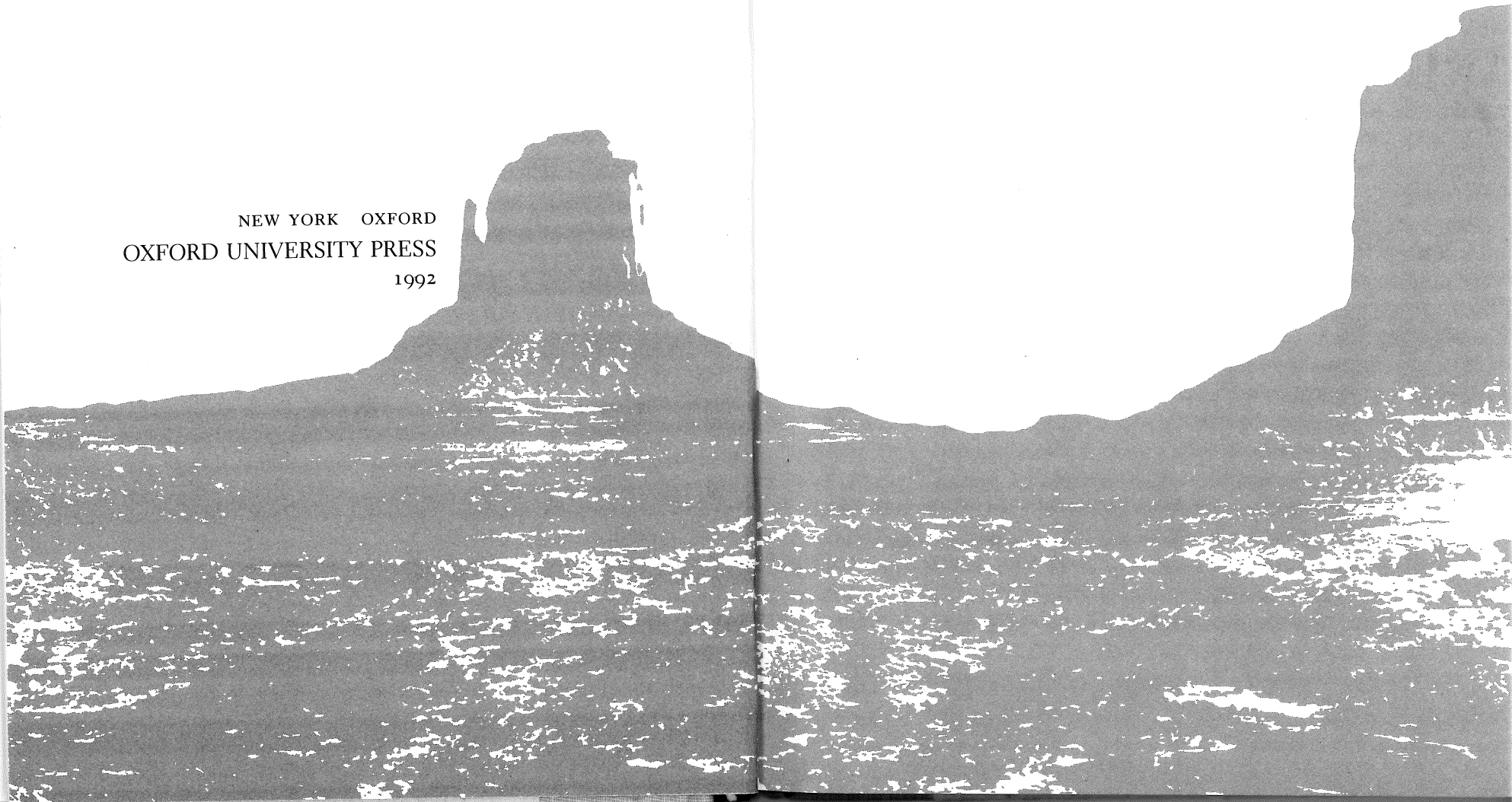


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West of Everything

The Inner Life of Westerns

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Still from *Rocky Mountain*, starring Errol Flynn and Patrice Wymore (Warner Bros., 1950).
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

Women and the Language of Men

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Fear of losing his identity drives a man west, where the harsh conditions of life force his manhood into being. Into this do-or-die, all-or-nothing world we step when we read this passage from Louis L'Amour's novel *Radigan* (1958), where a woman about to be attacked by a gunman experiences a moment of truth:

She had never felt like this before, but right now she was backed up against death with all the nonsense and the fancy words trimmed away. The hide of the truth was peeled back to expose the bare, quivering raw flesh of itself, and there was no nonsense about it. She had been taught the way a lady should live, and how a lady should act, and it was all good and right and true . . . but out here on the mesa top with a man hunting her to put her back on the grass it was no longer the same. . . . There are times in life when the fancy words and pretty actions don't count for much, when it's blood and death and a cold wind blowing and a gun in the hand and you know suddenly you're just an animal with guts and blood that wants to live, love and mate, and die in your own good time. (144-45)

L'Amour lays it on the line. Faced with death, we learn the truth about life. And the truth is that human nature is animal. When your back is to the wall you find out that what you want most is not to save your eternal soul—if it exists—but to live, in the body.

For truth is flesh, raw and quivering, with the hide peeled back. All else is nonsense. The passage proposes a set of oppositions fundamental to the way the Western thinks about the world. There are two choices: either you can remain in a world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions, a world of fancy words and pretty actions, of “manners for the parlor and the ball room, and . . . womanly tricks for courting”; or you can face life as it really is—blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand. These are the classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusion versus truth, words versus things. It is the last of these oppositions I want to focus on now because it stands for all the rest.

But first a warning. What is most characteristic of these oppositions is that as soon as you put pressure on them they break down. Each time one element of a pair is driven into a corner, it changes shape and frequently turns into its opposite. It’s as if the genre’s determination to have a world of absolute dichotomies ensures that interpenetration and transmutation will occur. For instance, when Burt Lancaster, playing Wyatt Earp in *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, declares toward the beginning of the movie, “I’ve never needed anybody in my life and I sure don’t need Doc Holliday,” the vehemence of his claim to autonomy virtually guarantees that it will be undermined. And sure enough, by the time the showdown arrives you can hardly tell him and Kirk Douglas (playing Doc) apart: they dress alike, walk alike, talk alike, and finally they fight side by side as brothers. Two who started out as opposites—gambler versus sheriff, drunken failure versus respected citizen, rake versus prude—have become indistinguishable.

Westerns strive to depict a world of clear alternatives—independence versus connection, anarchy versus law, town versus desert—but they are just as compulsively driven to destroying these opposites and making them contain each other.



So it is with language. Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real. But the next thing you know, someone is using language brilliantly, delivering an epigram so pithy and dense it might as well be a solid thing. In fact, Westerns go in for their own special brand of the bon mot, seasoned with skepticism and fried to a turn. The product—chewy and tough—is recognizable anywhere:

Cow’s nothin’ but a heap o’ trouble tied up in a leather bag.

The Cowboys, 1972

* A human rides a horse until he’s dead and then goes on foot. An Indian rides him another 20 miles and then eats him.

The Searchers, 1956

* A Texan is nothin’ but a human man way out on a limb.

The Searchers

Kansas is all right for men and dogs but it’s pretty hard on women and horses.

The Santa Fe Trail, 1940

God gets off at Leavenworth, and Cyrus Holliday drives you from there to the devil.

The Santa Fe Trail

There ain’t no Sundays west of Omaha.

The Cowboys

This is hard country, double hard.

Will Penny, 1968

When you boil it all down, what does a man really need? Just a smoke and a cup of coffee.

Johnny Guitar, 1954

In the end you end up dyin' all alone on a dirty street. And for what?
For nothin'.

High Noon, 1952

You can't serve papers on a rat, baby sister. You gotta kill 'em or
let 'em be.

True Grit, 1969

He wasn't a good man, he wasn't a bad man, but Lord, he was a *man*.
The Ballad of Cable Hogue, 1969

Some things a man has to do, so he does 'em.

Winchester '73, 1950

Only a man who carries a gun ever needs one.

Angel and the Bad Man, 1947

Mr. Grimes: "God, dear God."
Yaqui Joe: "He won't help you."

100 Rifles, 1969

You haven't gotten tough, you've just gotten miserable.

Cowboy, 1958

The sayings all have one thing in common: they bring you down. Like the wisdom L'Amour offers his female protagonist out on the mesa top, these gritty pieces of advice challenge romantic notions. Don't call on God; he's not there. Think you're tough? You're just miserable. What do you die for? Nothin'. The sayings puncture big ideas and self-congratulation; delivered with perfect timing, they land like stones from a slingshot and make a satisfying thunk.

For the Western is at heart antilanguage. Doing, not talking, is what it values. And this preference is connected to its politics, as a line from L'Amour suggests: "A man can . . . write fine words, or he can do something to hold himself in the hearts of the people" (*Treasure Mountain*, 1972). "Fine words" are contrasted not accidentally with "the hearts of the people." For the men who are the

Western's heroes don't have the large vocabularies an expensive education can buy. They don't have time to read that many books. Westerns distrust language in part because language tends to be wielded most skillfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength. Consequently, the entire enterprise is based on a paradox. In order to exist, the Western has to use words or visual images, but these images are precisely what it fears. As a medium, the Western has to pretend that it doesn't exist at all, its words and pictures, just a window on the truth, not really there.

So the Western's preferred parlance ideally consists of abrupt commands: "Turn the wagon. Tie 'em up short. Get up on the seat" (*Red River*); "Take my horse. Good swimmer. Get it done, boy" (*Rio Grande*, 1950). Or epigrammatic sayings of a strikingly aggressive sort: "There's only one thing you gotta know. Get it out fast and put it away slow" (*Man Without a Star*); "When you pull a gun, kill a man" (*My Darling Clementine*). For the really strong man, language is a snare; it blunts his purpose and diminishes his strength. When Joey asks Shane if he knows how to use a rifle, Shane answers, and we can barely hear him, "Little bit." The understatement and the clipping off of the indefinite article are typical of the minimalist language Western heroes speak, a desperate shorthand, comic, really, in its attempt to communicate without using words.

Westerns are full of contrasts between people who spout words and people who act. At the beginning of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* a temperance leader harangues his pious audience; in the next scene a violent bank robbery makes a shambles of their procession through town. The pattern of talk canceled by action always delivers the same message: language is false or at best ineffectual; only actions are real. When heroes talk, it is action: their laconic put-downs cut people off at the knees. Westerns treat salesmen and politicians, people whose business is language, with contempt. Brag-

garts are dead men as soon as they appear. When “Stonewall” Tory, in *Shane*, brags that he can face the Riker gang any day, you know he’s going to get shot; it’s Shane, the man who clips out words between clenched teeth, who will take out the hired gunman.

▮ The Western’s attack on language is wholesale and unrelenting, as if language were somehow tainted in its very being. When John Wayne, in John Ford’s *The Searchers*, rudely tells an older woman who is taking more than a single sentence to say something, “I’d be obliged, ma’am if you would get to the point,” he expresses the genre’s impatience with words as a way of dealing with the world. For while the woman is speaking, Indians are carrying a prisoner off. Such a small incident, once you unpack it, encapsulates the Western’s attitude toward a whole range of issues:

1. Chasing Indians—that is, engaging in aggressive physical action—is doing something, while talking about the situation is not.
2. The reflection and negotiation that language requires are gratuitous, even pernicious.
3. The hero doesn’t need to think or talk; he just *knows*. Being the hero, he is in a state of grace with respect to the truth.

In a world of bodies true action must have a physical form. And so the capacity for true knowledge must be based in physical experience. John Wayne playing Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* has that experience and knows what is right because, having arrived home after fighting in the Civil War, he better than anyone else realizes that life is “blood and death and a cold wind blowing and a gun in the hand.” In such a world, language constitutes an inferior kind of reality, and the farther one stays away from it the better.

Language is gratuitous at best; at worst it is deceptive. It takes the place of things, screens them from view, creates a shadow world where anything can be made to look like anything else. The reason no one in the Glenn Ford movie *Cowboy* can re-

member the proper words for burying a man is that there aren’t any. It is precisely *words* that cannot express the truth about things. The articulation of a creed in the Western is a sign not of conviction but of insincerity. The distaste with which John Wayne says, “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away,” as he buries a man in *Red River*, not only challenges the authority of the Christian God but also expresses disgust at all the trappings of belief: liturgies, litanies, forms, representations, all of which are betrayals of reality itself.



The features I am describing here, using the abstract language the Western shuns, are dramatically present in a movie called *Dakota Incident* (1956), whose plot turns in part on the bootlessness of words and, secondarily, on the perniciousness of money (another system of representation the Western scorns). Near the beginning, a windbag senator, about to depart on the stage from a miserable town called Christian Flats, pontificates to a crowd that has gathered to watch a fight, “There’s no problem that can’t be solved at a conference table,” adding, “Believe me, gentlemen, I know whereof I speak.” The next minute, two gun-fights break out on Main Street; in one of them the hero shoots and kills his own brother.

The theme of loquacity confounded by violence, declared at the outset, replays itself at the end when the main characters have been trapped by some Indians in a dry creek bed. The senator has been defending the Indians throughout, saying that they’re misunderstood, have a relationship with the land, and take from the small end of the horn of plenty. Finally, when he and the others are about to die of thirst, he goes out to parley with the Indians. He makes a long and rather moving speech about peace and understanding, and they shoot him; he dies clawing at the arrow in his chest.

In case we hadn't already gotten the point about the ineffectuality of language, we get it now. But no sooner is the point made than the movie does an about-face. The other characters start saying that the senator died for what he believed, that he was wrong about the Indians "but true to himself." They say that perhaps his words "fell on barren ground: the Indians and us." And the story ends on a note of peaceful cooperation between whites and Indians (after the attacking Indians have been wiped out), with talk about words of friendship falling on fertile ground.

Language is specifically linked in this movie to a belief in peace and cooperation as a way of solving conflicts. And though it's made clear from the start that only wimps and fools believe negotiation is the way to deal with enemies (the movie was made in 1956 during the Cold War), that position is abandoned as soon as "our side" wins. *Dakota Incident* is not the only Western to express this ambivalent attitude toward language and the peace and harmony associated with it. Such ambivalence is typical, but it is always resolved in the end. Language gets its day in court, and then it is condemned.

When John Wayne's young protégé in *The Searchers*, for example, returns to his sweetheart after seven years, he's surprised to learn that she hasn't been aware of his affection. "But I always loved you," he protests. "I thought you knew that without me havin' to say it." For a moment here, John Ford seems to be making fun of the idea that you can communicate without language, gently ridiculing the young man's assumption that somehow his feelings would be known although he had never articulated them. But his silence is vindicated ultimately when the girl he loves, who was about to marry another man, decides to stick with him. The cowboy hero's taciturnity, like his awkward manners around women and inability to dance, is only superficially a flaw; actually, it's proof of his manhood and trueheartedness. In Westerns silence, sexual potency, and integrity go together. }>

Again, in *My Darling Clementine* Ford seems to make an exception to the interdiction against language. When Victor Mature, playing Doc Holliday, delivers the "To be or not to be" speech from *Hamlet*, taking over from the drunken actor who has forgotten his lines, we are treated to a moment of verbal enchantment. The beauty and power of the poetry are recognized even by the hero, Wyatt Earp (played by Henry Fonda), who appreciates Shakespeare and delivers a long soliloquy himself over the grave of his brother. But when the old actor who has been performing locally leaves town, he tricks the desk clerk into accepting his signature on a bill in place of money. The actor, like the language he is identified with, is a lovable old fraud, wonderfully colorful and entertaining, but not, finally, to be trusted.

The position represented by language, always associated with women, religion, and culture, is allowed to appear in Westerns and is accorded a certain plausibility and value. It functions as a critique of force and, even more important, as a symbol of the peace, harmony, and civilization that force is invoked in order to preserve. But in the end, that position is deliberately proven wrong—massively, totally, and unequivocally—with pounding hooves, thundering guns, blood and death. Because the genre is in revolt against a Victorian culture where the ability to manipulate language confers power, the Western equates power with "not-language." And not-language it equates with being male.



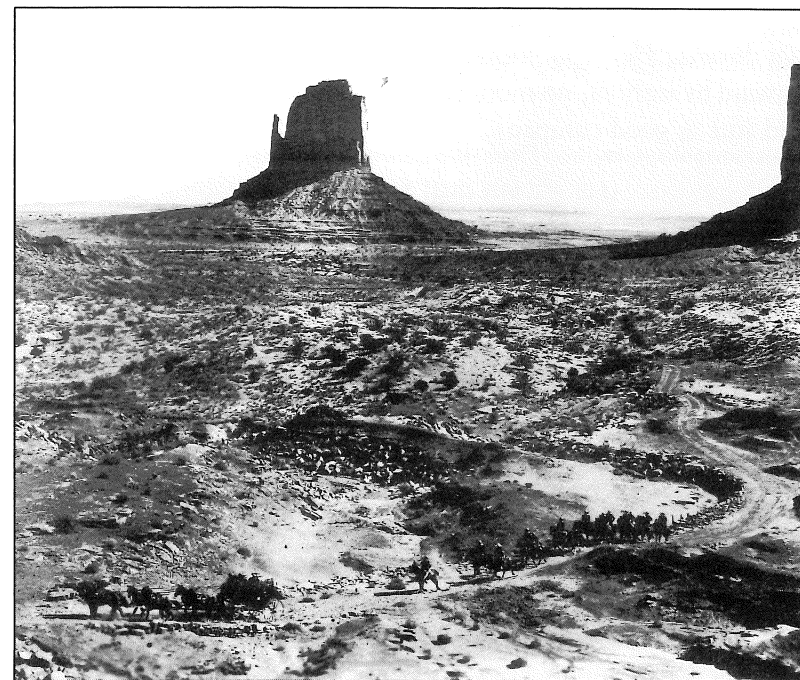
In his book *Phallic Critiques* (1984) Peter Schwenger has identified a style of writing he calls "the language of men," a language that belongs to what he terms the School of Virility, starting with Jack London and continuing through Ernest Hemingway to Norman Mailer and beyond. Infused with colloquialism, slang, choppy rhythms, "bitten-off fragments," and diction that marks the writer

as “tough,” this language is pitted against itself *as* language, and devoted to maintaining, in Schwenger’s terminology, “masculine reserve.”

Drawing on Octavio Paz’s definition of the *macho* as a “hermetic being, closed up in himself” (“women are inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up”), Schwenger shows the connections these authors make among speaking, feeling, and feminization. “It is by talking,” he writes, “that one opens up to another person and becomes vulnerable. It is by putting words to an emotion that it becomes feminized. As long as the emotion itself is restrained, held back, it hardly matters what the emotion itself is; it will retain a male integrity.” Thus, “not talking is a demonstration of masculine control over emotion” (43–45).

Control is the key word here. Not speaking demonstrates control not only over feelings but over one’s physical boundaries as well. The male, by remaining “hermetic,” “closed up,” maintains the integrity of the boundary that divides him from the world. (It is fitting that in the Western the ultimate loss of that control takes place when one man puts holes in another man’s body.) To speak is literally to open the body to penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body’s substance with the substance of what is outside it. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation. Speech relates the person who is speaking to other people (as opposed to things); it requires acknowledging their existence and, by extension, their parity. If “to become a man,” as Schwenger says, “must be finally to attain the solidity and self-containment of an object,” “an object that is self-contained does not have to open itself up in words.” But it is not so much the vulnerability or loss of dominance that speech implies that makes it dangerous as the reminder of the speaker’s own interiority.

The interdiction masculinity imposes on speech arises from the desire for complete objectivization. And this means being conscious



Still from *Stagecoach* (United Artists, 1939).

Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

of nothing, not knowing that one has a self. To be a man is not only to be monolithic, silent, mysterious, impenetrable as a desert butte, it is to *be* the desert butte. By becoming a solid object, not only is a man relieved of the burden of relatedness and responsiveness to others, he is relieved of consciousness itself, which is to say, primarily, consciousness *of* self.

At this point, we come upon the intersection between the Western’s rejection of language and its emphasis on landscape. Not fissured by self-consciousness, nature is what the hero aspires to emulate: perfect being-in-itself. This is why John Wayne was impatient with the woman who took longer than a sentence to speak

her mind. As the human incarnation of nature, he neither speaks nor listens. He is monumentality in motion, propelling himself forward by instinct, no more talkable to than a river or an avalanche, and just as good company.



WOMAN That's a pretty dog.

MAN (No response)

WOMAN Well, it's got a pretty coat.

MAN (Silence)

The foregoing account of the Western's hostility to language refers to a mode of behavior—masculine behavior for the most part—that has left an indelible mark on the experience of practically every person who has lived in this country in the twentieth century. I mean the linguistic behavior of men toward women, particularly in domestic situations.

He finds it very difficult to talk about his personal feelings, and intimidates me into not talking either. He also finds it very difficult to accept my affection. . . . I become angry that his need to be unemotional is more important than my need to have an outward show of love. Why do I always have to be the one that is understanding? (18)

When I was married, it was devastatingly lonely—I wanted to die—it was just so awful being in love with someone who . . . never talked to me or consulted me. . . . (23)

My husband grew up in a very non-emotional family and it took a long time for me to make him understand that it's a good thing to let people (especially the ones you love) know how you feel. (18)

The relationship did not fill my deepest needs for closeness, that's why I'm no longer in it. I did share every part of myself with him but it was never mutual. (19)

The loneliness comes from knowing you can't contact another person's feelings or actions, no matter how hard you try. (23)

If I could change one thing—it would be to get him to be more expressive of his emotions, his wants, needs. I most criticize him for not telling me what he wants or how he feels. He denies he feels things when his non-verbals indicate he does feel them. (21)

The quotations come from Shere Hite's *Women and Love: A Cultural Revolution in Progress* (1987). I quote them here because I want to make clear that the Western's hatred of language is not a philosophical matter only; it has codified and sanctioned the way several generations of men have behaved verbally toward women in American society. Young boys sitting in the Saturday afternoon darkness could not ride horses or shoot guns, but they could talk. Or rather, they could learn how to keep silent. The Western man's silence functions as a script for behavior; it expresses and authorizes a power relation that reaches into the furthest corners of domestic and social life. The impassivity of male silence suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization, establishes male superiority, and silences the one who would engage in conversation. Hite comments:

We usually don't want to see . . . non-communication or distancing types of behavior as expressing attitudes of inequality or superiority, as signs of a man not wanting to fraternize (sororize?) with someone of lower status. This is too painful. And yet, many men seem to be asserting superiority by their silences and testy conversational style with women. Thus, not talking to a woman on an equal level can be a way for a man to dominate a relationship. . . . (25)

For a man to speak of his inner feelings not only admits parity with the person he is talking to, but it jeopardizes his status as potent being, for talk dissipates presence, takes away the mystery of an ineffable self which silence preserves. Silence establishes dominance at the same time as it protects the silent one from inspection and possible criticism by offering nothing for the interlocutor to grab hold of. The effect, as in the dialogue about the dog quoted above, is to force the speaker into an ineffectual flow of language which tries to justify itself, achieve significance, make an impression by additions which only diminish the speaker's force with every word.

When Matthew Garth returns to his hotel room at the end of *Red River*, he acts the part of silent conqueror to perfection. The heroine, who has been waiting for him, warns him that his enemy is on the way to town. The film has her babble nervously about how she came to be there, how she found out about the danger, how there's no way he can escape, no way to stop his enemy, nothing anyone can do, nothing she can do. As he looks down at her, not hearing a thing she says, her words spill out uncontrollably, until finally she says, "Stop me, Matt, stop me." He puts his hand over her mouth, then kisses her. The fade-out that immediately follows suggests that the heroine, whose name is Tess Millay, is getting laid.

The scene invites diametrically opposed interpretations. From one point of view, what happens is exactly right: the desire these characters feel for each other yearns for physical expression. Nonverbal communication, in this case sex, is entirely appropriate. But the scene gets to this point at the woman's expense.

Tess is the same character who, earlier in the film, had been shot by an arrow and had it removed without batting an eyelash, had seduced the young man with her arm in a sling, and had refused a proposition from his enemy. In this scene she is totally undercut.

As her useless verbiage pours out, she falls apart before our eyes, a helpless creature who has completely lost control of herself and has to beg a man to stop her.

When I feel insecure, I need to talk about things a lot. It sometimes worries me that I say the same things over and over. (19)

I can be an emotional drain on my husband if I really open up. (19)

Hite notes that women feel ashamed of their need to talk, blaming themselves and making excuses for the silence of men. "My husband grew up in a very non-emotional family." The heroine of *Red River* cares so much about the hero that her words pour out in a flood of solicitude. But instead of seeing this as a sign of love, the film makes her anxiety look ridiculous and even forces *her* to interpret it this way.

Tess Millay's abject surrender to the hero's superiority at the end of *Red River* is a supreme example of woman's introjection of the male attitude toward her. She sees herself as he sees her, silly, blathering on about manly business that is none of her concern, and beneath it all really asking for sex. The camera and the audience identify with the hero, while the heroine dissolves into a caricature of herself. Sex joins here with blood and death and a cold wind blowing as the only true reality, extinguishing the authority of women and their words.

Someone might argue that all the Western is doing here is making a case for nonverbal communication. If that were true, so much the better. But, at least when it comes to the relations between men and women, the Western doesn't aim to communicate at all. The message, in the case of Tess Millay, as in the case of women in Westerns generally, is that there's nothing *to* them. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble. Even Marian, Joe Starret's wife in *Shane*, one of the few women in Western films



Still from *Red River*, starring John Wayne and Joanne Dru (United Artists, 1948).
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

who, we are made to feel, is also substantial as a person, dissolves into an ineffectual harangue at the end, unsuccessfully pleading with her man not to go into town to get shot. When the crunch comes, women shatter into words.

A classic moment of female defeat appears in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, which set the pattern for the Western in the twentieth century. In the following passage, Molly, the heroine, is vanquished by the particular form of male silence that her cowboy lover practices. The Virginian has just passed his mortal enemy on the road with drawn pistol and without a word. But when Molly tries to get him to talk about it and "ventures a step inside the border of his reticence," he turns her away:

She looked at him, and knew that she must step outside his reticence again. By love and her surrender to him their positions had been exchanged. . . . She was no longer his half-indulgent, half-scornful superior. Her better birth and schooling that had once been weapons to keep him at a distance, to bring her off victorious in their encounters, had given way before the onset of the natural man himself. She knew her cow-boy lover, with all that he lacked, to be more than ever she could be, with all that she had. He was her worshipper still, but her master, too. Therefore now, against the baffling smile he gave her, she felt powerless. (256)

Wister makes explicit the connection between the Virginian's mastery over Molly and his reticence, his conversational *droit du seigneur*. Like *L'Amour*, Wister sees the relationship between men and women as a version of the East–West, parlor–mesa, word–deed opposition. Molly is identified by her ties to the East, her class background, her education, but most of all by her involvement in language. Words are her work and her pleasure and the source of her power. She teaches them in school and keeps company with them in books, but they cannot protect her from "the onset of the natural man himself." The man's sheer physical presence is stronger than language, and so words are finally the sign of Molly's—and all women's—inferiority.

This is what lies behind the strange explanation the Virginian offers Molly of his relationship to the villain, Trampas. He says that he and Trampas just lie in wait for each other, hating each other in silence, always ready to draw. Then he tells a story about a women's temperance meeting he once overheard while staying at a hotel. "Oh, heavens. Well, I couldn't change my room and the hotel man, he apologized to me next mawnin'. Said it didn't surprise him the husbands drank some" (259). Then, reverting to himself and Trampas, the Virginian remarks, "We were not a bit like a temperance meetin'" (259).

The temperance ladies talk and talk; that is *all* they do. It never

comes to shooting. Meanwhile, they drive their husbands crazy with their cackle. Drive them to drink, which dulls the feelings men can't talk about. So the Virginian and Trampas (the enemy he passes on the road) hardly exchange a word. They cannot communicate; therefore, they will kill each other someday. Their silence signals their seriousness, their dignity and reality, and the inevitability of their conflict. Silence is a sign of mastery, and goes along with a gun in the hand. They would rather die than settle the argument by talking to each other.



Why does the Western harbor such animus against women's words? Why should it be so extreme and unforgiving? Is it because, being the weaker sex physically, women must use words as their chief weapon, and so, if men are to conquer, the gun of women's language must be emptied? Or is it because, having forsworn the solace of language, men cannot stand to see women avail themselves of it because it reminds them of their own unverbilized feelings? Hite remarks:

It could be argued that, if men are silent, they are not trying to dominate women; rather, they are trapped in their own silence (and their own pain), unable to talk or communicate about feelings, since this is such forbidden behavior for them. (25)

If Hite has guessed correctly, men's silence in Westerns is the counterpart of women's silence; that is, it is the silence of an interior self who has stopped trying to speak and has no corresponding self to talk to. Its voice is rarely heard, since it represents the very form of interior consciousness the genre wishes to stamp out. But it does burst out occasionally. In *The Virginian* it speaks in the form of a song, roared out by the rebellious cowhands who are getting drunk

in a caboose on their way back to the ranch where the Virginian is taking them. They sing:

"I'm wild and woolly, and full of fleas;
I'm hard to curry above the knees;
I'm a she-wolf from Bitter Creek, and
It's my night to ho-o-wl—"

The wolf bitch inside men, what would it sound like if they ever let it out? What would it say? The silence of this inner voice, its muteness, keeps the woman's voice, its counterpart, from being heard. It is replaced by the narrative of the gunfight, the range war, the holdup, the chase. By the desert. The Western itself is the language of men, what they do vicariously, instead of speaking.



I used to keep a photograph of the young John Wayne posted on my bulletin board. He has on a cowboy hat, and he is even then developing a little of that inimitable cowboy squint so beloved of millions. But he has not yet gotten the cowboy face, the leathery wall of noncommunication written over by wrinkles, speaking pain and hardship and the refusal to give in to them, speaking the determination to tough it out against all odds, speaking the willingness to be cruel in return for cruelty, and letting you know, beyond all shadow of a doubt, who's boss.

The other expression, the expression of the young John Wayne, is tender, and more than a little wistful; it is delicate and incredibly sensitive. Pure and sweet; shy, really, and demure.

Where is she, this young girl that used to inhabit John Wayne's body along with the Duke? I think of the antiwar song from the sixties, "Where have all the young girls gone?" and the answer comes back, "Gone to young men every one," and the young men

in the song are gone to battle and the soldiers to the graveyard. How far is it from the death of the young girl in John Wayne's face to the outbreak of war? How far is it from the suppression of language to the showdown on Main Street? In *The Virginian* Wister suggests that the silence that reigns between the hero and the villain guarantees that one will kill the other someday. And still he ridicules women's language.

The Western hero's silence symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life. And my sense is that this determined shutting down of emotions, this cutting of the self off from contact with the interior well of feeling, exacts its price in the end. Its equivalent: the force of the bullets that spew forth from the guns in little orgasms of uncontained murderousness. Its trophy: the bodies in the dust. Its victory: the silence of graves. Its epitaph: that redundant sign that keeps on appearing in *Gunfight at the OK Corral*—BOOT HILL GRAVEYARD TOMBSTONE.

Why does the Western hate women's language? I argued earlier that the Western turned against organized religion and the whole women's culture of the nineteenth century and all the sermons and novels that went with them; the rejection took place in the name of purity, of a truth belied by all these trappings, something that could not be stated. But perhaps the words the Western hates stand as well for inner confusion. A welter of thoughts and feelings, a condition of mental turmoil that is just as hateful as the more obvious external constraints of economics, politics, and class distinctions. Women, like language, remind men of their own interiority; women's talk evokes a whole network of familial and social relationships and their corollaries in the emotional circuitry. What men are fleeing in Westerns is not only the cluttered Victorian interior but also the domestic dramas that go on in that setting, which the quotations from Shere Hite recall. The gesture of sweeping the board clear may be intended to clear away the reminders of emotional entanglements that cannot be dealt with or faced. Men would

rather die than talk, because talking might bring up their own unprocessed pain or risk a dam burst that would undo the front of imperturbable superiority. It may be the Western hero flees into the desert seeking there what Gretel Ehrlich has called "the solace of open spaces," a place whose physical magnificence and emptiness are the promise of an inward strength and quietude. "Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day."