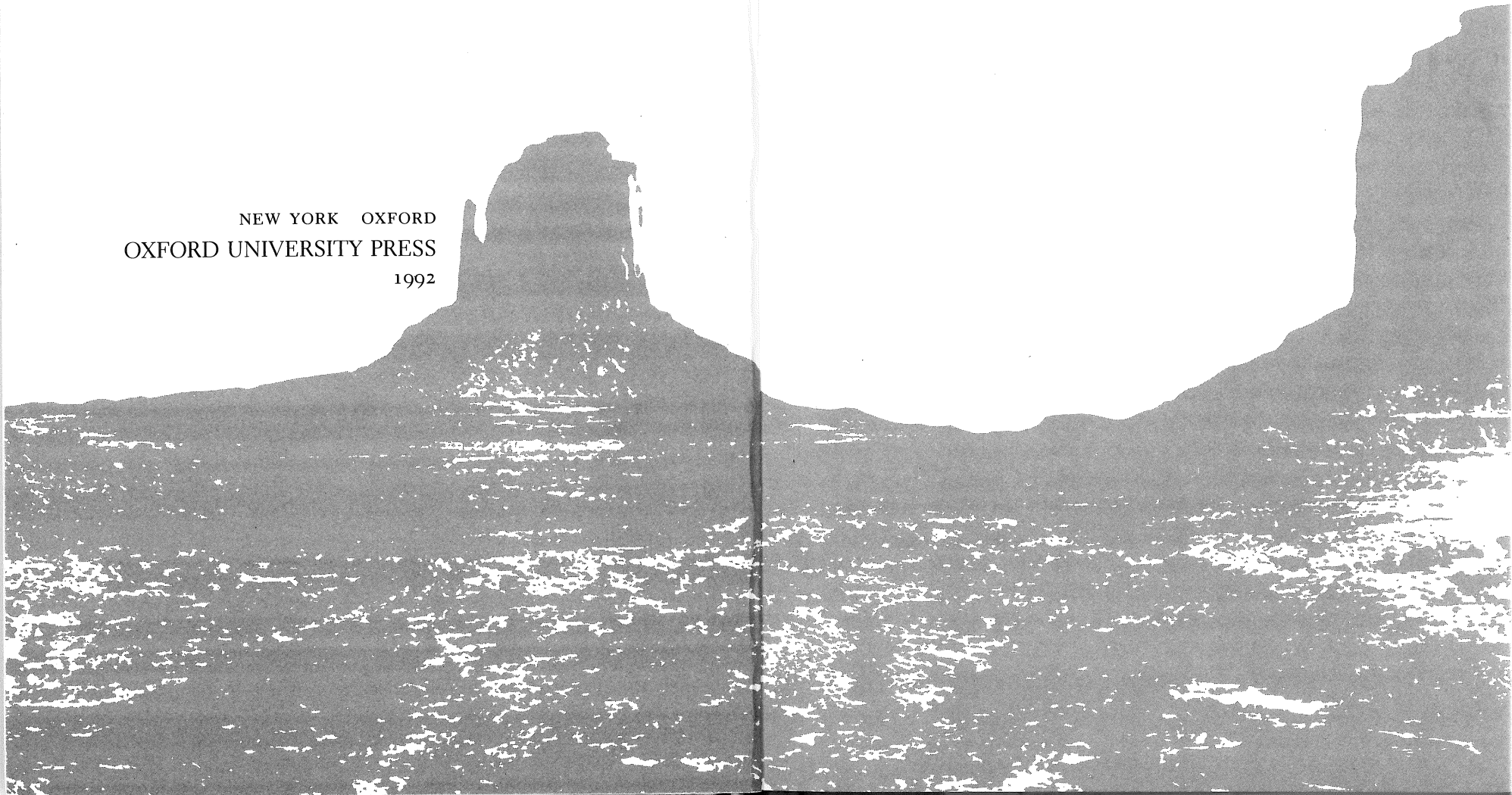


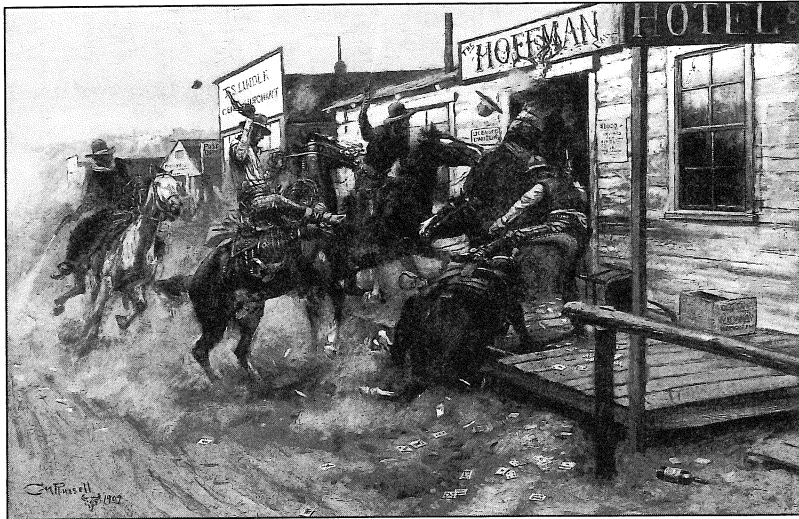
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West of Everything

The Inner Life of Westerns

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"In Without Knocking," by Charles M. Russell, 1909. (Oil on canvas).
Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (accession no. 1961.201).

Horses

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"A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty hi-ho Silver! The Lone Ranger!" These words, declaimed to the sound of the *William Tell* Overture, accompany the opening shot of "The Lone Ranger"—a close-up of a big white horse, ridden at a gallop by a masked rider. As the words "THE LONE RANGER" cover the image, we hear *bang, bang*. The camera pulls back. The Lone Ranger and Silver gallop down into a sage-dotted valley, draw up momentarily in front of a butte, wheel, then take off again, Silver's white mane and tail waving in the wind.

Now, try to imagine the same sequence without the horse . . .

Just as in "The Lone Ranger" there are certain things you take for granted, so it is in Westerns generally. You expect the sage-dotted plains, the buttes, the town with its false fronts, sandy main street, saloon, livery stable, cowboys in jeans and ten gallon hats. And horses: in town tied to the hitching rail, being ridden by a single rider outlined against the sky, pulling wobbly covered wagons, free on the prairie. In the background, in the foreground, on the margins, at the center, horses are on the screen constantly, seen in every conceivable attitude. The presence of such beings has an extraordinary influence on our experience of Westerns. The sheer energy of the posse, chasing the bandits at breakneck speed, pulling

up short, the horses' mouths foaming, bridles clanking, saddles creaking, hooves churning the sand; the fleeing villains stopping at a lookout point, wheeling around, pausing for a moment, then turning and galloping off again in a cloud of dust—these images are the heart and soul of a Western.

But though horses in Westerns are de rigueur, the characters who ride them don't pay them much attention, and as far as the critics are concerned they might as well not exist. The index to one of the most complete treatments of a corpus of Westerns ever written—Tag Gallagher's excellent *John Ford: The Man and His Films*—lists in boldface heroes, Indians, homosexuality, home, innocence, wilderness, rivers, good badmen, drunks, determinism, and destiny, but it doesn't list horses, although Ford, who made more than sixty Westerns, was almost unique in recognizing their importance; that is, he seemed to really *see* horses in a way other directors didn't. Horses, in Westerns, are precisely what meets the eye; that is, physically, visually, they are right there in front of you, but no one seems to notice them in the sense of paying them any attention. Because of this strange invisibility they are the place where everything in the genre is hidden. Besides doing all the work in a literal sense, getting the characters from place to place, pulling wagons, plowing fields, and such, they do double, triple, quadruple work in a symbolic sense. The more you look at them, the more indispensable they seem.

Ford's favorite movie, *Wagonmaster*, is an excellent place to begin looking at horses in Westerns, since it is the only Western film I know that registers consciously the lack of fit between the way characters in Westerns treat horses and the salient, dynamic presence of the animals themselves. The movie starts with a panorama full of horses and wagon wheels and dogs and men, shot against a backdrop of sheltering mountains. This long overture expressing the sweep of history and the grandeur of nature suggests that the story about to unfold should be seen in an epic context. In the first scene,

two good-natured horse traders named Sandy and Travis, surrounded by horses, talk about them purely as income producers. "The way I figure, Travis, these ponies are going to bring us thirty dollars a head." Coming after the panoramic overture, this seems a comically reductive way to talk. We get the impression of men who are part of something much larger than they are—the settling of the West, the ongoing life of nature—of which they haven't the remotest conception.

In the next scene Travis sells a horse to the town marshal, describing him in a formulaic singsong way—"sound and strong, eye, wind and limb"—that seems to have nothing to do with the horse we actually see. In the following scene, where the supposedly gentle horse lands the marshal in the dust, the horse's bravura performance is ironically juxtaposed to the counting out of money. Again, the human characters seem to have tunnel vision. The bucking bronco is only money to them, a clever bargain ("eight, nine, ten"), but the camera sees it as animal energy, an unquenchable life force fighting back.

In the last scene in the sequence, some Mormons who have just arrived in town offer to buy Travis and Sandy's horses at the asking price—fifty dollars a head—with an extra hundred thrown in if they'll lead the Mormon wagon train to the San Juan Valley. The entire negotiation takes place in front of a corral fence, behind which the remuda of horses moves restlessly. Though a liminal element only, the horses seem more strongly present than ever. In the glimpses we catch of them milling around tumultuously, their piercing whinnies breaking into the conversation, in the tossing of a mane and the flash of an eye, their dust and commotion, they exert pressure on the foregrounded action, interrupting it, energizing it, surrounding it in a way that doesn't force us to note them consciously but affects our senses constantly as we watch the scene. Ford uses this technique throughout the movie. Later on, when Travis proposes marriage to a

woman while they walk along next to his horse, the screen is divided into three parts: the horse's head, Travis, and the woman. While the horse is silent, he is *socially* present throughout, an active listener and participant in the action.

The ironic distance Ford opens up between horses as he makes us see them, and horses as the characters see them, replicates the irony of the title *Wagonmaster*. Travis, it turns out, doesn't really know the way to the San Juan Valley, and the movie makes it clear how little he, or any single person, has mastery over wagons, horses, rivers, people, or anything. Horses, in fact, not only come to symbolize the epic scope of the enterprise, they also begin to stand for something larger even than the historical movement the film commemorates. Midway through the story, as the Mormons are making their way across another river, and one wagon's team is being urged up the farther bank by a mounted horseman, a foal appears running free ahead of the horses in harness, up the bank and out of sight into the trees. The same footage appears as the closing shot of the movie, transforming the sense of finality conveyed by the Mormons' arrival in the San Juan Valley into a sense of continuing process. The foal, running on ahead of the rest and disappearing off the screen, is ongoing life, pressing forward into the future, innocent and free, free from wagons, free from masters, free from the movie itself.

The paradox of horses in Western movies is this: you can't have a Western without them, visually they are everywhere, and symbolically they carry a tremendous payload, but the mind doesn't count them in its inventory or give them any more of the time of day than the characters in *Wagonmaster* do. When we look at a picture on the screen consisting of men and horses, we never think about whether the horses are tired, or want to be galloping after the villains, or, if asked, would choose to pull covered wagons across the plains. When we look at the picture, though horses may affect our reactions subliminally, on a conscious level we think only about the men.

So the question is, What are horses *doing* in Westerns? Their presence seems natural to us, but for most of the nineteenth century horses figured very little in popular fiction. Their gradual appearance, first in dime novels, then in major best-sellers and in films at the beginning of the twentieth century coincides with the disappearance of horses from daily life, where they were used as work animals and as a means of transportation. This suggests that horses fulfill a longing for a different kind of existence. Antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological, they stand for an existence without cars and telephones and electricity. But you could have narratives set on farms or in small towns that embraced the simple life without filling them full of horses. Why horses in particular? And why only in certain forms? It isn't the farm horse primarily that we associate with Westerns, or the horse as show animal; it is horses ridden by men, charging into town, charging out of town, outlined on high mesas looking into the distance, coming at you at a gallop pulling a fleeing stagecoach, riding herd on the dogies as they move into the draw, or running free and wild.

Horses reach back to something in the past, in the 1870s, '80s, and '90s after the Civil War. But what they reach back for is not just some generalized notion of rural existence. Horses are something people have close physical contact with, something they touch, press against with their bodies. Something that is alive, first of all, something big, powerful, and fast-moving. Something not human but not beyond human control, dangerous, even potentially lethal, but ductile to the human will.

The key to what horses represent in Westerns is something very simple. It is the fact that the body of the horse stands beneath the body of the rider, between the human being and the earth. Horses express a need for connection to nature, to the wild. But it is nature in a particular form. Not songbirds or running brooks or violets by mossy stones, but power, motion, size, strength, brought under human control and in touch with the human body. It is the physical existence of horses above all that makes them indispensable in West-

erns. Their dynamic material presence, their energy and corporeality call out to the bodies of the viewers, to our bodies. Film after film begins with the tiny figures of horsemen outlined against the horizon, growing larger as they move nearer the camera, until finally you can hear their hoofbeats, see the whites of their eyes, be excited by their mass and motion. Right up to the camera they come so we can vicariously be in contact with their flesh, feel their breath, sense their strength and stamina, absorb the flow of force. Horses are there to galvanize us. More than any other single element in the genre, they symbolize the desire to recuperate some lost connection to life.



This connection can be dangerous. Of all Western writers, Zane Grey felt the apocalyptic possibilities of nature most profoundly. He captures the perilous, ecstatic, and godlike eruptions of natural force in spectacular prose. What men cannot do in Grey, horses and landscape will; the boundaries between his characters and their surroundings—animal, vegetable, and mineral—continually break down, and everything becomes part of a vortex of live energy coursing indiscriminately through the cosmos. At the end of a novel about horses called *Wildfire*, the hero rides a horse named Wildfire through a forest fire that has gone out of control. He is trying to save the girl he loves, who is strapped naked to the back of another horse. The wildfire, “freed from the bowels of the earth, tremendous, devouring,” is the analogue of the hero’s own passion. “The intense and abnormal rider’s passion . . . dammed up, but never fully controlled, burst within him, and suddenly he awoke to a wild and terrible violence of heart and soul. He had accepted death; he had no fear. All that he wanted to do, the last thing he wanted to do, was to ride down the King and kill Lucy mercifully.” In this climactic scene, where everything is heated to the melting point, the hero lusts to kill what he loves.

Love and murder are intermingled and confused, just as the forest fire (wildfire) and the horse (Wildfire) and human passion (wildfire) have blended indistinguishably.

The energy horses represent is destructive and creative. Though in *Wildfire* both horses and human beings survive the cataclysmic eruption, in other incidents in Grey’s work, such as the great “Wrangle’s Race Run” chapter of *Riders of the Purple Sage*, the climatic ride of a heroic horse ends in death. It’s not surprising that in most Westerns the perilous, sexually charged, rapturous potentiality of horses which Grey so well understood is kept in abeyance. Too apocalyptic, too threatening to our everyday categories of being and becoming, the volcanic force is typically rationed and controlled—in chase scenes, in episodes of horse breaking, and in occasional glimpses of bands of wild horses running free. Most of the time, the Western prefers its horses in manageable form, the most manageable being that exemplified in the opening of “The Guns of Will Sonnett,” a fifties serial still shown sometimes on late-night TV.

It begins with an old man and a young boy ambling along on their horses. It’s a sunny day, the sky is blue, the hills are a warm brown, and these two—four, really, because the horses are just as much a part of the scene as the men are—are just taking their time. The easygoing reciprocity between them, communicated not through language but through relaxed and rhythmical movements as horse and rider amble comfortably along, epitomizes, from a human point of view, the right relation of creatures to one another. The relation the man and horse embody is echoed in the sociableness and tacit trust between the friends (in this case grandfather and grandson), a relationship of mutual regard, mutual knowledge, and mutual acceptance. The Will Sonnett opener represents the ideal version of the horse-human relation (from the human point of view): men, animals, and landscape constituting a sort of peaceable kingdom.

In *Monte Walsh* (1970), a film starring Lee Marvin and Jack Palance, the horse takes over the role of human companionship

altogether in a closing scene that wittily echoes the beginning of the story. At the opening, the hero and his pal come across a wolf on the prairie, and the following dialogue ensues:

MONTE (*referring to the wolf-pelt*) How nice, another five dollars. Did
WALSH I ever tell you about Big Joe Amati?

PAL No.

MONTE Well, he used to wrestle wolves. Well, I never seen him do it, but I heard tell and I always wondered how you would wrestle a wolf.

PAL What you waitin' for?

MONTE I wonder how you *would* wrestle a wolf.

PAL Jesus. (*He takes his gun and shoots the wolf.*)

In the film's closing scene, after the hero has lost his lover and his pal, he is riding across the prairie by himself and comes upon a wolf. He dismounts, and the following dialogue ensues:

MONTE Did I ever tell you about Big Joe Amati? (*Horse looks around.*)

HORSE Neigh.

MONTE Well, he used to wrestle these. Well, I never seen him do it but I heard tell, and I know I . . . (*Horse looks around.*)

MONTE I always wondered how you would wrestle a wolf.

HORSE Neigh.

MONTE Well, we got better things to do than shoot wolves. (*Walks off, leading his horse into the brush.*) Now, let me tell you about Big Joe Amati. This boy was big. Now he come up around Denver way. . . .

Cut. End of film.

Monte Walsh's horse winds up taking the place of friend and lover, a situation the character accepts with wry humor and a certain self-satisfied resignation. As helpmeet and companion, the horse evokes from the hero sociable and nurturing behavior, perhaps because he is a safe repository for it. It is here, in the society of man and horse, that the problems women and language pose for the Western hero come closest to being solved. Free from emotional

entanglements, yet in touch with a sentient being, the hero can commune with the world and feel his kinship with it by means of a relationship that is steady, rewarding, and to a certain degree mutual. The horse as friend and helpmeet, a pal through thick and thin, fulfills a dream of companionship as deep as the longing for wild abandon that Zane Grey's horses answer.

The sense of comradeship and peaceful coexistence between man and horse should, perhaps, modify our sense of the endings of many Westerns. When the hero has to leave town at the end of the story and gets back on his horse and rides into the desert, he is not unaccommodated. The saddle he sits on is large and comfortable, and usually ornamented; to it are appended all sorts of gear—canteens, rifles, ropes, knives, bags of food, blankets, articles of clothing. There is a homeyness about all this equipment, so neatly stowed. The saddle leather creaks companionably, the bridle and the spurs jingle. The clip-clop of the hooves beat out a pleasant rhythm. The horse is the hero's home on the range, a mobile home to be sure, but better than a real house or a real trailer because it is alive, someone to talk to, to count on when the going gets tough. When he leaves the girl at the end of the movie, the hero isn't going off into the wild blue yonder all by himself; he is coming home to his horse, and together they are going to seek new adventures.

Yet against all this, and at the same time bound up with it, runs another set toward horses in Western films. It is only after something has been done to them that horses become the benign substitutes for culture and society that Western films imagine. The desire to curb the horse and make it submit to human requirements is as important to Westerns as the desire for merger or mutuality. Horses do not start out as pals; they have to be forced into it.



Here are two stories Westerns tell about this process. In the first television episode of "The Lone Ranger," the Lone Ranger, left for dead by bandits who have killed all the other men in his party, is found by Tonto, who nurses him back to life in a cave with running water. It takes three days. After this, the Lone Ranger and Tonto are friends for life, Tonto promising, like the biblical Ruth, to go where the Lone Ranger goes. In the second episode, which mirrors the first remarkably, the hero sets out to find himself a horse. He directs Tonto to accompany him to Wild Horse Valley, where they find a beautiful white stallion wounded and lying on the ground, about to be gored to death by a buffalo. While Tonto shoots the buffalo, the Lone Ranger moves to the horse's side and decides he will try to save him. He and Tonto nurse him, as the voice-over says, "as best they can," and after a few days the horse seems better. "Can the wild stallion rise?" asks the voice-over. "Gently the masked man coaxes the horse." Soon the Lone Ranger and the horse become inseparable.

This scene of rescue mirrors still another, shown in flashback, in which the Lone Ranger, as a young man, had come upon an Indian boy, left to die by the marauders who had killed his family. He saves the boy, who would, of course, grow up to be Tonto and save his life in turn.

So the rescue of the white stallion has a long pedigree. The horse enters the story in the same way humans do. They all go through a process of death and rebirth that implies an equality among them, as well as relations of mutual nurturance and support. But just as the Lone Ranger and Tonto do not end up as equals, although each saves the other, so the horse and his rescuer are not equals either. When the stallion is on his feet and has cantered off a little distance, the Lone Ranger says, "I'd like that horse more than anything in the world. But if he wants to go, he should be free." The emphasis here falls on the hero's liberality: he will not possess the stallion against his will. But it

also reveals the man's assumption that when a horse is owned by a man, the horse gives up his freedom.

The stallion, of course, *chooses* to do just that. As Tonto voluntarily becomes the Lone Ranger's servant (he doesn't use the word, of course), so the horse becomes his servant, too, though again the word is different. The Lone Ranger says, "We're going to be pals, aren't we, Silver?" But Silver figures chiefly as a means of transportation.

The contradiction between the Lone Ranger's actual relationship to Silver (master, owner, rider) and the only one that is acknowledged explicitly (pal) is striking. After the Lone Ranger puts a saddle on Silver, "and for the first time in his life, Silver bears weight on his back," there's a shot of the Lone Ranger riding around on Silver, and the voice-over declares portentously: "Here is no conflict between animal and master; here instead is a partnership between horse and rider. The Lone Ranger and Silver accept each other as equals."

The Lone Ranger's gentleness with Silver betokens a consideration that is real, just as real as the desire expressed in the voice-over's speech for reciprocity with horses, closeness, equality. But when a man is literally in the saddle and the other animal is underneath bearing the weight, that is not a relationship among equals. When one being holds the reins attached to a bit in the other being's mouth, when the rider wears spurs that are meant to gore the sides of the mount to urge him to go faster, when the rider gives the commands and the horse carries them out, when the rider *owns* the horse, that is not a relationship among equals. The piece of dialogue that brings the "finding of Silver" abruptly to a close unintentionally dramatizes what will become the standard position of horses in this serial, as in Westerns generally: they are a background condition.

LONE RANGER He's a beauty, Tonto, a dream horse if I ever rode one.

TONTO Him and Scout good friends.

LONE RANGER Yes, they'll do a lot of riding side by side.
 TONTO We ride after Cavendish gang now?

Like a dream house, a dream horse provides a setting for the hero, an appropriate complement to his appearance. (Silver's white coat and black saddle and bridle rhyme visually with the Lone Ranger's black mask and white hat.) But once the horse is possessed, most of the dream element disappears. With amazing rapidity, the next dream takes its place. "We ride after Cavendish gang now?" Tonto asks impatiently. And the Lone Ranger sets out to conquer the Cavendish gang, forgetting all about Silver, although of course he's riding on Silver's back.

It's not that the Lone Ranger doesn't love Silver; it's not that the Ranger isn't Silver's friend. It's that he can switch at will from mate to master while Silver has no choice in the matter; Silver's unacknowledged slide from pal to vehicle of transportation doesn't bother anybody but him.

Children's serials, as you might expect, emphasize the hoped for mutuality of the horse-rider arrangement: Silver, like Tom Mix's Tony ("the smartest horse in the movies") and Roy Rogers' Trigger, is a magical friend, there in time of need, always doing his master's bidding, but disappearing like a genie back into a bottle when more exciting business calls. In adult Westerns it is different. The horse is not a friend won through nurture and gentle suasion, but an occasion for proving the hero's superior strength and cunning. Where some television shows and most B Westerns (low-budget movies made in a few days for Saturday-afternoon viewing) imagine a peaceable kingdom where all beings gratefully accept their roles after a few bad characters have been expelled, A Westerns posit a kingdom of force and conflict, where humans and animals, men and women, bosses and underlings vie for dominance and define themselves by competing with each other.

This is the world depicted in *The Big Country*, when the well-

dressed, well-spoken, well-mannered Jim McKay (played by Gregory Peck) arrives at his fiancée's ranch. He lets some rowdies rough him up when he and his fiancée are driving home from the station; he refuses to fight the foreman (played by Charlton Heston) who has eyes for his girl. And when the stable hands arrange for him to ride Old Thunder, a horse obviously known for his ornery ways, he declines the gambit.

But when everyone leaves, McKay goes back to the barn and has the Mexican stableman (stereotypically plump and servile) lead Old Thunder into the corral. In the classic contest of wills between man and horse to see who will outlast the other, time after time the handsome McKay is thrown to the dust, and time after time he gets back on. Finally, he manages to hold his seat and in short order has Old Thunder behaving like a lamb. We breathe a sigh of relief.

The episode from *The Big Country* shows how men in Westerns use horses to prove their manhood—both in the sense of their superiority to other animals and in the sense of their difference from and superiority to women and lower-order males. The contest with Old Thunder dramatizes a fact already implicit in the horse-rider relation: it testifies to the man's dominion. The horse, like a colonized subject, makes a man a master. Its association with knight-hood, chivalric orders, lordly privilege, and high degree reinforces the image of mastery that a man on horseback represents. That image is political through and through. In the Far West, it says, every man can be a master. Every man can dominate something, be it the landscape, other human beings, an animal, or his own body. Each time the figure of a horseman appears against the horizon, it celebrates the possibility of mastery, of self, of others, of the land, of circumstance.

Yet it isn't that simple. Though the A Western glories in the hero's power over nature and other men, it frequently does so with a kind of bitter regret, almost perversely forcing itself to count the cost of victory. Every time a horse is broken, an outlaw killed, a homestead protected, that much of the West disap-

pears. The emotion that the taming of horses leaves behind is not so much triumph as nostalgia. Nostalgia for the Wild West, for the untamed body, for the spirit and energy conveyed by the presence of horses. In Dalton Trumbo's great screenplay for *Loneley Are the Brave*, that nostalgia becomes the Western's explicit theme.

From the very beginning, when the camera discovers the hero (Kirk Douglas) napping on the prairie with his horse, the movie equates the hero with his horse and both with everything the bureaucratic, machine-run, rule-bound modern world would deprive them of—spontaneity, beauty, freedom from rules and routines, and the right to enjoy life. Once, when he is being chased by the police, the hero has a chance to get away if he is willing to abandon his horse, Whiskey. At first, he is willing, but almost immediately changes his mind and can't go through with it, for Whiskey has been his only companion throughout his attempt to escape the vengeful representatives of a jail-like society who are pursuing him; he talks to Whiskey all the time, and as the story progresses, she grows more and more appealing. In the final scene their identification is complete. The cowboy and his horse, who have almost made it to the border despite the mechanized police effort, are hit by a truck as they cross a highway in a midnight rainstorm. As Kirk Douglas looks pathetically up into the camera, his rain-wet face like a baby's in its innocence and bewilderment, he resembles nothing so much as Whiskey—who has already been shot—beautiful, innocent, uncomprehending flesh struck down by a machine.

The physical beauty of the horse and its rider sets them apart from the other characters in the film—policemen, jail guards, sheriffs—whose uniforms reflect the regimented lives they (and the audience) lead. A beautiful palomino, sleek and plump like Kirk Douglas himself, and very frisky—Whiskey is deliberately played off against the sheriff's dog, a poor-looking mutt who pisses on the same spot at the same time every day. The human characters, of

course, are played off against the hero. When the driver of the fatal truck, which was carrying toilet seats, says to a policeman on the scene, "He's not going to die, is he?" the policeman replies, "How should I know, I've got a report to write." In their comeliness and grace Kirk Douglas and Whiskey incarnate all that is desirable and precious about living things. Their appeal is to the essential blamelessness and vulnerability of the body and to its inborn desire for pleasure and freedom.

The painfulness of watching this film brings to the surface an element of grief and suffering not at all foreign to Western filmmaking. The movie catches the audience in an emotional double bind, filling us with longing for a mode of life that it then declares extinct before our very eyes. It makes us love the hero and his horse and at the same time shows us that we represent the civilization that has killed them. This double bind works even more clearly in stories that dispense with the human protagonist altogether and give us only the horse to identify with.

In *The Mustangs* (1934), J. Frank Dobie tells the story of Starface, a bay stallion with a white star-shaped patch on his forehead, who regularly raided the ranches for mares to add to his band. Though he had been shot at hundreds of times, "the boldest gallant and the most magnificent thief that the Cimarron ranges had ever known," Starface had never allowed men to get close enough even to nick him with a bullet. Finally, the ranchers hire four cowboys with the best horses in the country, ordering them not to come home until they have captured the stallion or killed him. The men chase Starface for four days until, at dawn on the fifth day, they drive him into a canyon that ends in a bluff high over the Cimarron River. Dobie writes:

As the mustang ascended into a patch of sunshine allowed by a break in the walls on the opposite side of the canyon and they could see the sheen of light on his muscles, one of them called out, "God, look at the King of the horse world!"

... Towering above the bench [where Starface stood] was a caprock,

without a seam or a slope in its face. . . . As the leading rider emerged to the level, he saw Starface make his last dash.

He was headed for the open end of the bench. At the brink he gathered his feet as if to vault the Cimarron itself, and then, without halting a second, he sprang into space. For a flash of time, without tumbling, he remained stretched out, terror in his streaming mane and tail, the madness of ultimate defiance in his eyes. With him it was truly "Give me Liberty or give me Death." (185-86)

The story makes us feel the contradiction horses in Westerns embody by putting us in an intolerable position: up there on the cliff with Starface, with nowhere to go but over the edge or into the hands of the hired *mesteñeros*. We must either commit suicide along with the horse or draw back at the last minute and by default be associated with the men who have caused his death. In effect, we are the monsters, the settlers, the conquerors who have tamed and destroyed the wilderness; but we are also the horse up there on the ledge, desperate to be free.

Lonely Are the Brave traps us in the same dilemma. Either we take the plunge across the midnight highway, where we know the semi is going to hit us, or we side with the men in the helicopters, with their two-way radios, their badges, and their forms to fill out. By offering dead-end alternatives in both directions, the nostalgic narrative visits on the reader/viewer the same cruelty it visits on the protagonist. Although this story longs for a different world from the one it depicts, it doesn't offer us that world experientially, but is complicit with the regime of pain it criticizes by giving pain itself.



The extent to which the Western is involved with pain has not been commented on by critics, perhaps because the critics themselves are so habituated to this kind of pain that they just don't notice it. But the genre is riddled with pain. *Lonely Are the Brave* puts the

audience through a psychological anguish which is the counterpart of the physical suffering the Western regularly visits on its heroes. In *One-Eyed Jacks* (1960) Marlon Brando's hand is pounded to a pulp by another man's pistol butt. In *Warlock* Richard Widmark has his hand pinned to a table by a knife which is then pulled through it. In *High Plains Drifter* Clint Eastwood is whipped to death on Main Street, in a lengthy flashback the movie cuts to several times. In *Lonely Are the Brave* Kirk Douglas is beaten up three times before he starts his desperate flight from his motorized pursuers. Gary Cooper, in *High Noon*, has to slug it out at length with a man half his age before facing Frank Miller and his gang. And so on. The physical punishment heroes take is not incidental to their role; it is constitutive of it. Prolonged and deliberate laceration of the flesh, endured without complaint, is a sine qua non of masculine achievement. It indicates the control the man can exercise over his body and his feelings. It is the human counterpart of horse breaking, only what is being broken is not the horse's will but the hero's natural emotions. The hero beats himself into submission in the same way he subdues the animal.

A movie not coincidentally entitled *A Man Called Horse* (1969) celebrates just such a triumph of the will in a way that emphasizes its most negative aspects. The hero, played by Richard Harris, a wealthy Englishman who has bought his title and is bored with life, has "come halfway round the world just to shoot another kind of bird." Captured by Sioux Indians and given to the chief's mother as a servant, he is subjected to physical abuse and social humiliation, forced to fetch wood and do other menial tasks. In protest, he announces loudly to his captors: "I AM NOT A HORSE. I AM A MAN." The Indians, naturally, call him "Horse" from then on.

The rest of the movie is about how Horse finds the meaning of life by proving his manhood to the Indians. He does this first by killing two Shoshone braves who have happened onto a berrying expedition (Horse has been set this low-level task along with the

squaws), counting coup in the Indian manner by scalping them, which disgusts him but delights his captors. He has now earned the right to marry an Indian woman who has been making eyes at him, the sister of Yellow Hand (she has no name of her own). But first he must prove that he is a warrior by undergoing an ordeal. Horse declares: "I want to prove my courage. To withstand all tests of pain."

The ordeal is the climax of the movie. After standing in the blinding-hot sun all day, Horse is hung from a tent pole by the sinews of his chest, the whole tribe looking on; after enduring this silently for a long time, he is cut down and allowed to marry the girl. The point of the movie seems to be that the white man is more of a man than any of the Indians and that what makes him so is his ability to stand pain: first the pain of maltreatment and humiliation, and then the pain of the ritual ordeal. When the hero says in the beginning, "I am not a horse, I am a man," it implies that horses are fit recipients for the maltreatment he is suffering but humans are not. Yet, in order to prove that he is a man, he allows his body to be tortured, treating it as if it were a horse. The homology the film establishes—will is to body as man is to horse—is present in a less explicit form in all Western novels and films, underwriting the ethos of domination the horse-rider relationship exemplifies.

The tests of pain that heroes withstand, and the beatings and the shootings they deal out, are more or less consciously registered by the film and by the audience. But there is another level of pain recurrent in Westerns that is not consciously recognized and for that reason is even more symptomatic. I mean the pain meted out to horses. Horses are regularly whipped by stage drivers and wagoners, forced up steep hills and down sharp ravines, driven through flooding rivers and into quagmires. They pull heavy loads in the hot sun. They are spurred and whipped by posses and escaping bandits, shot at by practically everyone—thieves, murderers, good guys, cavalry, Indians. They are frequently wounded and killed.

They are forced to jump through the plate-glass windows of banks, ridden into churches and courthouses, across wooden sidewalks, and through burning buildings. They are caught in the middle of gunfights and ridden into barren places where they must go without water or food or shelter. What horses endure in Westerns is very much like what heroes endure, except that they aren't acting voluntarily and can't defend themselves or run away.

Like the messages said to appear in television advertisements that flash before the eye so quickly you can't actually see them but absorb them without knowing it, the suffering of horses is transmitted subliminally. Animal pain, there on the screen but not consciously apprehended, imprints itself on the viewer's psychic retina in scene after scene. The effect is inchoate, a sense of something bad going on just out of range, something that shouldn't happen but that can't be attended to because other much more important events (what is happening to the hero) are occurring at the same time. The unacknowledged abuse of horses injects an element of violence into scenes where nothing else is happening, as a way of filling in the gaps between acts of violence involving humans. This persistent borderline cruelty to horses is not an epiphenomenon but is integral to the work Westerns do.

The cruelty meted out to horses is an extension of the cruelty meted out to men's bodies and emotions; the pain horses endure is an analogue of the pain the hero inflicts on himself. His impassivity, his hyperbolically reductive language ("nope," "yup"), the stillness of his body, his studied nonreaction to provocation, his poker face—these are the external signs of the ruthless suppression of feeling that marks him as "strong." The continual control he exercises over himself emotionally prepares us and him for the monumental self-discipline he will have to exert in the climactic ordeal, which will subject his body to prolonged physical suffering. The abuse of horses is part of a sadomasochistic impulse central to Westerns which aims at the successful domination of the emotions, of the fleshly mortal part of the self, and of the material world outside the body.



Frederic Remington, American, 1861–1909, “The Bronco Buster,” cast by the Roman Bronze Works, New York, New York, bronze, modelled 1909, cast 1912, ht.: 82.6 cm. 3/4 front view.
Gift of Burr L. Robbins, 1959. 214. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson, © 1991 The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

That part of the self experienced as mortal, the body and its feelings, has already been expelled symbolically from the main action of the Western plot with the expulsion of women. In the constant spectacle of the horse's submission to human control, it continues to be manipulated, curbed, punished, and sometimes killed before our eyes.