

Introduction to West of Everything

I make no secret of the fact: I love Westerns. I love to hear violins with the clip-clop of hooves behind them and see the cactus-punctuated sky spread out behind the credits. When the horses pound toward the camera and pull up in a cloud of dust, my breath gets short.

Physical sensations are the bedrock of the experience Westerns afford. Louis L'Amour says in the first sentence of *Hondo* (1953) that the hero "rolled the cigarette in his lips, liking the taste of the tobacco," that he "squint[ed] his eyes against the sun glare." "His buckskin shirt," L'Amour says, "seasoned by sun, rain, and sweat, smelled stale and old."

L'Amour puts you inside the hero's shirt, makes you taste what he tastes, feel what he feels. Most of the sensations the hero has are not pleasurable: he is hot, tired, dirty, and thirsty much of the time; his muscles ache. His pain is part of our pleasure. It guarantees that the sensations are real. So does the fact that they come from nature: the sun's glare, not the glare of a light bulb; a buckskin shirt, not a synthetic wash-and-wear. For Westerns satisfy a hunger to be in touch with something absolutely real. It is good that the eye has to squint at the sun, since what the eye craves is the sun's reality.

I often imagine the site of the Western—the place it comes from and goes to, humanly speaking—to be like the apartment in a certain *New Yorker* cartoon. A woman is ironing a big pile of laundry—naked light bulb overhead, cats sitting around on the floor, crack in the wall—while through the door of an adjoining room you see her husband, sitting in the bathtub and calling to her, "Hon, I think it's time we took a ride into big sky country." The Western answers a need to get out of that apartment and into fresh air, sunlight, blue sky, and open space.

Don't fence me in.

Not just any space will do. Big sky country is a psychological and spiritual place known by definite physical markers. It is the American west, and not just any part of that but the West of the desert, of mountains and prairies, the West of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and some parts of California.

This West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need

for self-transformation. The desert light and the desert space, the creak of saddle leather and the sun beating down, the horses' energy and force—these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real.

The hero of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), says in a moment of rare self-revelation: "Often when I have camped here, it has made me want to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing. Not know myself from it. Never unmix again" (280). In Westerns the obsession with landscape is finally metaphysical. The craving for *material* reality, keen and insistent as it is, turns into a hunger even more insatiable. "My pa used to say," says a character from Louis L'Amour's *Galloway* (1970), "that when corruption is visited upon the cities of men, the mountains and the deserts await him. The cities are for money but the high-up hills are purely for the soul." The same is true of the Western. Thriving on physical sensation, wedded to violence, dominated by the need for domination, and imprisoned by its own heroic code, the Western appeals finally beyond all these to whatever it is the high-up hills betoken.

From roughly 1900 to 1975 a significant portion of the adolescent male population spent every Saturday afternoon at the movies. What they saw there were Westerns. Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, Lash LaRue, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy. From the twenties through the early seventies there were hundreds of nationally distributed feature films which gave the general population the same kind of experience on a more sophisticated level. Some of these films—*High Noon* (1952) ("Do not forsake me; oh my darling"), *Shane* (1953) ("Come back, Shane")—have become part of the permanent repertoire of American culture. Western radio shows in the thirties and forties were followed by TV shows in the fifties and sixties. In 1959 there were no fewer than thirty-five Westerns running concurrently on television, and out of the top ten programs eight were Westerns (Nachbar, x). John Wayne, the actor whose name is synonymous with Western films, became *the* symbol of American masculinity from World War II to Vietnam. Throughout the twentieth century, popular Western novels by Zane Grey, Ernest Haycox, Max Brand, Luke Short, and Louis L'Amour have sold hundreds of millions of copies. In 1984 L'Amour alone had 145 million books in print.

People from all levels of society read Westerns: presidents, truck drivers, librarians, soldiers, college students, businessmen, homeless people. They are read by women as well as men, rich and poor, young and old. In one way or another Westerns—novels and films—have touched the lives of virtually everyone who lived during the first three-quarters of this century. The arch-images of the genre—the gunfight, the fistfight, the chase on horseback, the figure of the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, the saloon girl, the lonely landscape itself—are culturally pervasive and overpowering. They carry within them compacted worlds of meaning and value,

codes of conduct, standards of judgment, and habits of perception that shape our sense of the world and govern our behavior without our having the slightest awareness of it.

This book asks what the Western hero has meant for the way Americans living in the twentieth century have thought about themselves, how the hero's aspirations have blended with theirs, and how his story has influenced people's beliefs about the way things are. For what the hero experiences is what the audience experiences; what he does, they do too. The feeling of being "in a Western"—the kind of experience that is and the effects it has—are what I am attempting to record. Westerns play, first and last, to a Wild West of the psyche. The images, ideas, and values that become part of an audience's way of interpreting life come in through the senses and are experienced first as drama. To comprehend how they've shaped people's attitudes and behavior, to understand them in an intellectual or conceptual way, one must begin with their impact on the body and the emotions.

The first half of this book highlights some of the genre's main features— death, women, language, landscape, horses, cattle—pays attention to the look and feel of their presence, and asks some questions. Why is the Western haunted by death? Why does it hate women and language so much? What messages does the landscape send? Why are there horses everywhere, and why don't people pay them more attention? What is implied by the fact that the raising of cattle for human consumption forms the economic basis of the life that Westerns represent?

Some of the answers are problematic and raise questions about the values to which Westerns have educated us. For Westerns believe that reality is material, not spiritual; they are obsessed with pain and celebrate the suppression of feeling; their taciturn heroes want to dominate the land, and sometimes to merge with it completely—they are trying to get away from other people and themselves.

The second half of the book looks at these issues by studying outstanding examples of the genre that generate the image of the West people carry in their minds: *The Virginian*, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, and a best-selling novel by Louis L'Amour. Though it's the West not of actuality but of representation I'm dealing with here—words and pictures, not flesh and blood—fiction and fact interpenetrate continually when one considers the life of Western writers in relation to their work. Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour in different ways all lived what they wrote. And Buffalo Bill spent the last half of his life playing out the first half theatrically.

Unlike most books on the Western, this one treats novels and films together. For when you read a Western novel or watch a Western movie on television, you are in

the same world no matter what the medium: the hero is the same, the story line is the same, the setting, the values, the actions are the same. The media draw on each other: movies and television programs are usually based on novels and short stories; conversely, when you read *Hondo*, you're likely to think of John Wayne. So when I say "Western" I mean everything from a comic book or a fifteen-minute radio show to a feature film or a full-length novel. What matters is not the medium but the identity of the imaginative world. Just as you know, when you turn the television on, whether you're watching a science fiction serial or a sitcom, you know when you're in a Western.

One of the things that lets you know when you're in a Western is the presence of Indians. Yet, to the surprise of some, including myself, Indians will not figure significantly in this book....

The absence of Indians in Western movies, by which I mean the lack of their serious presence as individuals, is so shocking once you realize it that, even for someone acquainted with outrage, it's hard to admit. My unbelief at the travesty of native peoples that Western films afford kept me from scrutinizing what was there. I didn't want to see. I stubbornly expected the genre to be better than it was, and when it wasn't, I dropped the subject. Forgetting perpetuates itself. I never cried at anything I saw in a Western, but I cried when I realized this: that after the Indians had been decimated by disease, removal, and conquest, and after they had been caricatured and degraded in Western movies, I had ignored them too. The human beings who populated this continent before the Europeans came and who still live here, whose image the Western traded on—where are they? Not in Western films. And not in this book, either.

While the Western may have been wrongly credited for giving us Indians, its general reputation as a serious representation of life has been vastly lower than what it deserves. People think of Westerns as light entertainment, adolescent and escapist, but there is nothing trivial about the needs they answer, the desires they arouse, or the vision of life they portray. One of the hallmarks of the genre is an almost desperate earnestness. This passage from the opening of *Heller with a Gun* (1955), an early L'Amour novel, exemplifies in miniature the kind of experience the Western likes to put its readers through, and it shows that whatever else they may be doing, Westerns are not getting away from seriousness, or from the demands of hard work, or from living a significant life:

It was bitter cold... .

He came down off the ridge into the shelter of the draw with the wind kicking up snow behind him. The sky was a flat slate gray, un - broken

and low. The air grew colder by the minute and there was a savage bite to the wind... .

He was two days out of Deadwood and riding for Cheyenne, and the nearest shelter was at Hat Creek Station, probably fifty miles along.

Wind knifed at his cheek. He drew deeply on his cigarette. Whoever followed him had the same problem. Find shelter or die. The wind was a moving wall of snow and the evening was filled with vast sound. (5)

This is a typical opening for a L'Amour novel. A man is alone in a blizzard with a murderer on his trail. Thirty-six hours later, this particular hero rides into Hat Creek Station out of the forty-below weather, having overpowered the man who was trying to kill him. The chapter ends as follows:

His mind was empty. He did not think. Only the occasional tug on the lead rope reminded him of the man who rode behind him. It was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways. (15)

The final sentence, in itself a kind of mini-Western, epitomizes familiar clichés. It represents physical strength as an ideal. It says that the hero is tough and strong, that the West made him that way; and it says this in simple language that anyone could understand. But it does not represent an escape from work. The protagonist is caught in a snowstorm, in below-zero weather, fifty miles from the nearest shelter; he is in pain and trapped in a situation he cannot escape except by monumental effort. He is able to reach warmth only through dogged persistence and the exercise of an unrelenting purpose. It is the ability to endure pain for a long time that saves him.

In fact all the qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete an excruciatingly difficult task: self-discipline; unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and excellent judgment; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds. At the most literal level, then, the experience the scene reproduces for its readers is that of work rather than leisure, of effort rather than rest or relaxation. Whatever it may be an escape from for its audience, this scene is not an escape from the psychological demands of work.

It is, however, an escape from something else. Though it reproduces with amazing thoroughness and intensity the emotional experience of performing intolerable labor, it removes the feelings associated with doing work from their usual surroundings and places them in a locale and a set of circumstances that expand their meaning, endow them with an overriding purpose, and fill them with excitement. In short, hard work is transformed here from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of

human endeavors: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the body and mind, and directs one's life to the service of an unquestioned goal. What the reader and the hero feel at the end of the episode is a sense of hard-won achievement. The laborious-ness of the experience, its mind-numbing and backbreaking demands, are essential to the form of satisfaction the narrative affords.

Rather than offering an alternative to work, the novels of Louis L'Amour make work their subject. They transfer the feelings of effort and struggle that belong to daily life into a situation that gives them a point, usually the preservation of life itself. In story after story the hero undergoes an ordeal that exacts superhuman exertions.

Protagonists crawl across deserts on their hands and knees, climb rock faces in the blinding sun, starve in snowbound cabins in the mountains, walk or ride for miles on end with all but mortal wounds, survive for long periods of time without water, without shelter, without sleep. Although the settings are exotic and the circumstances extreme, these situations call on the same qualities that get people out of bed to go to work, morning after morning. They require endurance more than anything else; not so much the ability to make an effort as the ability to sustain it. It isn't pain that these novels turn away from. It isn't self-discipline or a sense of responsibility. Least of all is it the will to persevere in the face of difficulty. What these novels offer that life does not offer is the opposite of a recreational spirit. It is seriousness. They posit effort and perseverance not only as necessary to salvation but salvation itself. It is when your own life doesn't require of you the effort, concentration, and intensity of aim that L ' Amour ' s heroes need to stay alive that you want to be out with them in a Wyoming blizzard with a murderer on your trail fifty miles from Hat Creek Station.

The desire to test one's nerve, physically, as a means of self-fulfillment is illustrated in a somewhat prosaic but nevertheless telling way in a joke someone sent in to *Reader's Digest*. The anecdote helps to explain why L'Amour's audience might be looking not for an escape from work but for quite the reverse:

Last summer my wife and I met a couple at a restaurant. After an enjoyable lunch, the women decided to go shopping, and I invited the man to go sailing. Later, while we were out on the water, a storm blew up. The tide had gone out, and we were downwind trying to work our way back through a narrow channel. At one point the boat grounded and we had to climb overboard and shove with all our might to get it back in deeper water. As my new friend stood there, ankle deep in muck, the wind blowing his hair wildly, rain streaming down his face, he grinned at me, and with unmistakable sincerity said, "Sure beats shopping! "

The men in this joke, like the heroes in L'Amour's novels, are braving the elements. Drenched to the skin, pushing a boat off a sandbar, they are having the time of their

lives. They enjoy themselves so much not because they are out on a pleasure trip but because they are meeting a challenge, a challenge whose value is defined by contrast with the activity the women are engaged in—shopping. Shopping, in this context, not only implies non-male activity, it embodies everything that readers of Westerns are trying to get away from: triviality, secondariness, meaningless activity. That the qualities devalued here are associated with women is essential to the way Westerns operate as far as gender is concerned. Requiring no effort of the will, no test of strength or nerve, shopping is seen here as petty and inconsequential; whatever paltry resources it calls on, however it is performed, shopping makes no difference. It isn't serious.

Ordinary work—in fact, ordinary life—is too much like shopping. It never embodies what the hero's struggle to get out of the blizzard embodies: the fully saturated moment. But this is not because life in the twentieth century involves people in all those transactions the Western hero traditionally rejects—the acquisition of material goods, the desire for social status, the search for luxuries. What Westerns criticize in daily life is not the presence of things, technology, laws, or institutions per se, but the sense that life under these conditions isn't going anywhere. If Westerns seem to long for the out-of-doors, for a simplified social existence, for blizzards and shoot-outs and fabulous exploits, it isn't because their readers want to give up TV and computers and fast foods and go back to life on the frontier. It's that life on the frontier is a way of imagining the self in a boundary situation—a place that will put you to some kind of ultimate test. What distinguishes the life of the L'Amour hero from that of his readers isn't that he can build a fire in the snow, kill ten bandits with six bullets, or get on his horse and ride out of town whenever he wants to; it is that he never fritters away his time. Whatever he does, he gives it everything he 's got because he's always in a situation where everything he's got is the necessary minimum.

In the foreword to the thirtieth-anniversary edition of Hondo, his most famous novel, L'Amour declares that working people are not only his intended audience but the subjects of his stories as well:

I sing of arms and men, not of presidents, kings, generals, and passing explorers, but of those who survived their personal, lonely Alamos, men who drove the cattle, plowed the furrows, built their shelters against the wind, the men who built a nation. (vi)

L'Amour's epic description of life in the Old West suggests that the hunger Westerns satisfy is a hunger not for adventure but for meaning. What these books offer their readers is not free time but its very antithesis: pressure so acute that time disappears. The trouble with ordinary work isn't, as people generally assume, that it demands too much of you but that it doesn't demand enough. F. O. Matthiessen once wrote of

Herman Melville that his novels called the whole soul of man into being; that is what, in their way, the novels of Louis L ' Amour aim to do.

The whole soul of man. "Man?" What about woman?

When they speak of their youthful afternoons at the movies, the men I talk to invariably have a certain ruminative tone in their voices, smiling inwardly at something I can't see. "Every Saturday," they say, "for years, I used to go . . . " and then they mention some (to me) extraneous circumstance, like how much they paid, or the name of the movie theater, or what they used to eat. Then, invariably, they list the names of the heroes—Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Tom Mix, Lash LaRue; they try to remember them all, as if they were baseball statistics—and sometimes say which one they liked best. They pronounce these names like the words to a prayer whose meaning they have forgotten, and trail off into a silence I used to think was significant but which may be just a nostalgic blur. Or it may be full of things they can't articulate. These conversations, at any rate, are maddening. Here am I trying *manfully* to write about Westerns, starting from zero and getting bleary-eyed in the process, and there they are with this huge backlog of knowledge and experience to draw on—I'll never catch up—from which they draw nothing but a list of names.

With women it's different. Either you draw a blank when you ask them about Westerns or you get something less formulaic and more personal. When they do have a history with the genre, women are split into two camps: those who identified with the hero and those who didn't or couldn't. Annie Oakley and Dale Evans were for this second group. One friend said she loved "Bonanza" so much that she had to invent a female character so that she could participate as a woman, and spent a long time deciding whether to be the fourth wife or one of the Cartwright children. Another friend told me she could identify with male heroes but only the nonwhite, non-WASP ones, Tonto and Zorro. Another was so crazy about Gene Autry as a child that she wore guns around all the time and for two years refused to answer to anything but "Gene." I identified with everybody—the Lone Ranger, Tonto, Silver, and, if there was a woman in the story, with her, too, though sometimes she was just too different from the men to be anybody I'd want to be....

So although Westerns have traditionally been fare for men and not for women, women can feel engaged by them. In fact, since stories about men (at least in our culture) function as stories about all people, women learn at an early age to identify with male heroes. Socialized to please others, women also acquire early on the ability to sympathize with people whose circumstances are different from their own. Hence they regularly identify across gender lines in reading and in watching movies and television.

Feminist theorists have shown how movies force women to look at women from the point of objects, forcing women to identify against themselves in order to participate in the story. Westerns do this more than most narratives, and the attitudes toward oneself that form over a lifetime of seeing oneself trivialized and degraded are extremely difficult to undo. But in the very act of harming women in this way Westerns also force men into parts that are excruciating to perform, parts that, given the choice, they probably would not have wanted to play.

In fact, what is most interesting about Westerns at this moment in history is their relation to gender, and especially the way they created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century. The model was not for women but for men: Westerns insist on this point by emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal. It is not one ideal among many, it is *the* ideal, certainly the only one worth dying for. It doesn't matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a shepherd, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a *man*. That is the only side to be on. The most poignant expression of this sentiment, so characteristic of the genre, comes in the late, and in many ways uncharacteristic, film *The Wild Bunch*. Robert Ryan, leader of a gang of louts hired by the railroad to catch a gang of thieves to which he used to belong, has just heard one of his crew say something derogatory about the gang they're chasing. And he replies, "We 're after *men*, and I wish to God I was with them."

That, I think, is the way the audience of a Western feels when things are going right. "I wish to God I was with them." I feel that way a lot when I watch Westerns, and sometimes I feel exactly the reverse.

I am simultaneously attracted and repelled by the power of Western heroes, the power that men in our society wield. I've been jealous of power, and longed for it, wanted the experiences that accompany it, and seen the figures who embody it as admirable, worthy to emulate, and sexually attractive. I have also been horrified by the male exercise of power and, like most women, have felt victimized by it in my own life. In a sense my engagement with the Western has been an attempt to understand why men act the way they do and to come to terms with it emotionally.

So I came to this project with a mixture of motives, not unlike the motives with which men originally came to the West: curiosity, awe, and a desire to subdue and possess. There was the feeling that if I could understand what made these Western heroes so attractive, I could gain some advantage over men, turn the knowledge against them when I needed to. In a sense, I suppose, I wanted to do to Western heroes what my own culture, in the form of Western novels and movies, had done to women, had done to me. I wanted to hold men up to scorn.

But though I have felt contempt and hatred for the Western hero, for his self-righteousness, for his silence, for his pathetic determination to be tough, the desire to *be* the Western hero, with his squint and his silence and his swagger, always returns. I want to be up there in the saddle, looking down at the woman in homespun; I want to walk into the cool darkness of the saloon, order a whiskey at the bar, feel its warmth in my throat, and hear the conversation come to a sudden halt. I want these things and I don't want them, because I have found in my own life, and through reading and watching Westerns, that the price for these experiences, or rather, for the power they represent, is too high. The price the Western exacts from its heroes is written in the expression on Gary Cooper's face throughout *High Noon* as he tries to get help in confronting Frank Miller's gang. The expression is one of fear, distaste, determination, and inward pain. It is impossible not to share that pain with Western heroes if one is trying to understand them. Consequently, my attitude toward the hero is always shifting. Outrage, disdain, admiration, emulation, compassion.

A word about pain. Westerns invite their audiences to undergo a considerable amount of it. And for a long time I imagined it was only *other* readers and viewers who responded to this invitation, albeit subliminally. The attraction to suffering, I thought, was a pathology found especially in men who, as a class, were always trying to prove that they could take it. Never did it occur to me that I loved the pain I was describing, and that in fact *everything* I said about the Western hero—and, by implication, his audience—was in varying degrees true of me as well.