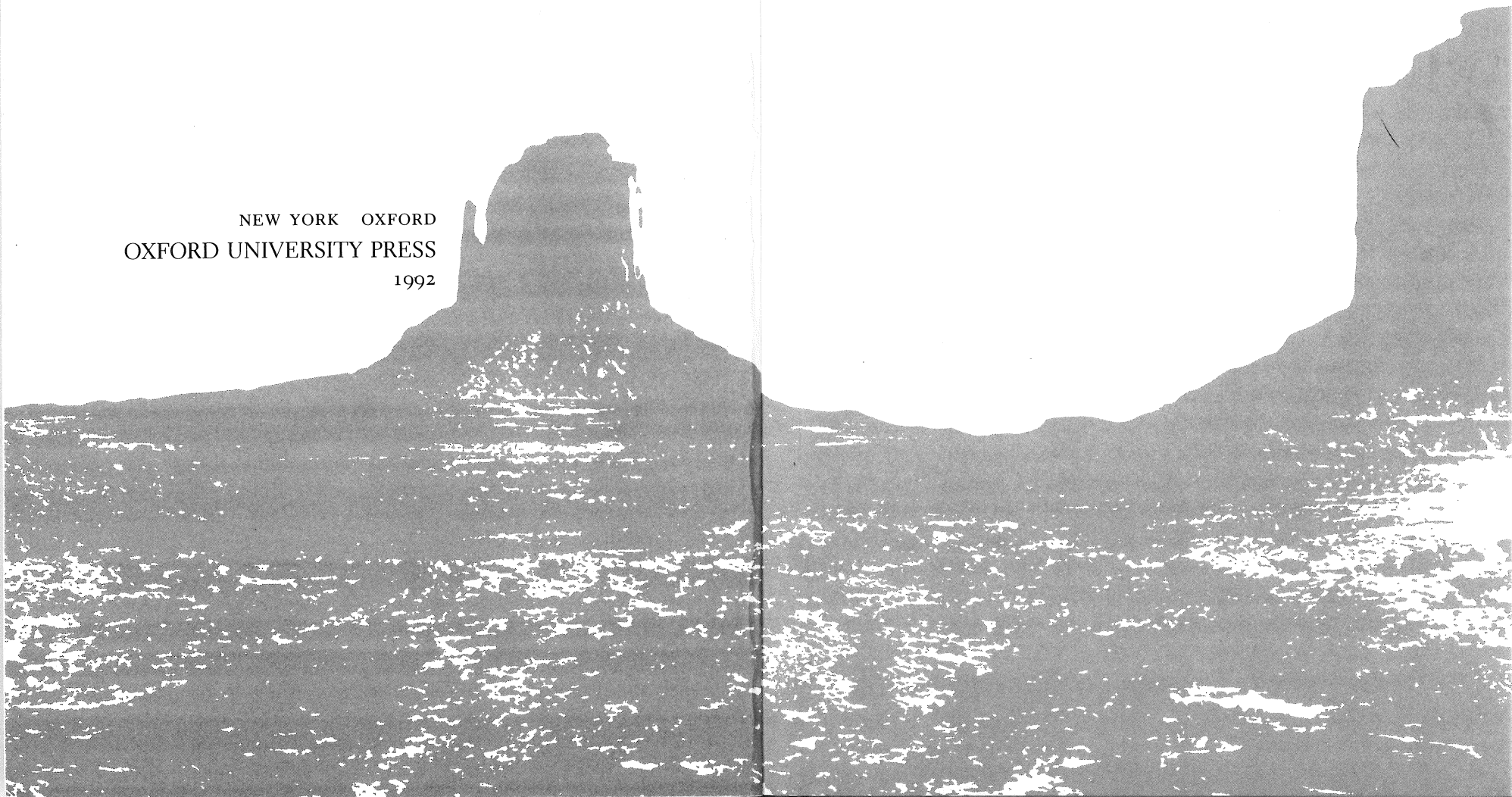


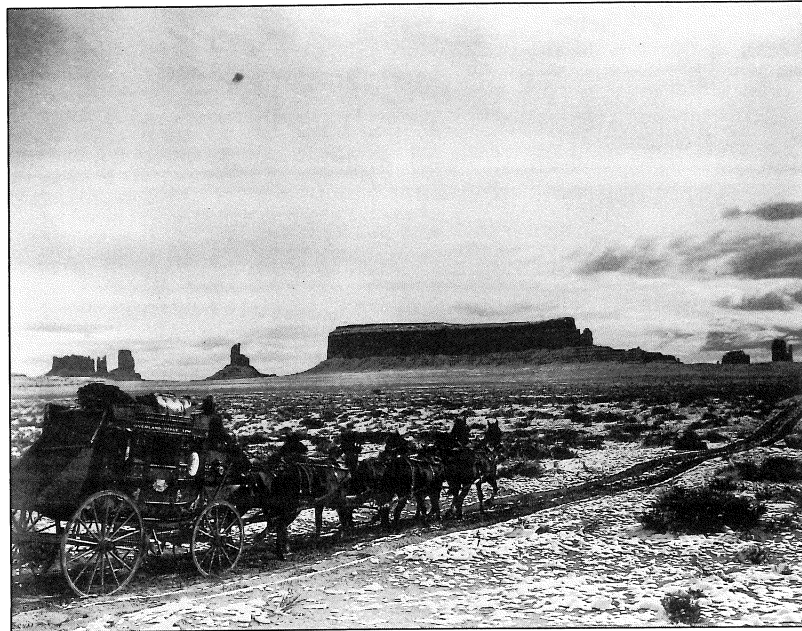
JANE TOMPKINS

West of Everything

The Inner Life of Westerns

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Still from *Stagecoach* (United Artists, 1939), taken in Monument Valley, Utah.
 Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

Landscape

3

Truly Mazzini was right when he said that no appeal is so powerful as the call: Come, and suffer.

Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*

The typical Western movie opens with a landscape shot:

Desert, with butte, two riders galloping toward camera.

Stagecoach (1939)

Cattle on a trail, flat country.

Texas (1941)

Landscape with butte, a wagon train, cattle.

My Darling Clementine (1946)

Desert with wagon train, flat country, a few hills.

Red River (1948)

Flat foreground, river, large mesa on the opposite shore.

Rio Grande (1950)

Desert landscape framed by the doorway of house. Song:

“What makes a man to wander, what makes a man to roam,
 what makes a man to wander, and turn his back on home?”

The Searchers (1956)

Blank horizon, prairie, sky.

Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957)

Flat desert, lone tree.

Lonely Are the Brave (1962)

Total blank, misty.

High Plains Drifter (1973)

In the beginning, say these shots, was the earth, and the earth was desert. It was here first, before anything. And the story you are about to see goes back to the beginning of things, starts, literally, from the ground up. In the instant before the human figure appears we have the sense of being present at a moment before time began. All there is is space, pure and absolute, materialized in the desert landscape. "A world of crystal light [as it says in *The Virginian*], a land without evil, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis."

The Western landscape reflects the Old Testament sense of the world at creation rather than the New Testament sense, for the material world is the subject of the Genesis creation story:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good. (Gen. I: 1-5)

God creates the heaven and the earth and then the light, the constituent elements of the Western landscape. In the Western as in Genesis, the physical world comes first. The only difference is that instead of being created by God, it is God.

It is the Alpha and the Omega. If the opening shot recalls the earth at creation—solids rising from a level plain bathed in a pristine light—it foreshadows the end of things as well. The desert is the landscape of death. In *High Plains Drifter*, for example, the protagonist, who is in fact dead, appears from out of a misty blank in an opening shot that blends sky and earth into an originary unity

and, when his murderous work is done, rides back into the same mysterious nothingness, and there's a cut to his tombstone.

But in between the apocalyptic moments of creation and dissolution the landscape sends a multitude of other messages, messages that seem as true and incontrovertible as the mountains and plains. It is the genius of the Western that it seems to make the land speak for itself. So that when we read the line from Louis L'Amour's *Heller with a Gun*—"it was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways"—we forget that this truth, so transparently self-evident, was propounded by a man sitting at a typewriter.



The land revealed on the opening pages or in the opening shot of a Western is a land defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all, absence of water and shade. This description, from L'Amour's *Hondo*, is typical:

It was hot. A few lost, cotton-ball bunches of cloud drifted in a brassy sky, leaving rare islands of shadow upon the desert's face.

Nothing moved. It was a far, lost land, a land of beige-gray silences and distance where the eye reached out farther and farther to lose itself finally against the sky, and where the only movement was the lazy swing of a remote buzzard. (2)

It is an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime. This code of asceticism founds our experience of Western stories. The landscape challenges the body to endure hardship—that is its fundamental message at the physical level. It says, This is a hard place to be; you will have to do without here. Its spiritual message is the same: come, and suffer.

The appeal of the desert lies partly in its promise of pain, an invitation that is irresistible, as Charles Sheldon suggested, because it awakens a desire for spiritual prowess, some unearthly glory earned through long-continued discipline, self-sacrifice, submission to a supernal power. Men may dominate or simply ignore women in Westerns, they may break horses and drive cattle, kill game and kick dogs and beat one another into a pulp, but they never lord it over nature. Nature is the one transcendent thing, the one thing larger than man (and it is constantly portrayed as immense), the ideal toward which human nature strives. Not *imitatio Christi* but *imitatio naturae*. What is imitated is a physical thing, not a spiritual ideal; a solid state of being, not a process of becoming; a material entity, not a person; a condition of objecthood, not a form of consciousness. The landscape's final invitation—merger—promises complete materialization. Meanwhile, the qualities that nature implicitly possesses—power, endurance, rugged majesty—are the ones that men desire while they live.

And so men imitate the land in Westerns; they try to look as much like nature as possible. Everything blends imperceptibly into the desert.

He wore nothing that gleamed. The lineback's dun color shaded into the desert as did his own clothing.

[His face] had all the characteristics of the range rider's—the leanness, the red burn of the sun, the set changelessness that came from years of silence and solitude.

He was a big man, wide-shouldered, with the lean hardboned face of the desert rider. There was no softness in him. His toughness was ingrained and deep.

He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it dusily.

These quotations, from *Hondo*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Hondo*, and *The Virginian*, respectively, all describe the same man, a man

whose hardness is one with the hardness of nature. L'Amour writes in the foreword to *Hondo* that his hero was a man "bleak as the land over which he rode." The cover of *Heller with a Gun* reads: "He was as merciless as the frontier that bred him." The qualities needed to survive on the land are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, mercilessness. And they are regarded not only as necessary to survival but as the acme of human moral perfection. To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving. The ethical system the Western proposes, which vindicates conflict, violence, and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on top with everyone else in descending order beneath—this code and this hierarchy never appear to reflect the interests or beliefs of any particular group, or of human beings at all, but seem to have been dictated primordially by nature itself.

For the setting by its hardness and austerity seems to have selected its heroes from among strong men in the prime of life, people who have a certain build, complexion, facial type, carriage, gesture, and demeanor; who dress a certain way, carry certain accoutrements, have few or no social ties, are expert at certain skills (riding, tracking, roping, fistfighting, shooting) and terrible at others (dancing, talking to ladies). And because the people who exhibit these traits in Westerns are invariably white, male, and Anglo-Saxon, the Western naturalizes a certain racial, gender, and ethnic type as hero. There is no need to say that men are superior to women, Anglos to Mexicans, white men to black; the scene has already said it.

Nature makes it obvious, even to the most benighted, who her chosen are; the sage-dotted plains, the buttes, the infinite sky tell more plainly than any words what is necessary in a man. The landscape establishes by contrast an image of the corrupt, effete life that the genre never tires of criticizing—the fancy words and pretty actions of the drawing room, elegant clothes, foreign accents, dusky complexions, subservient manners, of women, Easterners, and non-white males. We know that the people who get off the stage wearing

death, that physical stamina and strength are the sine qua non of personal distinction, that matter and physical force are the substance of ultimate reality, and that sensory experience, the history of the body's contact with things, is the repository of all significant knowledge. It chooses the desert because its clean, spare lines, lucid spaces, and absence of ornament bring it closer to the abstract austerities of modern architectural design than any other kind of landscape would. The Western deifies nature—the nonhuman—and yet the form of nature it chooses for the site of its worship is the one most resembling man-made space: monumental.

This architectural quality is not an accident but is integral to the way the landscape functions psychologically in Westerns. It expresses a need to be in control of one's surroundings, to dominate them; hence the denuded, absolute quality of the scene which recalls the empty canyons of city streets, blank, mute, and hostile to human purposes. At the same time the monolithic, awe-inspiring character of the landscape seems to reflect a desire for self-transcendence, an urge to join the self to something greater. In representing space that is superhuman but man-made, domineering and domineered, the Western both glorifies nature *and* suppresses it simultaneously.

Power, more than any other quality, is what is being celebrated and struggled with in these grandiose vistas. The worship of power, the desire for it, and, at the same time, an awe of it bordering on reverence and dread emanate from these panoramic, wide-angle views. There is a romance going on here. The landscape arouses the viewer's desire for, wish to identify with, an object that is overpowering and majestic, an object that draws the viewer ineluctably to itself and crushes him with the thought of its greatness and ineffability.



This, at least, is the rhetoric of the landscape Westerns revel in. It is, of course, an interpretation of nature that produces the impres-

sions I have been describing. The various kinds of hardness nature seems to inculcate in Western novels and films are projected onto the landscape by men and read back off it by them—images of the heart's desires and fears. For the desert is no more blank or empty than the northeastern forests were when the Europeans came. It is full of living things, of birds and animals, and inhabited by people. When you first come to the desert, writes John C. Van Dyke (one of the great Anglo chroniclers of the American desert, writing for others of a similar background),

you see little more than a desolate waste. . . . The vegetation you think looks like a thin covering of dry sticks. And as for the animals, the birds—the living things on the desert—they are not apparent at all. . . . Yet they are here. Even in the lava-beds where not even cactus will grow, and where to all appearance there is no life whatever, you may see tracks in the sand where quail and road-runners and linnets have been running about in search of food. There are tracks, too, of the coyote and the wild-cat—tracks following tracks. . . . (174–75)

The emptiness we see in the desert, the sense of a hostile environment, is an effect of a certain way of life and of certain desires. Western “nature” exists not in itself but through and for Eastern men's eyes.

The rhetoric of the landscape works in favor of the particular masculine ideal Westerns enforce. But it is only in the split second at the beginning, say, of *Gunfight at the OK Corral* when all you see is the line of the horizon, perfectly flat and unbroken, that the landscape really possesses the monolithic austerity I have been ascribing to it. As soon as the tiny figures of the horsemen appear, or a wagon or a wagon train, as soon as the line is broken even by sage brush or cattle or mountains, the signs of life undo the still perfection of objecthood. In fact, the land is almost never truly blank but is wrinkled and folded and written on in a variety of ways. One of the hero's chief skills is his ability to decipher it. L'Amour's heroes are constantly pausing to read “sign,” the telltale traces of animals and men, or the signals that nature leaves lying around to

point those who know in the direction of what they're looking for—water, pasture, game, a place to camp for the night.

Not only is the landscape almost never truly blank, but it is constantly changing, continually inviting the senses, stimulating feeling, perception, and thought. At any particular moment, the landscape wears an individual face with distinguishing features, which Western writers never tire of describing. They are always telling you how the sage smelled and how fast the clouds were moving and what shape the shadows had along the edge of the ravine. L'Amour in particular is captivated by the rich potential of the terrain his characters move across; the single most important relationship they have is to the land. They are in constant contact with it—thinking about it, using it, enjoying it, fearing it, seeing it, smelling it, touching it, hearing it. The rhythms of the landscape's appearance and disappearance in the hero's consciousness, the way it impinges on his mind, body, and emotions, are fundamental to the experience Western narratives provide. Feel, for example, the sensations of this passage from L'Amour's *Sackett* (1961):

We started up Coyote Creek in the late hours of the night, with stars hanging their bright lanterns over the mountains. Cap was riding point, our six pack horses trailing him, and me riding drag. A chill wind came down off the Sangre de Cristos, and somewhere out over the bottom a quail was calling.

Cap had a sour, dry-mouthed look to him. He was the kind if you got in trouble you didn't look to see if he was still with you—you knew damned well he was.

Not wishing to be seen leaving, we avoided Mora, and unless somebody was lying atop that rocky ridge near the ranch it was unlikely that we were seen.

The Mora river flowed through a narrow gap at the ranch and out into the flatlands beyond, and we had only to follow the Mora until it was joined by Coyote Creek, then turned up Coyote and across the wide valley of La Cueva.

We circled around the sleeping village of Golondrinos, and pointed

north, shivering in the morning cold. The sky was stark and clear, the ridges sharply cut against the faintly lightening sky. Grass swished about our horses' hoofs, our saddles creaked, and over at Golondrinos a dog barked inquiringly into the morning. (37–38)

Passages like this, with their continual scoping of the landscape, are the staple of Western fiction, its bread of life. The body of the land provides a field of action and a fund of sensation, and the place names (Golondrinos, Coyote Creek, Sangre de Cristos) lend historicity and romance. In this excerpt the narrator is distanced from his surroundings, relatively speaking; physical sensations are enough to situate the reader but not intense, the quail calling "somewhere out over the bottom" providing just a touch of specificity. The paragraph about Cap interrupts the geographical focus momentarily, and then the narrator's movements are recounted in summary fashion: "we avoided Mora," "turned up Coyote," "circled around the sleeping village." Still, spatial location, the lay of the land, and the body's sensations in the environment dominate, and the passage concludes characteristically in a moment of heightened awareness: a shiver in the cold, sharply outlined ridges, swishing grass, creaking saddle leather, and a dog that "barked inquiringly into the morning." The moment consists not in thought or emotion, not in action or reaction, but in the textural features of the landscape, tallied and imprinted on the senses. To feel that moment, through and through, is what people turn to Westerns for.

Later, when the hero is on the trail of someone he is searching for, the focus zooms in close:

I walked my horse across a high meadow that lay beyond the curtain of trees. The ground was nigh covered by alpine gold-flower, bright yellow, and almighty pretty to look at. And along some of the trickles running down from the melting snow a kind of primrose was growing.

The trees were mostly blue spruce, shading off into aspen and, on the high ridges above timberline, there were a few squat bristle-cone pines, gnarled from their endless war with the wind.

A couple of times I found where whoever it was I was trailing had

stopped to pick some kind of herb out of the grass, or to drink at a stream. (64-65)

This conscientious registry of the terrain, which occupies six solid pages at this point in the text, is not at all unusual. The hero moves over the land with an intensity of concentration that turns his journey into a drama of exploration. He rides through forests and into meadows, across ridges and down canyons, scales mountainsides, follows streams, pausing constantly to study the land and plot his next move. The scenery changes dramatically.

The boulders were a maze. Great slabs of rock stood on knife edges, looking like rows of broken molars, split and rotten. Without warning a canyon dropped away in front of me for maybe five hundred feet of almost sheer fall. Off to the left I could see an eyebrow of trail. (67)

With the mention of human features, eyebrow and teeth, L'Amour hints at the personhood that lurks beneath the landscape's surface. The hero and the landscape perform a pas de deux; he rides, walks, crawls, climbs across it, stops to touch, smell, listen, and scrutinize, while the land responds with an ever-changing series of vistas, challenges, clues, surprises, mysteries. Characteristically, as I've said, the landscape is the site of ordeal, proving the man as nothing else can—in *Sackett*, for instance, shortly after the passage just cited, the hero climbs the talus of a hill and then works his way up a rock chimney until he stands two thousand feet above the valley floor, as a sort of warm-up exercise. But the land doesn't just test men; it also rewards them with food, water, shelter, and, finally, rest. This passage from L'Amour's *Silver Canyon* (1956) is typical:

Behind me the Sweet Alice Hills lifted their rough shoulders, all of a thousand feet higher than the spring where I was camped. . . . The sun was setting over the Blue Mountains and, hunkered down over a tiny fire, I prepared my supper, worried and on edge because of all that might be happening.

Yet, as the evening drew on, my anxiety left me. The hills were silent and dark. There was only a faint trickling of water from the spring, and the comfortable, quieting sound of my horse cropping grass. (116)

The hero's passage across the landscape has ultimately a domesticating effect. Though it begins in anxious movement and passes through terror and pain, it continually ends in repose. A welcoming grove of aspens, a spring, and a patch of grass provide shelter and sustenance. A campfire and the setting sun give visual pleasure and comfort, while trickling water and a horse cropping grass make soothing noises. If nature's wildness and hardness test his strength and will and intelligence, they also give him solace and refreshment.

Perhaps more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself. For he is competent in this setting. He knows his horse will lead him to water, knows how to build a fire and where to camp. He can take care of himself. Besides being agonistic and at times ecstatic, the hero's relationship to the environment is steady, knowledgeable, functional, and pleasure-giving. Over and over, as he feeds and waters his horse, builds a fire, cooks his supper, and beds down for the night, he makes the world answer his primary needs. There is something infinitely reassuring about this. Far from town, far from the conveniences of modern life, far from any outside help, the solitary man, with only nature at his disposal, makes himself comfortable. He does so in answer, perhaps, to the reader's wish that the universe turn out, finally, to be a safe place for him also, not a mine field or a prison but a maternal home.

The interaction between hero and landscape lies at the genre's center, overshadowed in the popular image of the Western by gun-fights and chases, but no less essential to the experience Westerners provide. In the end, the land is everything to the hero; it is both the destination and the way. He courts it, struggles with it, defies it, conquers it, and lies down with it at night. In this, it is like nothing so much as the figure the Western casts out at the start: the woman. If the hero wants to become a phallic butte, immovable and sere, imitating the "great slabs of rock" that "stood on knife edges," he also wants to embrace the ground he walks on, "the high meadow . . . behind a curtain of trees, covered with gold alpine flower," with "trickles running down from melting snow."

The alternation of challenging vistas of desert and rock that de-

mand competition and struggle with inviting pastoral interludes offering pleasure and nurturance turns the landscape into a kind of gender allegory where the land plays a series of roles. In the passage from *Silver Canyon* the hero has started out from Poison Canyon and passed through Dark Canyon, but he ends up in sight of the Sweet Alice Hills. In films, the staple setting of dry rock and scrub-dotted sand is punctuated by shots of flowing rivers bordered by green trees, as, for example, in *The Wild Bunch*, where the river shots are breathtakingly sensual and the desert sequences unbearably parched and sunstruck.

▮ In the faithfully and minutely recorded passage of the hero's body over the body of the land, in his constant interaction with it, mental and physical, the hero plays out his social relationships, answers his spiritual needs, and foreshadows his destiny. So much so that it is tempting to say the hero's relation to the land is a substitute relation. No sex in the Western? No women? No home? Get yourself to the Sweet Alice Hills, or better yet the Grand Tetons (French for "big breasts"), and find relief. ▮

Yet while it is probably true in some sense that the land takes the place of things the Western does not and will not represent, the trouble with this view is that it limits the possible meanings of the genre to a narrow and highly conventional range of alternatives. To say that the hero's palpation of the land really takes the place of sex with a woman, that his bedding down and making himself comfortable in it really substitutes for the domestic fireside and a mother's care, or that his struggle to survive it reenacts his competition with other men assumes that heterosexual sexuality, the nuclear family, and a struggle for status among peers are the bedrock of all human experience. My sense is that these are precisely the structures of experience that the landscape in Westerns is trying to displace. The man who leaves home and fireside and turns to the wilderness does so in search of something other than what they have to offer.

In looking for a way to express the something other that the landscape represents, I came upon a book that describes a turn to

the desert that took place fifteen hundred years ago in the Middle East. Benedicta Ward's *The Desert Christian* (1975), which describes the founding of Christian monasticism, may seem distant from the West of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, but it provides a suggestive parallel for a similar turn to the desert that took place in the twentieth-century imagination.



St. Anthony the Great, the hermit of Lower Egypt, Ward says in her foreword, gave all he had to the poor, devoted himself to asceticism under the guidance of a recluse for several years, and at age thirty-four went into the desert to live in complete solitude for the rest of his life. In Upper Egypt, communities of brothers living in the desert, united to one another in work and prayer, formed the basis for later organized monasticism. In Nitria and Scetis, desert monks lived together under the direction of a spiritual father, or "abba." And in Syria monks "deliberately imposed on themselves what is hardest for human beings to bear: they went about naked and in chains, they lived unsettled lives, eating whatever they found in the woods, . . . [choosing] to live at the limits of human nature, close to the animals, the angels, and the demons." These events took place around the year A.D. 400.

For the desert Christians, the first step in this life was withdrawal from ordinary society. The second was placing themselves under a spiritual father. After that, the rule was living as simply as possible. "One hour's sleep a night is enough for a monk if he is a fighter." "For a man of prayer, one meal a day is sufficient." No possessions besides a hut, a reed mat, a sheep skin, a lamp, and a vessel for water or oil. There was not much talking, economy of words being as important as economy of things. The desert fathers gave life to their disciples through the word, used sparingly and conceived as part of a relationship. Most of the sayings of the fathers concern the best way to live in the body and the day-to-day struggle with

the passions (especially sexual passion). "It was this aspect of warfare with the demons that was called 'asceticism,' the hard work of being a monk." Its aim was *hesychia*, "quiet, the calm through the whole man" (xxiv).

I detail these practices to suggest the parallels between desert monasticism and the features that define the Western hero's existence. Not that Westerns derive historically from desert monasticism, or that their belief system reflects that of the desert fathers. Rather, the similarities point to a dimension of the Western's ethos that otherwise might be missed.

Westerns give small rein to the body's need for food, sleep, shelter, sex, and overall comfort. The cowboy's fare—on the few occasions that he eats—is hardtack, boiled coffee, and cigarettes. Sometimes just the cigarette. Thirst is constant, sleep characteristically denied. The hero makes camp for a few short hours and then, while the stars are still out, saddles up and is on his way. ("For Hondo," writes L'Amour, "to wake was to rise.") The capacity to stand physical pain, as I've suggested, is central to the hero's identity.

The hero almost never has sex, and when he does it's only implied, not shown, denial of sex being central to the kind of deprivation the Western finds essential for the exemplary life. Like the absence of greenery, it is a turning away from fertility, fluidity, propagation, and an affirmation of what is hard and dry and takes a long time to come to fruition. For the desert itself is the great exemplar of asceticism. The hero imitates the desert's fierceness in his hard struggle to survive, its loneliness in his solitary existence, and its silence in his frugal way with language. Gnostic, carved out of life experience, compressed and delivered under pressure, the sayings of cowboy heroes, by their brevity, acknowledge, as do the saying of the desert fathers, the importance of things that cannot be said.

And here lies another paradox: the desert landscape is the fullest realization of the genre's drive toward materiality, the place where language fails and rocks assert themselves. But by the same token

it is the place where something else becomes visible, an ineffable thing that cannot be named. The desert pushes the consciousness of the hero and of the reader/viewer beyond itself and into another realm. The buttes are still, the mountains remain unmoved, the sun beats down, the horizon recedes forever beneath the sky. It is not only the body that is tested here; the desert is a spiritual proving ground as well. The landscape, which on the one hand drives Christianity away, ends by forcing men to see something godlike there. "All I know," says a character from L'Amour's *The Lonesome Gods* (1983), "is that I shall never rest easy until I have gone into the desert alone."

TOWN

In certain Westerns, both novels and films, I feel a tremendous desire to be in town, the town the hero rides into somewhere near the beginning of the story. The way the lights and shadows fall across the wooden sidewalks and onto the sides of the buildings—the dry goods store, the law office, the newspaper office—the scurrying children, women in their long dresses and bonnets and shawls, horses tied to the hitching rail, the water trough, the sound of the blacksmith's hammer, the dust from wagons going by, the leather harnesses, the iron wheels—everything about this scene arouses a craving in me to travel back in time to that place and live the life that is implied in these details. It is home, safe, authentic, the way life was meant to be—close to the earth, to the land, to the senses, to good materials, to sun and wind and dust, to people and animals. This town represents a simpler, more benign social order, a place for everyone and everyone in her place.

There is a tremendous tension in Westerns between the landscape and town. The genre pulls toward the landscape—that, in a sense, is its whole point. But because there's so much emphasis on getting away, town also exerts a tremendous pull; otherwise there would be no reason to flee. So there's a paradox in the presentation of town.

Town is a mecca, a haven, journey's end. The men go there to get supplies, to eat, to sleep, to rest up from their labors—ranching, mining, chasing bandits, hiding out, fighting each other. They come to town for respite and refuge. To get a shave, a haircut, a bath, to put on clean clothes and feel human again. They come to get drunk and play cards and ogle the saloon girls. They come to wheel and deal and steal and get information. They come to meet the train or the stage. Town is a magnet; it draws people. Or a well, a place people come to to draw something out, some form of sustenance; it holds the bank that characters in Westerns are always robbing.

So town functions as a surrogate home, though it's not home because it's a public place. It supplies things that humans need—physical comforts, companionship—yet it does this largely without imposing the obligations the hero is in retreat from. (That is the purpose of the saloon, the place where food and drink and sex can all be bought.) But in fact, town always threatens to entrap the hero in the very things the genre most wishes to avoid: intimacy, mutual dependence, a network of social and emotional responsibilities. Town fills basic needs, but basic though they are, they are precisely the needs that have to be denied because of what their satisfaction inevitably entails. Town seduces.

When the hero enters the saloon after being out in the desert, all the senses are eased—the desire for shade, coolness, something to drink, a place to sit down, human companionship. In the background, the saloon girl's breasts, her dress, her hair, her voice if she is singing, her red lips, all a reminder of what the cowboy has for so long done without, and must continue to renounce if he is to survive.

Now pull the camera gradually away from the smoky card table, back through the swinging doors of the saloon. Dolly back down Main Street; let the false fronts show their shrunken hind parts; let the buildings grow smaller, until finally they are a tiny silhouette against a range of desert mountains rising up behind. Now let the

sky dwarf everything, until town is nothing but a squidge on a vast plain, mountain-rimmed and arched by an even vaster heaven. Here, in plain and sky and mountain, is what is, what the horseman rides out of and back into, the beginning and the end.

The Western is always bombinating between these alternatives: town, where if a bullet doesn't get you a woman will, and desert, where death waits in a different form. For there is often a link, at the final moment of Westerns, between the desert and the town. They seem to be opposed, and for the most part they are, but in this moment a rapprochement occurs. When the hero meets his enemy face to face, someone dies and someone rides away, but both bodies bend toward the land—one prone or supine, in the dust, and one upright and mounted, on its way. On its way across a dusty plain that reminds us of a fate postponed.