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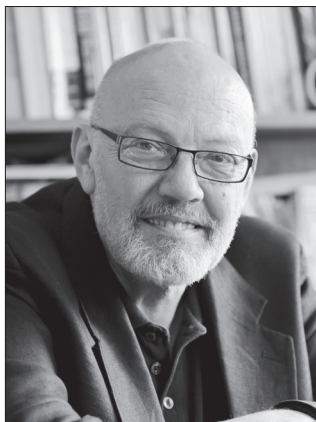
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Walter J. Muilenburg's *Prairie*: Review Essay



by James Schaap

I had never heard of a short novel titled *Prairie* when it stepped out of a google search that located a list of novels about homesteading by regional writers of old. Other names I recognized immediately: Ruth Suckow, who spent her childhood in Hawarden; Herbert Quick, a one-time mayor of Sioux City; Granville's Josephine Donovan; and O.E. Rolvaag, who attended Augustana Academy in Canton, SD a century ago. But another novel, *Prairie*, was new to me, even though the author's name was not—Muilenburg.

With the help of the internet's lightning research speed, I discovered, not to my surprise, that once upon a time "Muilenburg, Walter J.," was local, his birthplace listed as Orange City, Iowa, not surprising given that a half page of Muilenburgs

still populate the Orange City phone book. Walter J. was born here in the 1890s, went off to college, then published a novel in 1925, *Prairie*, a novel I stumbled into, then bought from a used-book seller on Amazon, a paperback beat and worn, its binding dried up and worthless.

I thought the whole story amazing. I've lived in the neighborhood of Walter J.'s birth for more than forty years, most of those as a literature professor at Dordt College, and I'd never heard of him or this novel of his, *Prairie*.

The novel's story seemed very strange even though the setting was familiar. *Prairie* documents a relatively brief moment of exceptional character but limited tenure in Midwestern history: the homesteading era, the stretch of time, often less than a decade, from the moment a plow cut into prairie land, to the initial stirrings of vital community around those very first pioneers. At least part of Walter J.'s novel is set right here, in the landscape outside my window. What's more, the story concerns people who lived here back then, one of whom he was.

You don't have to read far to realize that *Prairie* is a novel of ideas. *Giants in the Earth*, the Rolvaag classic, is set in the same era and an adjacent locale; but *Giants* is only secondarily a novel of ideas. *Prairie* is decidedly different, even though comparisons between the two novels arise easily. The underlying moral—and I use the word *moral* purposely—is that we not only seem but are powerless to alter the course of our lives. We will be what we will be. Muilenburg's heavy theme is actually even more bleak: even that which we hate, we inevitably become.

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That is a depressing thought, and *Prairie* is not a particularly welcoming novel. It has not and will never become anyone's favorite book, offering very little to warm the human heart. If what happens to Elias Vaughn doesn't scare you, it simply repels. Few readers would choose to read it twice, but I did because I wanted to be sure that I didn't miss some important moment. I did not. *Prairie* is a depressing novel written by a son of Dutch Calvinist Siouland a century ago, an amazingly dispiriting piece of work.

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Because it is, the novel and its creator became, at least for me, fascinating mysteries. That I'd not heard of this Muilenburg's *Prairie* was odd, even humbling; I'd prided myself on my sturdy knowledge of local literature. I had read Josephine Donovan's *Black Soil* years ago, another homesteading saga set just a few miles east and published five years later, in 1930, a novel far easier to love. *Black Soil* features a long-suffering pioneer mother whose tough Roman Catholic faith sustains her through prairie fires, a plague of grasshoppers, successive crop failures, and a husband who would probably rather do a host of things than break Iowa soil. Nell O'Connor leans sturdily on her faith in God's will for her and her family, even when events and characters in the novel seem pitched against her or her and their joy.

No similar faith animates Walter J. Muilenburg's *Prairie*. Bible reading and prayer abound in the novel, but the stiff practice of godliness Elias Vaughn's father keeps up seems ineffectual and of little human value, spiritual discipline set in stone and just as lifeless. When the novel was published in 1925, the *Saturday Review* called the elder Vaughn "a grim Calvinist." I suppose he is. The old widower dutifully reads his Bible after every meal and ritually offers blessings and thanks but knows nothing of love. Elias walks away from his father's home,

not simply because he wants to, but also because he has to: his father disowns his son and only child for marrying a woman from a family the old man's self-righteousness had deemed shiftless.

Prairie is unyielding in its deterministic portrayal of a character Walter J. Muilenburg would rather have us observe than love. Elias Vaughn, his wife and son, are not consumed by prairie fires or grasshoppers, nor are they slain by renegade Lakota Sioux. No matter. *Prairie* is a novel of faithless despair, written by a man who grew up in a Dutch Reformed farm family just down the road, ironically a family that had to be rich in faith.

So who was Orange City's Walter J. Muilenburg?—that's what I asked myself. A century later, what can be known about this man who wrote only one novel, a celebrated novel but a bleak and harsh portrayal of one man's sad life?

A Muilenburg family tree in the archives of the Northwestern College library told me that Walter J., the son of John and Gertrude (Van Rooyan) Muilenburg, was born in August of 1896, two miles north and one east of Orange City, Iowa, to a family that had been in northwest Iowa for two decades when Walter was born. His Muilenburg grandparents laid the plow to uncut northwest Iowa ground when they'd come from the Pella area already in 1872. The lobby of the Sioux County Courthouse features a painting of four men and a covered wagon, the search party who came north and west to find a verdant patch of ground where they could plant a new Dutch colony. One of those pioneers was Hubert Muilenburg, a brother of Walter J.'s grandfather. Let there be no doubt: Walter J. Muilenburg was born here of pedigreed founder's stock.

When that foursome of discoverers returned to the Pella area, they gathered a crowd of like-minded adventurers and four years later moved north with dozens of Dutch Calvinists, most of them immigrants who spoke little if any English. They were separatists, as were virtually all Dutch immigrants in the years preceding the American Civil War, stoutly pious Calvinists who, in the Netherlands, had spotted heresy in *Hervormde Kirk*, the state church of the Netherlands. In 1834, they had walked out of the state church and suffered persecution for their treason. A little more than a decade

later, many of them left the Netherlands altogether.

Judging from the amount of land the John Muilenburg family worked (according to the 1908 *Sioux County Atlas*), the family was probably not particularly wealthy. Such humble beginnings put a familiar American spin on the Walter J. Muilenburg story: young American novelist hails from a pioneer family of limited means on the wide open spaces of American's grassland, a species of rags-to-riches.

But that family history contributed more to Walter's story. That the John and Gertrude Muilenburgs were not wealthy does not mean something greatly valuable didn't bless that farm home. The Muilenburg children took high school diplomas at the turn of the 20th century, when, here in Siouland, only a few farm kids attended school after the eighth grade. What's more, their educations didn't stop there; the Muilenburg children were sent on to college, even the women granted exceptional educational opportunities. Walter went to the University of Iowa, but his siblings went elsewhere.

That Muilenburg family tree introduced me to Walter J, but also his younger brother James, who left the farm and went off to Hope College, a not unfamiliar destination for those few Orange City boys who went on after an education at Northwestern Academy. But when, years later, James Muilenburg's exams were finally completed and his doctoral thesis was on the library shelf, among the neighbors up and down the dirt roads north of town, brother James had to be the only young man with a Ph.D. from Yale.

Information about the life of Dr. James Muilenburg is as abundant as information about his older brother Walter, the novelist, is scarce. In a frequently quoted passage from *Now and Then*, Frederick Buechner pays exceptional tribute to Prof. James Muilenburg, a role model and one of the 20th century's most influential theologians, in this way:

He was a fool in the sense that he didn't or couldn't or wouldn't resolve, intellectualize, evade, the tensions of his faith but lived those tensions out, torn almost in two by them at times. He was a fool, I suppose, in the sense that he was an intimate of the dark, yet held fast to the light as if it were something you could hold fast to; in the sense that he

wore his heart on his sleeve even though it was in some ways a broken heart; in the sense that he was as absurdly himself before the packed lecture hall as he was alone in his office; a fool in the sense that he was a child in his terrible candor. A fool, in other words, for Christ. (16-17)

Prof. James Muilenburg was a scholar who helped translate the Bible into the Revised Standard Version, and a stirring lecturer who held forth on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY, during Buechner's years as a student. Other names on Union's faculty office doors read larger today—Tillich, Niebuhr; but the professor that Buechner remembers most vividly is Dr. James Muilenburg, a rightly distinguished brother of the novelist, both of whom grew up on land I can almost see from my basement window.

If you read the work of both of the Muilenburg brothers, it's not difficult to determine that they seem, when it comes to faith, polar opposites. That inescapable judgment, for me at least, creates even more mystery.

It's important to say, however, that Walter's younger brother James was not the only deeply religious child in the neighborhood. When the Muilenburg brothers' grandparents immigrated from Holland, they claimed *both* economic and religious motivations because they were people "of the book," people of deep faith. James's and Walter's grandfather's obituary describes the old man as "true, noble, and generous...firm in his convictions and keen in his judgments." Then this:

He never faltered in anything he believed to be right. As a Christian he was true, devout, earnest,... . It was his delight to study the Bible, to explain the same and to convert men to that religion which has ever been the consolation of his life.

It is difficult to imagine that the Muilenburg children could have been brought up in a home that was any less pious.

But there were more siblings. Walter's and James's younger brother, Cornelius, also a Ph.D., was also a committed believer who pastored churches in Michigan for most of his life. Two of their sisters, both college-educated, taught school throughout their lifetimes. Another sister, post-retirement, be-

came a dorm mother at Northwestern College and is remembered even today for her quiet personal faith.

Brother James's revered reputation and accumulated publications on Old Testament history only makes the mystery of brother Walter's story even more enticing. Most of what can be known about Walter is that he lived much of his life in rural northern Michigan, taught some college English, and, oddly enough, seems to have stopped writing imaginative literature when he was young enough not to have to. Though his early work was much heralded and got significant national press, just about every piece of fiction he ever wrote can be read in a morning.

Walter never married. We know that for most of his life he lived away from people and that when he retired, he spent his later years in Arizona but made frequent trips back to northwest Iowa, enough, we might presume, to want to be buried here—and he is, one of several siblings on John and Gertrude Muilenburg's Orange City cemetery plot.

We know a bit more about him from his famous brother James, in a letter he wrote to a graduate student, writing a dissertation on the *The Midland*, a literary journal published at the University of Iowa. *The Midland* ran three of Walter's short stories (including one titled "Prairie"). In that letter, James Muilenburg explains that his brother "became something of a recluse" after leaving a teaching position at Michigan State University to live at what had been his summer place near the northern Michigan community of Glennie. Nothing in that letter suggests any kind of rift between the two brothers, but then little suggests emotions more endearing either.

What can be gleaned from Walter's fiction is perhaps all we can know—if we can know anything—of brother Walter's life and pilgrimage. *Prairie* was first published in 1925 by Viking, then redone in paperback by Popular Library in 1970; and there are those three stories in *The Midland*. No less a celebrity journalist than H. L. Mencken once wrote to *Midland* editor John T. Frederick to tell him he considered Frederick's *Midland*, "probably the most important literary magazine ever published in America," a tribute Frederick used thereafter, whenever and wherever he could.

Walter J. Muilenburg met John T. Frederick

at the University of Iowa early in the 1920s. They had to have become fast friends because Walter's rural abode "up north" in Michigan was located beside a place owned by the Fredericks. Prof. James Muilenburg characterized the Glennie neighborhood this way in his letter to the graduate student: "I was under the impression that he and Frederick and others formed a kind of literary colony there."

In another letter, also from the archives at the University of Iowa, a letter Walter himself sent to brother James, Walter speaks of having dinner frequently with the Fredericks. He also pictures his rustic hideaway and describes the world in and outside the cabin as if to explain his life to his theologian brother:

There are lots of windows. The house is set up on a fairly high "ridge", facing the west. It slopes down gradually to the lake and, on the north, to a fine stream. Far away, miles to the west, is the highest line of hills anywhere around here, and they are marvelously colored. Imagine it as it is tonight, with a full moon halfway up to the zenith. There is just the remotest touch of light through the trees to show where the lake is. On all sides, the boundaries of the clearing are marked by the darkness of a heavy growth of trees. Everything is quiet, except for an occasional call of a whippoorwill or owl.

If you read the work of both of the Muilenburg brothers, it's not difficult to determine that they seem, when it comes to faith, polar opposites. That inescapable judgment, for me at least, creates even more mystery.

In all likelihood, brother James took his depiction of Walter as "something of a recluse" from Walter's self-assessment in the same note:

To most people this hermit life would be eerie; to me it is ideal. Never have I enjoyed myself as I have this summer. Really, I have all the advantages that Thoreau brought out in his Walden, and a number

he never enjoyed: to wit, good food and good tobacco. Thoreau put this idea in my head, and the matter has worked out with wonderful satisfaction.

The spirituality espoused by Thoreau and Emerson and others of the transcendentalist school in the Romantic era (pre-Civil War) of American literature, obvious heroes to Walter J. Muilenburg, was anything but atheism. But neither was it what Walter's Calvinist parents would have thought of as orthodox.

Still, the grim prospects that underlie the story in *Prairie* can hardly be construed as "romantic." Characters appear less human than they are functions. Throughout the novel, jarringly in fact, Muilenburg refers to Elias Vaughn by his various offices: "the son," or "the young farmer," or "the father" or "the old farmer," as if deliberately to keep Elias's humanness at arm's length. That stylistic feature is not unique to *Prairie*. Other novels, especially those of his time, refer similarly to characters because their authors, frequently associated with literary naturalism, wanted to judge human character at the distance a scientist might observe them. Literary naturalism operates most exclusively within a view of life which desired to apply scientific objectivity and detachment to any study of human beings. In *Prairie* and elsewhere in late 19th- and early 20th-century literature, fiction can feel like a laboratory.

Prairie may well be "the epic novel of one man's bitter war with a savage wilderness," as the ad copy on the 1970 paperback's cover boldly claims; but if it is, that war is not with traditional enemies. The hardships of prairie life are here, just as they are in Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, published (in Norwegian) at the same time as Muilenburg's *Prairie*. Harsh Great Plains winters, ravaging prairie fires, grasshoppers in black clouds, and endless drought are the antagonists in Josephine Donovan's *Black Soil*, too. All three novels are set in the same pioneering era and in remarkable proximity to each other.

But the question both of those novels pose in almost every chapter is whether or not the pioneers can conquer an environment so harsh it threatens to make promised lands uninhabitable.

Muilenburg's *Prairie* suggests that hardships

created by an often hostile environment is the opposition, but the novel often describes the monumental open grassland pioneers like those Elias Vaughn found in terms that seem almost worshipful, not beastly at all, but breathtakingly beautiful.

Vaughn marries Lizzie, a neighbor girl, abruptly, then leaves his father's farm, shaking the dust off his boots, and becomes the prodigal. He and his new wife cross the Big Sioux River and strike out on their own where other homesteaders have not yet settled, determined to create their own rural kingdom in what is likely South Dakota grassland.

My own great-grandparents did the same thing, but soon determined to retreat back to northwest Iowa because the environment in South Dakota was distinctly harsher. Elias stubbornly will not go back, but he seems to face a different antagonist.

Throughout the story, Elias—always by himself, always in broad open plains that surround him—experiences transcendent moments of sheer inspiration that leave him deeply moved but somehow incapable of comprehending. While Elias Vaughn moves ever closer to reliving his father's own squalid emotional life (his father, too, is a successful farmer), Elias experiences these surprising, mystical moments of spiritual joy all along the way. The Great Plains world seems not so much a villain in Walter Muilenburg's *Prairie* as a seductress. In the world where Elias lives, his only comfort in life and death is a moment, now and again, when he can lose himself in the limitless beauty of land and sky all around.

One such passage—and there are many—begins like this: "The sun stood well up in a spotlessly pure blue sky." The beauty he finds even here, in one short line, belies the darkness of the traditional literary naturalist vision. Or "Elias stamped exuberantly into the snow." The descriptors are downright joyous, even giddy:

At the rise of ground that fell sharply before them to the bottom lands of the creek, the man halted, and stared out over the winter prairie land, turning slowly to enjoy the entire sweep of country that lay before him. All was radiance and sparkle. Mile after mile of rolling prairie shone a dazzling white under the intense blue of the sky. There was not a stir of wind; so great a stillness was upon the earth... . To the west was the house, looking

utterly homelike there, cuddled into its refuge of well-grown cottonwoods, and with a slow curl of wood smoke weaving itself out of the chimney and thinning imperceptibly against the blue of the west. In the north and south, the light of the snow was caught up into the horizon, and it seemed to the man as though there were hidden suns sending up a crystal radiance from below the far rim of a winter world. To the east, there was more change. Below them, at the foot of the slope, the tortuously winding line of willows followed the creek. The light against them, with the snow beyond, gave them a tawny-red color. All the world was breathless with Christmas, the man felt, new-born, blue and white. He drew in great breaths of the mellow, cold air. (178)

Even in the cold of winter, the prairie—the natural world, an endless land beneath the circle of heaven—is here and elsewhere in the novel almost blissful, an odd sentiment in a novel that features a man powerless to become anything more than the graven image (*graven* is Muilenburg's own word in the final paragraph) of the hard-core father who banished him from the home he'd grown up in and the farm he would have inherited. Strangely enough, moments full of spiritual vision are not rare in the otherwise immensely bleak story Muilenburg tells.

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At times one might think that Elias's near epiphanies suggest a religious view akin to Emerson's transcendentalism more so than the Calvinism of Walter Muilenburg's youth and heritage. That the novel is largely forgotten is understandable. *Prairie* is really an odd and cold mix of heartless determinism strangely blessed with rich moments of transcendental spirituality.

When their baby is born, Elias is happy. In a line that's prescient of what will happen to the child, and what happens to Elias, the new father holds his son for the first time and tells his wife, "He's going to be you over again." The boy will. Then Elias simply "gave her the boy and returned to his work." All's well in the world, it seems, if he can go back to work.

No one can fault Elias Vaughn or his father for laziness. Work seems to him his salvation. Even though Elias eventually takes up his father's ritual of Bible reading and prayer, what remains more important to him than faith is work, the viability of his farming enterprise. Elias Vaughn is Weber's "Protestant Ethic" thesis made flesh: devotion severed from spiritual roots evolves eventually into capitalism. What Max Weber theorized about the Protestant Ethic is clearly formulated and justly apt in the life of Elias Vaughn.

But there's more to the passage that follows the little boy's birth. As he leaves, the prairie offers bounteous spiritual fulfillment: "As he walked to the plowed land, the cathedral peace of the golden, silent afternoon fell upon him."

The story's trajectory is unmistakable. Through successive prairie seasons Elias Vaughn improves his claim, ekes out a living, gains some prominence in the region as a survivor, someone who didn't leave; but he finally becomes as stiff and unforgiving—and alone—as his father ever was.

A generation separates them, but time and experience prove ineffectual to thwart whatever force it is that creates and shapes the shameless stubbornness affecting both father and son. Strangely enough, Elias Vaughn seems not so much beaten by the prairie as seduced by its transcendence, but also by the strength and will that environment requires of him in the battles that must be waged simply to live out there. Walter J. Muilenburg has Elias Vaughn very much alone at the end of the novel, just as his father was, not because Elias was beaten by fire or hoppers or drought, but because the battle he won with a sometimes enchanting natural world left him no time or desire to nurture the relationships that might have better sustained him.

The "message" of the novel is unmistakable: the son becomes the father. We are somehow incapable of change. What Walter J. Muilenburg creates in

his first and only novel, *Prairie*, is a kind of death trap that grabs a man who tries to build an empire for himself, his fearful wife, and their only child. *Prairie* is an argument for despair.

What was in Walter J. Muilenburg's mind and soul? How could he attempt to blend emotionless naturalism with a Thoreauvian transcendental spirit that at time feels almost other-worldly? The answer is, he couldn't.

Perhaps his friend John T. Frederick can be of some help here because the journal he founded, *Midland*, and in which he published three Muilenburg stories, valued work that editor Frederick championed as notable Midwestern literature. What he wanted for the *Midland* was fiction and poetry that had "redemptive value" because of the "dignity and beauty in rural and small-town life" and the "goodness of the family."

And more: "There is a Thoreauvian rapture to be discovered in the natural wonders of the region," he says in the guidelines he created to outline his vision. *Rapture*, it seems to me, is a peculiarly 19th-century word whose contemporary usage has been pirated by end-times theologies. John T. Frederick insists on *rapture* as a qualification, and *rapture* is what Muilenburg attempts in successive chapters of *Prairie*, even though Elias Vaughn himself does not understand—seemingly cannot—exactly what it is he feels. Those moments of spiritual elation seem powerless to affect him, make him an any better human being, than did his father's Bible reading and prayer.

Prairie is an odd mix of doctrinaire literary naturalism accessorized with sublime moments of "Thoreauvian rapture." If it weren't for the mystery of identity, the fact that Walter J. Muilenburg grew up just down the road in what had to be a very pious home he shared with siblings who, unlike him, seem not to have rejected the faith that the novel suggests brother Walter did, what few copies of *Prairie* remain could likely be found on this summer's library clearance cart.

Still, for me at least, the steep contrast between brother Walter's religiosity and his siblings' raises other questions. Imagine Walter and James on matching milking stools beneath a half-dozen cows day after day, or forking manure, or haying, cultivating corn and beans, and listening to their father

read the Bible after every last farm-house meal, and going off to worship in town, Sunday after Sunday, twice a Sabbath. Think of all three boys together in an unheated upstairs bedroom of a little farm house not all that far north of town. Two of them will become dedicated men of the cloth. One of them, seemingly, will walk away.

How does that happen? Strangely enough, it's Walter J. who is buried here, just a mile or so from where he grew up, the only one of the three brothers who is.

Was Walter happy? I don't know, and I wish I did.

There's something quintessentially American about the tale of the Muilenburg brothers and sisters too, don't you think? They are *not* all alike, *not* clones, not replicas of their parents or each other. Walter J.'s own life, what little we know of it, proves the determinism he sneeringly tries to preach in *Prairie* is questionable truth, even as it was to him in those bright moments of "Thoreauvian rapture."

The Muilenburg brothers were not rats in a lab. They had and made choices because in quite significant ways it seems they may have walked away from each other. What their differences suggest is that our destinies are not somehow rigged to self-pilot. We are not helpless victims of powers much greater than we may even aspire to.

I can't help wonder what brother James thought about his older brother Walter. I wish I knew what the eminent theologian thought about Walter's reclusive life and his literary soul. What he explains and describes in the only letter like it to exist betrays very little emotion whatsoever.

But there is this passage from "A Meditation on Divine Fatherhood," a devotional essay Professor Muilenburg wrote to explore the opening bars of the Lord's Prayer. Much in this short essay examines what happens to human beings who suffer a kind of fatherlessness even when a father is present in the home. "The frustration and bewilderment which afflicts the soul of contemporary man is expressed in the brokenness of the family relationship," he says. Could he possibly be referring to his own family? And then this: "The memory of our fathers blesses or haunts us all our days," a truth, he says, only a few of us fully understand: "Those who know this secret best are the psychiatrist, the poet,

the artists, and the playwright.” Might he have been talking about his brother, explaining him?

“But what does father really mean? What does it mean to be a father, and what does it mean to be a son?” he asks a bit later in the meditation. “Orientals,” he says, understand this mysterious relationship better than Westerners, “for the East knows that the father lives in his son, and the son knows he lives on the life of his father.” And then, “His father is in him.”

Could Professor Muilenburg not be thinking about his brother—and maybe his brother’s novel? Seems difficult to imagine.

Brother James was, by his own confession and reputation, acquainted with the darkness. “Every morning when you wake up, before you reaffirm

your faith in the majesty of a Loving God, before you say ‘I believe’, for another day,” he told his students so frequently that some of them never forgot, “read the news with a record of the latest crimes and tragedies of mankind and then see,” he’d say, “if you can honestly say it again.”

The famous theologian of the pioneer Muilenburgs appears to have known something of the darkness. The professor that Frederick Buechner called “a fool” he so greatly admired was, Buechner says, “an intimate of the dark.”

What he certainly knew, familiar as Professor Muilenburg was with the Scripture, was the peculiar burden of being a brother’s keeper.

Maybe that’s all I’ll ever know.