More New(s) from Lake Wobegon: Informed Tolerance and the Teaching of Literature

Bob J. Frye

William Stringfellow has written in the Society of Friends Journal:

Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance or with impressing the other, or if you are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or if you are debating about whether the word being spoken is true or relevant or agreeable. Such matters may have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered.

Listening...is a primitive act of love, in which a person gives him [or her] self to another's word, making him [or her] self accessible and vulnerable to that word. (260)

I begin with this quotation because of the primacy it gives to language and hence its pertinence, it seems to me, to our focus on teaching literature. I want briefly to offer you a new angle of vision on one non-canonical literary text I attempt to teach, Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon Days. And then, if things work out, I want to suggest succinctly that an instructive comparison may be drawn between fictional Lake Wobegon and fictional English Studies, whose mapping is going on even as I speak. Both fictional places, Keillor’s and ours, demonstrate cogently the need for informed tolerance, a phrase I hope you will not mind waiting to hear me define, with Clifford Geertz’s help, near my conclusion.

When Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon Days appeared in 1985, reviewers and critics lauded its “charm,” marveled at its “amusing stories and gossip,” and praised Keillor’s “sort of humor that evokes a chuckle” (Compton and Morse 197). “What some say now,” John Skow writes, “is...that Keillor's storytelling approaches the quality of Twain’s” (69). Yet Skow’s comparison may lead to a fruitful examination of a kind of writing clearly evident in Twain but mostly ignored by critics of Lake Wobegon Days—satire. In this novel, I contend, Keillor employs traditional means of satire, ranging from gentle, Horatian criticism of typical
objects of satire—education, politics, medicine, for example—to sardonic, Juvenalian commentary on religious intolerance and repressive child-rearing. In this paper I will focus on Keillor’s satire of religious intolerance.

The sense of unease, the “sweet gloom” (Skow 70) that some readers have mistaken for merely poignant reminiscences in a “love poem to small towns” (MacDougall B4), reaches deeper than nostalgia. In “Some Reflections on Satire” Patricia Spacks argues that the most significant response by effective satire, generally defined here as a literary genre or technique that mocks or ridicules in order to effect change, is “uneasiness” (364). This sense of uneasiness that Spacks discerns may produce in the reader of satire some hope of change, of improvement, whether the satire be gentle and sympathetic like that of Horace, or filled with savage indignation like that of Juvenal.

Lake Wobegon, it turns out, is not only the small locale of Americana where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average” (qtd. in Morse 197), but it is also the place, says the narrator, where “we don’t forget mistakes” (346), where “patching up was not a Brethren talent” (133n).

Keillor, who calls himself “America’s tallest radio humorist,” aired his Prairie Home Companion radio broadcasts from July 1974 to June 1987. By then Keillor had become a national folk hero, with his face on the covers of Time and the Saturday Evening Post, with an excerpt from his book Lake Wobegon Days appearing in the Atlantic a month before the book’s publication and a condensed excerpt in Reader’s Digest in September 1986. Whole families made pilgrimages to the World Theatre in St. Paul to sit in Keillor’s audience, hearing advertisements for businesses in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, such as the Chatterbox Cafe “where the coffeepot is always on, which is why it tastes that way,” and Deep Valley Beds, the kind with the old-time mattress that sags in the middle and renders prolonged marital discord nigh impossible.

But it is important to distinguish between Garrison Keillor the radio personality, including his being a reporter of weekly news from Lake Wobegon, and Garrison Keillor the author. Of course, as Michael Kline has pointed out in a keen essay in Studies in American Humor, “Keillor is no objective reporter... because the ‘news’ from Lake Wobegon doesn’t really have the characteristics of news. What comes from Lake Wobegon has little sensational value, nor does it have general interest beyond itself” (134).

Lake Wobegon Days consists of twelve chapters. The first is “Home” portraying the nature of the place, Lake Wobegon itself—the business district, the two parking meters, the high school song, the importance of religion—and the 43-year-old narrator’s recalling adventures away at
college before his coming home to Lake Wobegon and summoning up remembrances of things past. The next few chapters provide a history of the founding of Lake Wobegon, including settlement by despairing Norwegians looking for a place like their home in Norway, forgetting that they had wanted to leave home because it was so bad. This section of the book focuses on Norwegians’ settling there by mistake and describes the missing of Lake Wobegon from maps—it is in Mist County—because of incompetent surveyors and includes not only quotations ostensibly from letters and journals but also scholarly explanatory footnotes. This section is a parody of serious historical accounts of foundings of towns, focusing on greed and ineptitude in ways reminiscent of Thomas Berger’s satiric depiction of history in *Little Big Man*. The succeeding chapters emphasize the specialness of the town (it has a Statue of the Unknown Norwegian with quackgrass growing in an unusual place), the role of religion, and then a series of chapters filled with sketches and anecdotes loosely held together by the seasons of the year.

It is understandable why so many reviewers and critics would call Garrison Keillor a humorist instead of a satirist. Many passages in the book are uncommonly amusing and seem to have no reason for being other than to entertain, to make us chuckle or chortle. The narrator describes a boyhood friend named Larry “who can play Taps with his armpit” (201) and a goody-goody pupil Darla Ingqvist who discovers, to her surprise, a gob of boogers on the doorknob just as classmate Brian shouts, “Snot on you!” (213). We hear of Walt, who built two fourteen-foot fiberglass duck decoys, his theory being “that ducks fly too high to see life-sized decoys, that giant decoys would appear life-sized from cruising altitude...and thus would exert greater draw” (238-39). Or consider that when the teacher Miss Lewis brings a radio to class to let the students hear the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, bagpipes play,

which we had never heard before, and so she drew a picture on the blackboard. We recognized it instantly as a penis and scrotum, and so did she when she heard the buzz and stepped back for a look, so she made the bag rounder and make the pipe stand up, which fascinated us even more, and finally she erased it and turned and said, her face glowing, “Small minds think small thoughts.” (153)

The levels of irony here are fascinating yet seem to have no other purpose than the evocation of laughter, even if that laughter is based on the reality of children’s lively minds. However, much of the humor of the book is gently critical, Horatian satire, as Keillor pokes good-natured fun at typical objects of satire—education, professions such as doctors and lawyers, and politics.
Keillor’s handling of Lake Wobegon politics is gentle, as minor town council debates proceed with mock-epic seriousness. Even state politics are satirized genially as Keillor writes of attempts by the legislature to remedy the mistakes of inept surveyors who omitted fifty square miles of central Minnesota, including Lake Wobegon. The 1933 legislature proposed recovering

the lost county by collapsing the square mileage of several large lakes.... Proponents of map change, or “accurates” as they were called, were chastised by their opponents, the so-called “moderates,” who denied the existence of Mist County....

Wobegonians took the defeat of inclusion with their usual calm. “We felt that we were a part of Minnesota by virtue of the fact that when we drove more than a few miles in any direction, we were [still] in Minnesota,” Hjalmar Ingqvist [argued]. (112-13)

This gentle *reductio ad absurdum* vividly reveals, without rancor and without bitterness, the foolishness of cumbersome political debates. Common sense remains elusive in Wobegonian politics.

Yet there are two subjects about which Keillor evidently feels strongly—religion and child-rearing. I will focus concisely on religion here.

Keillor grew up a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a strict fundamentalist sect that abhorred dancing, disapproved of clergymen and hence had none, and required church attendance twice on Sundays (Skow 71). Of course, the narrator of *Lake Wobegon Days* is not necessarily Keillor. Yet Keillor’s interviews, especially his long one with the editors of *The Wittenburg Door* in 1984, clearly reveal how important religion is to him: “Garrison Keillor is not merely a humorist, but a man whose deep Christian beliefs subtly emanate from everything he does” (13). *Lake Wobegon Days* demonstrates that he takes religion seriously and is keenly aware of the limitations of those sects that confine, those fanatical groups who hold rigidly narrow views, those whom Eric Hoffer has called “the true believers.”

The narrator explains in considerable detail his religious background in chapter five, “Protestant”:

We met in Uncle Al’s and Aunt Flo’s bare living room with plain folding chairs arranged facing in toward the middle. No clergyman in a black smock. Or organ or piano, for that would make one person too prominent.... No picture of Jesus, He was in
our hearts. The faithful sat down at the appointed hour and waited for the Spirit to move one of them to speak or to pray or give out a hymn from our Little Flock hymnal. No musical notation, for music must come from the heart and not off a page. The idea of reading a prayer was sacrilege to us—"If a man can’t remember what he wants to say to God, let him sit down and think a little harder," Grandpa said.... Jesus [was] in our midst, who loved us. So peaceful, and we loved each other too. (126-27)

But this apparent peacefulness is misleading, and just as Jonathan Swift in his devastating satire "The Abolishing of Christianity" makes clear that it is only nominal Christianity, not real Christianity, that he worries about being abolished—real Christianity having not existed for years, so the sanctified Brethren were often sanctified from each other, set apart, excluded from one another, long since divorced from their original pure sense of sanctification. Keillor’s narrator says:

We were "exclusive" Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure of false doctrine by avoiding association with the impure.... [W]e made sure that any who fellowshipped with us were straight on all the details of the Faith, as set forth by the first Brethren who left the Anglican Church in 1865 to worship on the basis of correct principles.... Unfortunately, once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other. (130)

Then, in a most effective satiric commentary on intolerance and on rigidity of narrow tenets and principles, Keillor describes "dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which were speaking to any of the others" (131). He notes the Cox Brethren, the Dennis Brethren, the Bird Brethren, the Reformed Sanctified, and the Johnson group. Mr. Johnson preached against women’s slacks, citing Deuteronomy 22:5, "but Mr. Cox, though he was hardly pro-slacks, felt Mr. Johnson failed to emphasize grace as having superseded the law.... My mother never wore slacks, though she did dress my sister in winter leggings, which troubled Grandpa..." (132). In a scorching footnote on this passage Keillor’s narrator remarks that "brethren history is confusing," describes the deep rifts among Brethren, and adds this sardonic understatement: "Patching up was not a Brethren talent" (133n).

The narrator relates how dumbfounded he had been when he saw a television set in a Brethren house—that of a liberal Cox Brethren, of course. For the narrator’s parents had constantly drilled into him that
you start getting entangled in the things of the world, and one
thing leads to another. First it’s television, then it’s worldly
books, and the next thing you know, God’s people are sitting
around drinking whiskey sours in dim smoky bars with wait-
resses in skimpy black outfits and their bosoms displayed like
grapefruit. (138)

In an incisive footnote on this passage, a footnote of sharp satiric
irony not unlike that found in some long footnotes of Alexander Pope in
The Dunciad, Keillor’s narrator quotes Wobegonian native Clarence Bun-
sen:

Most Brethren I knew were death on card-playing, beer-
drinking, and frowned on hand-holding, and of course they
wouldn’t go near a dance. They thought it brought out carnal
desires. Well, maybe theirs lay closer to the surface, I don’t
know. Some were not only opposed to dancing but also felt that
marching in formation was wrong, so we called them the Left-
Footed Brethren. Some others were more liberal, Mr. Bell for
example, he thought cards were okay so long as you didn’t play
with a full deck. (138)

Here we have Keillor’s most direct statement of his views on
religious intolerance. When you couple this sustained critical examina-
tion of sectarian intolerance with his savage satire evident in his 20-page
footnote on “95 Theses 95” in the chapter “News,” the text seems no
longer merely bucolic whimsy, no longer a paeon to small-town living.

The blurring of distinctions between reality and fiction is uncom-
monly evident in the case of Lake Wobegon. Los Angeles in 1982 named
Lake Wobegon a “sister city” and, as Stephen Wilbers notes, even the
American Automobile Association has gotten into the act, “listing Lake
Wobegon in its tour book” (19). When Keillor is asked whether Lake
Wobegon exists, he responds by saying,

there is no town in Minnesota named Lake Wobegon that I could
show you, at least I’m not aware of one. But I would also have a
hard time showing you the Ninth Federal Reserve District, the
Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Big Ten, or the
upper middle class. Most people deal very comfortably with
abstractions much more far-fetched than Lake Wobegon, e.g. the
Moral Majority, secular humanists, Hollywood, etc. Compared
to any of those, Lake Wobegon is as real as my hands on this
typewriter and sometimes more real than that. (qtd. in Wilbers
13)
Wilbers adds that "this blurring of imagined and real space makes it difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality, subjective perception from objective truth, and mythical place from actual place. In fact, this lack of clear boundaries, many have argued, is a fundamental characteristic of human experience" (13).

Mapping the amorphous boundaries of the world of English Studies is a case in point. From one perspective, the geomorphic features of this landscape are utterly clear and reveal an ideal place. Do you recall Keillor's narrator's description of the peaceful, serenely loving Sanctified Brethren in Lake Wobegon? Well, now hear Wayne Booth's description of an English Department in the opening of a speech at Syracuse University in April 1987:

When I was invited to talk with you today, I was told that the English Department was experiencing some degree of conflict.... I had a hard time believing this report, since every other English department I know about is living in a state of blissful peace. In my own, for example, all is sweetness and light. Neo-Aristotelians and feminists, Marxists and Reaginies, Derrivadies and Lacanics, conventionalitarians and flycast fishermen all understand each other perfectly. When an argument is presented by any one of these in a departmental meeting, it is never dismissed as motivated by party spirit. Our oral examinations are models of an ironic, friendly, open, inquiring spirit. Our disciple of Lyotard abandons her personal passions when entering the examination room, and asks questions that startle candidates by sounding highly traditional; our convert to the recent prophecies of Frederick Crews sloughs off all conservative prejudice as he asks penetrating yet friendly questions about the deferral of meanings through labyrinthine texts. (76)

Where is this department? Is it at David Lodge's Euphoria State? No, it's from Booth's wonderful book The Vocation of a Teacher. Booth adds: "Well, would the world of English studies be healthier if that opening could have been spoken without irony—if most English departments were not embattled, if there was indeed some simple harmony that we could offer each other, some post-poststructuralism, something beyond-beyond that would enable us all to work together in pursuit of fully-agreed-upon ends?" (77). The answer, in a word, is no. The answer, in another word, is heteroglossia.

So what is the news from the landscape of English Studies? In What Is English? Peter Elbow says that his book is "a picture of a profession that
cannot define what it is...and I don’t take our not knowing as the most important news from the [1987] English Coalition Conference (if it was news)” (v). Poet Reed Whittemore seems aptly to describe the news from English Studies when he writes these lines: “It is not clear / Where we go from here, / Or for that matter / Who we’re” (87). Our sense of place is not nearly so serene as those pictures on catalog covers that Gerald Graff describes in his recent “beyond-beyond” book, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1992): “The classroom, in these images, is a garden [a bucolic Lake Wobegon, if you will] occupying a redemptive space inside the bureaucratic and professional machine...[Here] the classroom resembles the primitive Protestant Church, freed from the ecclesiastical externals...” (117). But, of course, this serenity is as misleading as the seeming tranquility of the Sanctified Brethren in Lake Wobegon. This we know from recent mappings of our place. Martin Mueller, for example, in “Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos [that’s where the middle of the road is]: Some Thoughts on the Current State of English Studies,” notes that Clifford Geertz in a 1980 essay on the refiguration of social thought has written about “the massive redrawing of the boundaries that has been underway in the humanities and the cognate social sciences” (8). Then Mueller adds parenthetically: “The geographical metaphor understates the degree of transformation, for more is at stake than redrawing lines along contiguous fields: a shaking, perhaps a constant rotation, of a kaleidoscope, might be a better image for a process in which entirely new forms of contiguity are achieved” (8).

Even so, it is the geographical metaphor that informs and shapes the MLA’s, not to be confused with the AAA’s, tour guide titled *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (1992) edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. The editors note that “this book’s table of contents is a map that could easily have been drawn some other way” (9; italics mine). And as in Lake Wobegon, reality and fiction in this English and American studies landscape are not always clear; nor is “who we’re.” The editors note that “the odd thing, in fact, about literature as an imagined territory is that there are apparently no natural limits” (6)—and the same can be said of literary criticism. They add: “The sense of solidarity that builds up around something like deconstruction, the new historicism, or cultural criticism, or around early modern, eighteenth-century, or modernist studies, is largely an illusion” (8; italics mine).

This illusionary quality, the fluidity of boundaries because of differing perspectives, is vividly articulated in Lawrence Lipking’s chapter in the recent book *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reflections on an Institution* (1992) in which Lipking comments on one result of the sprawling nature of this literary period:
Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel*, for instance, directly addresses the issues of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and offers a persuasive alternative account. Yet the two books are separated not only by theoretical divergences but by the length of a century. Watt draws his model from the social and economic conditions of the mid-eighteenth century, and McKeon from the crises of the mid-seventeenth. It is no wonder, then, that Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding should look, from one point of view, like the cutting edge of the contemporary scene, and from another like the culmination of more than a hundred years of experiment and conflict. The disparity is typical of many exchanges in eighteenth-century studies. A period so generously conceived, or so spread out, admits an abundance of ways of carving up the territory. (10)

Hence the need to read our maps of “English Studies” with care, the need to keep ourselves informed, the need to recognize, as Graff urges in *Beyond the Culture Wars*, our community in the midst of differences.

I urge the practice of the sort of inclusiveness that Greenblatt and Gunn note in their Introduction when they write: “As various of our contributors attest, exemplary traditional scholarship is being produced in virtually all the historical fields, often with the help of insights derived from some of the newer critical movements” (9). I urge the practice of the candid, informed tolerance I see advocated by my colleague Linda Hughes in the Spring 1993 *ADE Bulletin* in which she makes clear her own stance, expresses genuine concern for those colleagues who “sense a challenge from paradigms that seem to offer no room for those unable to embrace their premises,” and then encourages “a greater degree of pluralism where paradigms are concerned” (57). As Mueller points out, “Debate and dialogue do not flourish in climates of corrosive suspicion, inquisitorial arrogance, dogmatic certainty, and strident complacency” (11). Informed tolerance may enable us to remain individuals in community with others even as we debate vigorously our strong beliefs, a goal of Graff’s *Beyond the Culture Wars* and one described in different terms by Walter J. Ong: “We all want to be alone together.”

In a sprawling landscape of English Studies that includes Alvin Kernan’s indignant characterization in *The Death of Literature* (1990) of “aggressive social causes” “legitimated by deconstruction” (83) and Donna Landry’s in-your-face essay “Commodity Feminism” on eighteenth-century studies, noting “we can disrupt business-as-usual by situating our differences within and against the institutions that would like to contain us, to mute our potentially disruptive presence, once they have conceded the
need to have us there at all” (170)—to mention only two examples since 1990: I say, in such a landscape, informed tolerance seems to me a worthy
goal. Clifford Geertz, quoted by Mueller, sums up for me what I mean by
this phrase “informed tolerance”: “...the first step is surely to accept the
depth of the differences; the second to understand what these differences
are; and the third to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can
be publicly formulated—one in which [we English Studies folk]... can
give a credible account of [ourselves] to one another” (12).

Well, that’s some of the news from landscape English Studies,
where some of the readings are all strong, where most all the textbooks are
good-looking, and where—here my parallelism breaks down—if we are
willing to inform ourselves thoughtfully and to listen, really listen to each
other, then we can work toward excelling what we had dreamed that we
as teachers of literature could do, or, accepting failure as we must, at least
we can fail at a very high level.

Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

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