of seven and one-half days. It was a week of rest and reminiscences. But what a shattering change a score of years (1914–1934) can make in a man's life. He reported:

"It is Sunday morning and we are on the mid-ocean. I am staying home from church 'cause there isn't any. There are only two of us in the smoking room.

"Twenty years ago I went across on the same boat. We were then a thousand or more passengers and there were services on three decks. Tired and overworked I sat on a chair and slept through one of the most beautiful sermons that anyone could miss." 28

Arriving in Oslo, Ager discovered disturbing changes in Norway's capital city. For him the wholesome yesterdays of Norway were being eroded by the invasion of modern immorality. Under the dateline of Oslo, Norway,
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October 8, 1934, he wrote to his home-town daily: “Obscene books and pictures are far more prevalent now than ever before. Public lectures and discourses defending ‘Abortus Provocatus’ are frequently heard and newspapers advertise contraceptives quite openly, but thinly veiled.” In the next sentence, standing by itself, he was happy to report: “We have seen very few intoxicated people.”

Indeed, because of this, Ager experienced a rejuvenation of soul as he relived once more the temperance crusade of the days of his youth. Of his forty lectures many were given in temperance halls. From Tvedestrand, on November 3, 1934, he wrote for home consumption in Eau Claire: “From Stavanger we went to the city Flekkefjord. Still another different dialect. After the lecture daughter and I were invited to a Good-Templar festival and spent a very nice evening. Every town here has its I.O.G.T. [Independent Order of Good Templars] hall with cafe connected. Some have two.”

Ager, a veteran never-say-die temperance crusader, now enjoyed a pervasive sense of well-being and of pride in the Norway of his birth. But this emotion could not eclipse the dark thoughts in the back of his mind—about the alarming trend away from temperance in America. The societies Excelsior and Varden had declined soon after the passage of the eighteenth amendment, and their members had married, had had children, and had begun to speak English. Viking of the I.O.G.T. was better organized and survived until about 1930. Now, in Norway, Ager was experiencing for the last time the fellowship of kindred minds committed completely to the practice of abstinence. Whatever the trend in America, it was still true of Norway, as had been said a quarter of a century before, “Norway is, next to Finland, the most temperate of European countries. . . . The Norwegian people have educated themselves to absti-
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cence, and the temperance movement found wide support earlier in Norway than anywhere else. *Det Norske Totalafholdselskab* (The Norwegian Total Abstinence Society) was organized in 1851.29

That the trip had been good for Ager’s general health and mental outlook seemed undeniable. As a son remarked, “He seemed to cast off some of the old-man ways and was pretty much his old self again.”30

But then came 1935. January was the month for the annual meeting of the First Norwegian Lutheran Church. The word “Norwegian” had in reality become a misnomer in the legal name of the congregation. By 1926 the Sunday school consisted of forty classes in English and only five in Norwegian. By 1929 no one was confirmed in the Norwegian language; Ager’s last four children were instructed in English. He had failed to maintain Norwegian even in his own household.

At the annual meeting of the congregation in January, 1935, a complete revision of the constitution adopted on April 2, 1877, was read for the first time in English. Of the 195 present, 185 voted “yes” for the changes. Henceforth, the name First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church was inaccurate. The pastor, Seth Eastvold, began referring to it as “First Lutheran,” and preached only in English. He assigned his assistant, the Reverend Mandus Egge, to be minister to the dwindling small Norwegian-speaking remnant. It was during the pastorate of the Reverend Agner Tanner that the congregation, at the annual meeting on January 20, 1947, formally adopted the necessary amendment to the articles of organization, dropping the word “Norwegian” from the legal name of the church.

This slow, and to Ager, painful death of the Norwegian language meant the end of a lifelong ideal — the continuing use of the “mother tongue.” Soon after the 1935 action of the congregation, Ager’s intimations of his own mortality would be profoundly underscored. They came
with the death on April 29 of John Gaustad, one of his most intimate friends. He had been Ager's constant companion in many causes; they had appeared together on many public occasions across the years, and had relaxed together in unnumbered games of pinochle and on many fishing trips. While secretary for many years of First Norwegian Lutheran Church, he and Ager had perennially agitated for the retention of the mother language. They had been defeated in a critical annual meeting of the congregation in January, 1918.

Out of such an experience the bonds of friendship had grown stronger in the ensuing years. Now this association came to an abrupt end in the news headline: “John Gaustad, Prominent in Public Life Here for Many Years, Dies at Age of 78.” Years later Ager confided to one of his daughters, “There hasn’t been one day since John Gaustad died that I have not mourned for him.” The death of his friend was therefore one more experience that left Ager sitting more and more alone as the darkness grew deeper during the final decade of his life.

Later in 1935, on October 27, 28, and 29, the church celebrated its seventieth anniversary. A twenty-two-page booklet with a historical account of the congregation and its festival program was printed entirely in English. There was one concession to the few: a service was held in Norwegian, on Sunday at 2:30 p.m. This service became a weekly event, although the hour varied. Ager’s name had not been included in the parish directory since 1930, but Mrs. Ager and the children continued to be listed. When he was in the city on Sunday, however, he often attended the Norwegian service. Toward the last years of this dark decade, attendance there dropped to as few as twenty. In a church building seating one thousand, the small group clustered close to the front. But Ager, as usual, sat alone in the distant balcony, the living portrait of the title of his last novel, I Sit Alone.

Insofar as Ager did worship, it was only from afar: in a
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remote spot a distant spectator without involvement. At this time he was apt to be away at his summer cottage on Sundays. On September 15, 1933, he wrote in a letter, reflecting the depths of the depression blues: “I’ve been spending my weekends alone at Chetek the last couple of weeks. It’s a blessed thing to be able to rove around there and fuss with food and kerosene lamps, and to break things without getting scolded, and to spill ashes on the floor without any fear or trembling.” From about 1913, he had walked from the forested mainland over a slough on the twenty-foot bridge to an island with century-old white and Norway pines. He and his family first rented a cottage there from the Reverend Peder Tangjerd. Later the Tangjerds built a second cottage, calling it “Huldrestua.” After the pastor’s death, his widow, in 1924, sold this cottage to Ager. The transaction was evidently made possible because of the $1,000 gift Ager had received at the surprise party given for him by friends in 1919. He had put the money away “for a rainy day.” Now this island cottage became a haven of peace.

In this year of 1935 with its continuing reverses, the well-known Norwegian weekly Minneapolis Tidende had ceased publication; the death of this great newspaper shadowed Ager’s mind with foreboding. This newspaper had begun in 1887, about the time that Reform was establishing itself in Eau Claire. Concerning the termination of the Minneapolis paper, Theodore C. Blegen was later to observe: “When this well-edited and widely read journal ceased to appear in Minneapolis in 1935, the event was interpreted by many as a sign of the approaching end of the Norwegian-language press in this country.”

By 1940 production of Reform was in the hands of two men, Elton Johnson, a country youth from near Eleva, had become quite proficient as a linotypist. Ager did
everything else. One of Ager's sons relates that in talking to Johnson one day, his father had said, "When you and I die, Reform dies." The following year that statement would come true.

On April 9, 1940, came the German invasion of Norway. The catastrophic news added to the confusion in Ager's mind. In a letter of July 19, he made only a passing reference to this shocking event in his already shaken world: "The fishing at Huldrestua has been rotten but I travel up there every Saturday and fuss and cook and enjoy myself tremendously 50 miles from the radio and newspapers and all other devilry. I've been so busy this summer that I've had to put in long days of work, but my health has been good, so it would be a sin to complain." And then, as an unimportant afterthought, he added: "I must tell you I have also received one of those Olav Medals, but I accepted it on the condition that nothing be said about it, because it was completely undeserved and therefore gave me no grounds for pride." 

Here is evidence that Ager had resigned himself to failure, and in such a mood an honor is shallow comfort. This was Ager's last summer at Huldrestua. A year later, in April, 1941, he wrote in a letter: "I've been terribly busy. Work a great deal in the print shop, and do most of my writing at home evenings." The next month he gave his last 17th of May address at Hawkins, Wisconsin, a small town of five hundred people. The program was in a Norwegian Lutheran church with a congregation of thirty families. The evening began with the genuine Norwegian festival meal of "fløtegrøt og lefse med norsk bakkelse" (cream porridge, flat bread, and Norwegian pastries). Ager gave the festival address, and a freewill offering of sixty dollars was collected and sent to Norwegian Relief. To commemorate Norway's Constitution of 1814 and to raise a modest gift for a sorely embattled little Norway — this was the final ges-
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ture of one who at the height of his popularity had ad-
dressed thousands. He had thrilled audiences in such
cities as Minneapolis, New York, Boston, Brooklyn, Bal-
timore, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Fran-
cisco, and Seattle. He must have had long memories and
poignant thoughts of bygone days on the night he spoke
in the small country church of Hawkins.

Then came Friday night, June 27, 1941, when in the
assembly hall of First Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, he
addressed Østerdalslagets stevne (a meeting of immi-
grants from Østerdal in southeastern Norway, from
which Ager had come). Later that evening he walked over
to Pythian Hall, where his daughter-in-law was attend-
ing a meeting, and complained that he felt miserable. She
offered him a cup of coffee. He refused, which was most
unusual. Saturday, alone in his house, he was definitely
ill. Pain in his abdomen was almost unbearable, and he
felt lonely of heart and mind. The family was at Prairie
Lake. Later that evening Ager became so sick that he
called the family doctor, who came to the house and at
once had him admitted to Luther Hospital. Sunday
morning he went into surgery, apparently for appen-
dicitis, the first diagnosis. Later he endured surgery a
second time; it was now evident that he had cancer of
the colon. He remained in the hospital all of July.

On July 17, 1941, there appeared, not his usual edito-
rial in Reform but one word in large print: MERK! (Take
Notice!). It was an appeal to subscribers in arrears to pay
at once. It was necessary that they do so because summer
is not only the “quiet time” in the newspaper business,
but now Ager’s need was critical because of the doctor
and hospital bills that were coming in. From his sickbed,
the editor sent greetings to all of Reform’s readers. The
first item in the editorial column on July 24 informed
them that he had had yet another operation, his third, and
that his situation was critical. On Friday, August 1, at
9:20 in the morning, one-half hour after losing consciousness, he died.

Deep in the editor-author's roll-top desk, among memorabilia out of the past, was the brown-paper-covered composition book in which, at age twenty-two, he had, in careful handwriting, begun to copy thoughts meaningful to him from the writings of his chosen company of the great. The very first quotation was from the Norwegian poet Welhaven:

Kan du igjennem din strid og din graad
Bevare det barnlige skjær til det sidste,
Da har du regnbuen over din graad,
Da har du glorien over din kiste.

(If you through strife and tears
Keep your childlike gleam to the last,
Then have you the rainbow over your tears,
Then have you the halo over your coffin.)

Men and eras die together. On Thursday, September 18, 1941, the subscribers to Reform were notified in bold type on the front page that this would be the last issue of the paper. Someone was reported to have commented on how natural this was, for "Reform was Ager and Ager was Reform." Six weeks after Reform closed down, October 30, Skandinaven came out with its last issue.

With the passing of the immigration era came the eventual end of the Norwegian-language press. With the declining use of Norwegian, there lay lost — neglected and forgotten — an immigrant literature of poetry, short story, biography, and fiction. As Ager had peered into the future, he had early sensed life's potential and ultimate tragedy. In the last dark decade, he had experienced how insensitively cruel the world could be for the idealist. He found himself sitting alone in the political world, in the town, in the church — even, it seemed, in his own home. He was incapable of explaining himself,
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struck dumb in view of guaranteed misunderstanding and built-in disagreement on the part of others.

In Ager’s last novel, Christian Peterson in his shack on the Dakota prairie looked in the mirror and was startled at the sight of his eyes; so Waldemar Ager, alone in his cabin on the shores of Prairie Lake, had looked in the mirror and, seeing his eyes, saw himself and understood his situation: “I said to myself (for of course I had no one else to say it to), ‘What has become of a man’s inner self when he is outwardly starved and a masterless dog or a runaway slave?’”

All his life, Ager had visualized himself as a slave to a set of ideals. They constituted the master of his life. So a look at his own eyes in the mirror generated the analogy of the eyes of a “starved and masterless dog,” followed by an alternative analogy, “or a runaway slave.” In the words of Christian Peterson: “It’s possibly because of the fact that starved or ailing dogs can’t talk that they get that piteous look of sad resignation in their eyes.”

Later he adds: “It was from that time I got such an interest in eyes, animals’ eyes and peoples’ eyes. There is more than a little resemblance between the two. In a dog’s eyes one can often read a deep melancholy over the fact that he can’t make himself understood.” With this “resignation” and “melancholy,” there is only one alternative for the idealist. As Moses never entered the promised land but saw it only dimly in the distance from atop Mount Nebo, so the idealist rests his case with posterity and trusts the far future for vindication.

NOTES

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4 Karen Larsen, review of Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of
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