

Spiritual Values in the Popular Western Novel

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Without some explanation my title may seem puzzling or misleading, for spiritual values are conspicuously absent from many versions of the popular Western. It is true, of course, that category Westerns are often viewed as morality plays in which good triumphs over evil, white hats over black. But much of that characteristic of the genre is empty convention. The morality is too often counterfeit because good prevails merely through an invariable and implausible connection with a single physical gesture—the quick draw. And in contemporary film versions, which often reflect a condition of anomie, the fast draw is even less convincingly linked with goodness. “Anomie” is defined as a social condition characterized by the relative absence of norms or moral standards, in which the individual experiences value disorientation and spiritual isolation. Many recent Western films display an uncaring cynicism about human beings, about community, and about the tender emotions of love, loyalty, mercy, and genial laughter. I am skeptical, therefore, that the morality-play structure of formula Westerns is of much spiritual significance. I wish, rather, to treat spiritual values in relation to the inner, reflective life of the individual. Simplistic or unimaginative conformity to formula eliminates the space for

spiritual values in this sense. And superimposing Hollywood formulas upon the conventions of the Western genre simply compounds the problem. Hollywood or TV Westerns pile mass-audience conventions upon this already convention-bound genre, pushing it even further away from the spiritual values inherent in its origins.

So a first step in delineating my focus is to exclude Western films. Literature and film have much in common but remain distinctly different media. And recognizing the differences is especially important in relation to the Western. Ignoring the distinctions, as Jane Tompkins does in *West of Everything* (1992), induces doubtful conclusions drawn from indiscriminating generalizations. She views Western novels and films as being all of one piece: "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" (7). Such a generalization, which would lump together the novel *The Ox-bow Incident* (1940) with the film *High Plains Drifter* (1973), is of doubtful usefulness. The distance between the literary work of an individual imagination (particularly one informed by the Western experience) and a film resulting from the frequently capricious influences of financial backers, producer, screen writers, director, actors, and editors can be immense. It can be the distance that separates popular culture from mass culture when popular culture is seen as situated on a continuum with high culture (the former differing from the latter in degree rather than in nature) and mass culture is viewed as the product of commercial, impersonal, exploitatively derivative, and often technological interests. The popular Western novel (and occasionally film) can be healthful in the way good art is healthful, while a mass Western (film or novel) usually both seduces and impoverishes, keeping us watching or reading while at the same time leaving us feeling defrauded of our time and spiritual sensibility.

A second step in narrowing my focus is to move back to the beginnings of the Western at the turn of the last century—to writers like Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, and B[ertha]. K. Bowers. These authors were writing about the West mostly before critics had invented the term "Western." They were people with first-

hand experience of the region, who wrote about it with varying literary motivations and styles. As Gary Topping explains in his helpful essay "The Rise of the Western," they were neither following established conventions nor deliberately creating new ones. They considered themselves to be serious, original interpreters of the West, and thus found repugnant the uniformity and formula implied in the term "Western." They did not constitute a school or movement. With few exceptions they did not acknowledge being influenced by each other's books, nor did they meet or correspond with each other. What they shared was the recognition that the West—its landscapes, peoples, and cultures—was a very interesting place which presented a salutary contrast to the dehumanizing materialism and urbanization of the Gilded Age. The West appeared to them a locus for revitalizing the best human habits and values. They were undoubtedly influenced by the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper, but (except for Grey) not by the dime novels of the late-nineteenth century, as is usually assumed. Their principal literary models were European Romantic and Victorian poets and novelists, and the influence of such literature is more evident in their writing than in subsequent formula Westerns. The influence of the high culture tradition of Romanticism upon these original writers of Westerns helps account for the spiritual values manifest in their fiction.

Reducing my focus still further, I wish to use three examples from Owen Wister and Zane Grey to demonstrate that these authors, who contributed so much to the creation of the genre, were preoccupied with spiritual matters. I suggest that the spirituality that informs these examples is not derived from orthodox Christianity, though it is generally compatible with Christianity, and that these authors wished to blend a spiritual reverence for nature with the Protestant cultural tradition that shaped their essential consciousness or world view. The spirituality in these examples derives from a religion of nature that had its inception in the romantic primitivism of Rousseau and found its most influential voices (as far as Wister and Grey were concerned) in Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau. It was a religious impulse whose essence was universal rather than exclusive, whose ground was in na-

ture and man's subjective emotions and mystical intuitions rather than in biblical revelation. Its characteristics include alienation from civilization and a corresponding attraction to nature; freedom from institutions, including priests and dogma; actions prompted by natural inclination rather than by instituted law and social decorum; and a valorizing of liberty and equality—and Emersonian self-reliance and Thoreauvian individualism fit in here somewhere also. Obviously, these are characteristics we immediately associate with the classic Western hero and heroine. We do so largely because of models like the ones I will present. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the tension between East and West that flows like sap through Western fiction is fundamentally a tension between a spirituality evoked by nature and institutionalized Christianity. The Western is the only genre whose name derives from a geographical region—from landscape really. Thus, the spirituality embodied in its founding exemplars is naturally a response to landscape.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) is the prototypical Western. Most of the genre's themes, settings, characters, conflicts, and resolutions were born fully developed in this novel, like Venus from the foam of the Mediterranean Sea—and with not dissimilar mythic consequences. The main character is a gentleman of nature who is not above playing jokes on a Christian preacher and engages in a prolonged duel with a school-teacher embodiment of New England religion and morals. The novel's spiritual center is a locus in the natural world—a landscape. It is the island in a mountain stream where he takes his bride to consummate their union after marriage by the bishop of Wyoming. His conversation with the bishop prior to his marriage and his showdown with Trampas focus the tensions between Christianity and the religion of nature. The bishop's heart "was with the Virginian. But there was his gospel, that he preached, and believed, and tried to live." Ultimately, the bishop, like Molly, accedes to the spiritual values embodied in the Virginian: "The good bishop was at a standstill. Of all kicking against the pricks none is so hard as this kick of a professing Christian against the whole instinct of human man" (338–39). Thus, the first full-blown Western dramatizes the con-

frontation between and the eventual merging of Christianity and the religion of nature. In fact, a little remarked ingredient of the familiar Western code is this spiritual core derived from the complex of primitivism, natural wonder, and behavior consonant with these instincts.

The Virginian's Edenic island is reached by ascent into the mountains (the perennial location of human communion with the divine). It is "the true world of the mountains" blessed by "the true mountain air" and the "true breath of the mountains" (349-50). "The ploughed and planted country . . . lay in another world from this"—"the whole world is far from here." This is "virgin wilderness" that "belonged to no man." In short, it is the place of pure nature, pure air, pure water, pure solitude, and pure spirit: "Nothing can surpass this" (355). In this place he had often stripped naked, rolled in the grass with his unsaddled and unbridled horse, and bathed in the stream. His experiences here had been like those of Huck Finn and Jim naked on their raft, or Thoreau bathing daily in Walden Pond, or Walt Whitman wallowing naked in his creek and wrestling oak saplings. When he had visited there in the past, he had wanted "to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing. Not know [himself] from it" (356). This is romantic, primitivistic nature worship in spades. And when he brings Molly to this sacred place, she appreciates it in a similar way, and they speak reverently in low voices. Their experience together at this idyllic campsite is even better than he had dreamed it would be. But, of course, the novel does not end here. The couple must return to Molly's home in Vermont in order for the merging of East and West, of Christianity and nature worship, to be ratified by society.

In 1907, Zane Grey made a trip to Arizona, his first encounter with the West, a visit that was to determine his literary career. During that visit he met a Mormon named Jim Emmet, the man he later credited as having influenced him most. "My debt to him is incalculable," he wrote. "No doubt he exerted more influence over my developing, creating, all-absorbing love for the Southwest than any other Westerner." The important lesson he learned from Emmet was silent, listening observation—the habit or gift of wonder in the presence of nature. "Surely,"

says Grey, “of all the gifts that have come to me from contact with the West, this one of sheer love of wilderness beauty, color, grandeur, has been the greatest, the most significant for my work” (“Man” 136). It was, in fact, the primary inspiration for his writing. As his biographer Carlton Jackson points out, “love of nature came first in his order of priorities, then love of literature, and third, love of the West. These three attributes worked in combination to produce Grey’s literary career” (118). Grey himself acknowledged: “My inspiration to write has always come from nature. Character and action are subordinate to setting” (*Last Man* vi). Elsewhere he said, “My romances are simply the expression of my feeling for places” (“What” 5). Romance and love of nature had for Grey a common source in a primitive or primordial instinct in human beings. “Primitive,” a term he used frequently, had a positive not a pejorative meaning for him, signifying what is fundamental, vital, natural, whole-some. In his mind, romance was only another name for idealism, and idealism is the manifestation of a primal human instinct. He intended his romances to appeal to that fundamental human predisposition. “In every man and woman,” he wrote, “there survives the red blood of our ancestors, the primitive instincts. In these hides the secret of the eloquent and tremendous influence of the natural world” (“What” 6). The spiritual values reflected in his fiction originate in this peculiar post-Darwinian version of romantic primitivism and awe of nature. T. K. Whipple, in remarking on Grey’s faculty of wonder and sense of mystery, claims that “not even Thomas Hardy lays more stress on the effect of natural environment.” He adds that so far as Grey indicates a religion, “it is a form of nature worship; when he is face to face with the grandiose aspects of the earth’s surface, he feels himself in the presence of God” (26).

The Shepherd of Guadalupe (1930) is one of several Zane Grey novels that treat the situation of a person physically, mentally, and spiritually ailing who comes or returns to the West and is healed. This novel’s familiar Western theme is another of those introduced by Owen Wister, who himself came to the West for the sake of his health and who dedicated *The Virginian* to his friend Theodore Roosevelt,

who came west for the same reason. The hero of *The Shepherd of Guadalupe*, Clifton Forrest (suggesting cliff and forest?), returns to his home in New Mexico “broken in body and mind, victim of an appalling chaos” (3). That chaos was World War I. Grey’s repugnance toward that war was nearly as strong an influence upon him as his first visit to the West. It epitomized for him the modern greed, violence, and materialism that nearly destroyed his young hero, who was among the missing for over a year and spent nine months on a hospital cot. “Even his belief in God had succumbed” to the horrors of war (11).

But, of course, as the story progresses and Forrest withdraws from society to become a solitary shepherd in the desert, “the wonder of nature, the mystery of life” begins to restore him. “God had failed him, he thought. But there were whispers on the wind, not earthly or physical” (76). He begins to commune with the natural world: “There were intervals when the stream of his consciousness seemed suspended and he had no thought at all. He felt, he heard, he saw, he smelled the physical objects about him” (85–86). This spell of enchantment enables him to cling to life. The desert overwhelms his despair by awakening “a spiritual consciousness stronger than anything in primal nature. While there was life there was hope, good, truth, joy, and God” (204). As he lies under the stars, “there was born in him an unutterable and ineffably passionate love for the raw, ruthless, flinty desert that had saved him” (215). Here “he was thankful in his soul. He had erected a temple” (223). Nature “had gone into him. Moreover, there were also the beauty, the spirit, the nameless fulfillment of nature that forever forbade him mockery or revolt” (228). In the course of the novel he moves “from supreme agony of body to supreme ecstasy of soul” (271). The physical and spiritual healing he undergoes in the desert is repeatedly described in religious terms—salvation, gratitude, soul, temple.

Virginia, the heroine, experiences a parallel awakening as she seeks in nature a solitude that “flooded her being, pervaded her spirit, soothed her troubled soul” (106). When her friend comments, with an allusion to Wordsworth, on a light in her face never seen on land or sea, Virginia, replies: “I’ve been to the shrine [meaning the natural

landscape]. . . . I have recovered something I lost long ago" (109). Her experience also is cast in the vocabulary of religion—being, spirit, soul, reverence, shrine. This, in short, is a novel of spiritual renewal generated by a wondering openness to nature. The allusion to Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas: Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont" reveals at least one of the sources of Grey's persistent inclination to spiritualize nature: the English Romantic poets.

Just as Wister ended *The Virginian* by giving his hero the stamp of Eastern approval, Grey ends his novel by having Virginia's friend Helen, a patrician Easterner, ratify the change in Forrest. She is "confounded by [his] spiritual transformation," and she says of the hero, "he has seen through death . . . he has conquered self, cast out evil, seen the pitiful frailty of men and women, of our fleeting time here, of the unknown future. He is like the Shepherd we read of in our childhood" (304). Christianity and the religion of nature are blended here as the nature-worshipping hero is likened to Christ himself.

Like Clifton Forrest, the hero of Grey's *Rogue River Feud* (1929), Keven Bell, is a young man who has been wounded physically, emotionally, and spiritually during World War I. The title of the novel suggests that its subject is riding and shooting cowboys, but actually the story, set in the thick forests of Oregon during the 1920s, involves commercial forces opposing the hero and using illegal nets to exploit the region's fishery. In other words, the opposing forces are environmental villains, and the novel can be seen as an environmental romance. Keven Bell's injuries are more severe than those of Clifton Forrest. He returns to his home in Grant's Pass after an absence of four years, two of them spent in an army hospital recovering from a cannon blowing up in his face. His eyesight is impaired, his lower jaw is an iron replacement, and his memory is diminished by brain trauma. Like Forrest, he has "lost belief in man and faith in God" (120).

The novel's principal theme is the healing power of primitive wilderness. The first chapter—devoid of human characters—describes the river, from its sources in the mountains to its entry into the Pacific Ocean. This description emphasizes the influence of natural environment much the way Hardy's description of Egdon Heath does at the beginning of *The Return of the Native* (1878). In the course of the novel, the

river becomes a spiritual force, an instrument of salvation for soul and body. Keven's guide in this process of salvation is a young woman, part Native American, reared in the forest away from civilization, who is "an unconscious worshiper of nature" (138). In her presence amid the Rogue River wilderness, a primitive consciousness awakens within him, and he gradually realizes the efficacy of that wondering awareness—"its significance, its truth, its glorious power to uplift and satisfy and save" (155). He tells the woman, "you and the river and the solitude have done something to my spirit, and through that to my mistreated body" (156-57). This spiritual significance of the river and its environment is epitomized in this climactic passage:

Through the incredible stillness the low murmur of the river seemed to have a supernatural significance. That voice could not come only from gliding waters. It was a gentle and singing sound, full of mystery, like the pale-gleaming, starlight-reflecting water from whence it came. There was something else out there. Keven felt it, and the thing that had been vague became clear. Spirit! All was not merely physical—rocks and trees and waters. The same spirit which dreamed and murmured under the watching stars actuated this throbbing, quivering girl. The last shadow of materialism faded out of Keven Bell forever. (189-90)

As these examples indicate, the religious values of Christianity are affirmed in the classic Western, but merely as a supplement to a spirituality of landscape, a religion of nature. The priest, minister, and institutional church are seldom glorified in the Western. Quite the contrary, they are often satirized and treated with condescension. They are customarily equated with the civilizing forces of the East, which the Western hero recognizes as inevitable and irresistible, but which he insists with frontier stubbornness must accommodate themselves to his own spiritual affinity for the free natural environment of the West. It is the varying versions of accommodation to such affinity that constitute spiritual values in the popular Western, and these values are usually only glimpsed when some slight lull in the action adventure permits a slight opening for metaphysical reflection.

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