



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Western Is as Western Does

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

"People first, place second," William Faulkner wrote; while Ford Madox Ford—whose last book was *The March of Literature*, described by its author as a survey of world literature from Confucius to Conrad—believed that great writing transcended not only national and cultural boundaries but those of time itself. There is, nevertheless, descriptably such a thing as English or Russian or French or American literature; and, within the last category, New England and Southern and Western literature, provided we do not attempt to define these according to preconceived notions but are willing to take them as we find them, while recognizing that they are marked by generalized characteristics shared by the individual works to a greater or lesser degree. For the most part, any debate concerning what is and what is not a "Southern" or a "Western" novel is almost certain to be as trivial as it is futile and boring, but that does not mean that the Southern or Western novel does not exist.

In the present number of *Chronicles*, the subject of which is Western writing, Gregory McNamee considers the question of the American West as a literary colony of the American East. He means by this the exploitation by Eastern publishers and readers of the Westerner's portion of the raw material of experience that is the literary capital of any literary tradition, but there is another sense as well in which the East may be said to have colonized the West, and that is by the great number of writers it has exported here. "Like most literary Westerners," Edward Abbey wrote of Mary Austin, "[she] was born in the east—east of the Mississippi. . . ." He was right, of course. What J. Gordon Coogler wrote exaggeratedly of the South ("Alas, for the South! Her books have grown fewer— / She never was much given to literature") is, in its second line if not in its

first one, a fair description of the West, where for reasons that are wholly understandable people have historically had little time to spare for the bozart. Abbey himself was a native of Home, Pennsylvania; and from Owen Wister to Thomas McGuane—but excluding Wallace Stegner and A.B. Guthrie, Jr., Harvey Fergusson and Eugene Manlove Rhodes—your typical Western writer is an Easterner in bison's clothing. On the other hand, Willa Cather, who grew up in Nebraska, moved to New York City where she lived in Greenwich Village for the rest of her life and became an opera fan. Are we therefore to consider the author of *O Pioneers!* an Eastern writer? You tell me: I don't know, and frankly I don't care. So far as I am concerned, what has a Western setting, derives from Western experience, and is written by somebody who has actually set foot in the West is Western literature—provided, of course, that it is literature at all.

It is Western experience, finally, that most distinguishes Western from other categories of American literature; and it is primarily that experience, rather than the literary treatment of it, that has denied it, especially in the East, the wider readership that it had lost by the time of the young Wallace Stegner and perhaps as early as the heyday of Frank Norris. Long before the earliest of the stock-in-trade "Westerns" appeared, Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and Bret Harte's stories were major publishing successes along the Northeast seaboard, which had not yet developed its prissy distaste for life as it is lived west of the Delaware River. The rise of the "Western" novel, intervening between Stephen Crane's career and Willa Cather's, has been blamed for alienating Eastern (meaning "sophisticated") sensibilities from all Western writing, but even if that were so it is insufficient explanation for the endemic uninterest of back-East folk in every aspect of Western culture and history, except those which (like environmental damage or race relations on the

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frontier) can be exploited for ideological purposes. About ten years ago, I read a statement by John Updike to the effect that, for the sake of his art, every serious writer should reside in the Northeast, since no other part of the United States offers him the material from which to create masterpieces. There, in a nutshell, I am afraid, Updike put it all. Today, the only Western writers to whom the Eastern literary establishment pays attention are Native Americans like Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris or those of its stars who have eccentrically moved West, such as Richard Ford or Tom McGuane. (McGuane, incidentally, although some of his best work has been done on Montanan themes and with Montanan settings, seems to receive far less attention nowadays than he did in the 1960's and early 70's, when he was living in and writing about Key West.) In this respect Ivan Doig, a native of Montana and the son of a shepherd-er though he migrated to Seattle many years ago, is an important though inexplicable exception.

In 1989, A. Carl Bredahl, Jr. —another contributor to this issue—published a brilliant monograph called *New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon*, where he argued that Western literature differs significantly from Northeastern and Southeastern American literature in its regard for “surface,” meaning not just landscape and physical contact but the sheer literalness of human experience, which needs to be valued for itself and not as a metaphor for something else. In my review of the book in *Chronicles*, I agreed substantially with this reading of the literature of Western America, but did not find the essential quality Bredahl identified in it to be wholly praiseworthy. What I meant to suggest was that life, whether lived in the West or in the East or in Addis Ababa, has depths below the surface, and that it is one of the triumphs of literature not just to suggest these but to mirror them by means of receding poetic images. To be able to do this, of course, requires a considerable literary technique of a kind with which poets have for millennia been familiar, but which novelists, as practitioners of a far more recent art, did not discover until the end of the 19th century. It is a technique that Western literature has conspicuously lacked, and that it seems a shame to deprive it of on purely theoretical grounds. Astonishingly, the one Western writer I can think of besides Stephen Crane, Thomas McGuane, and Cormac McCarthy (author of *Blood Meridian*) who managed to achieve such sophistication is Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose work is thought to be for children but who wrote sentences, paragraphs, and scenes rivaling those of Ernest Hemingway in their subtle evocation of emotional depths and complexities presented with a deceptive clarity. (I have more to say in this issue on the subject of Laura Wilder, whose books I have been reading and rereading since I was five years old.)

I sense, however, that the time for the development of a higher literary sensibility in Western writing is past, Eastern publishers and Eastern audiences having shown themselves largely indifferent to *any* Western aspirations, and Western writers themselves being apparently content with the presentation of “surface.” For Western men of letters, the material, not the medium, continues as ever to be the main thing. So be it, then, since the material is rich indeed and much of the writing powerful, even masterful.

And it is refreshing to find a substantial body of literature upon which the influence of Virginia Woolf has had no impact whatever. Still, it is in part this final disinterest in artistic formalism that is leading the Western canon to disintegration under the distractions of Western aboriginal and ethnic literature, and the literature of the paganized Western nature essay, strongly pushed of course by environmentalism. Western-Western writing—meaning writing from the American West out of the tradition of Western civilization—may be almost at an end as Professor Bredahl's essay here suggests, at least to me.

Another suggestion that this could be the case is offered by Texas Christian University's gigantic—and gigantically useful—text, *A Literary History of the American West*, sponsored by the Western Literature Association and published in 1987. Nearly all of the essays it comprises are solid and informative, but the final third of the book (organizationally speaking) leads me to conclude that the contemporary attempt at inclusivity promises to explode the concept of Western literature as we know it and to redefine it solely according to a mere geographical definition that is meaningless. “Western American Indian Writers” . . . “American Indian Fiction” . . . “Early Mexican-American Literature” . . . “Contemporary Mexican-American Literature” . . . “Asian-American Literary Traditions” . . . “Afro-American Writers in the West” . . . “Scandinavian Immigrant Literature”: all worthy and interesting subjects in themselves, I guess, but what does any of them have in common with the work of John Wesley Powell, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Owen Wister, Willa Cather, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Zane Grey, Wallace Stegner, A.B. Guthrie, Jr., Edward Abbey, and Thomas McGuane? A cohesive literature, after all, though it will certainly have its wide-ranging influences, is always the product of one culture, not of many.

Chiefly because it is a fine story, but partly also because it demonstrates how foreign influences can be brought successfully to bear in the work of a writer secure nevertheless within his own culture, I have chosen Kent Nelson's “The Garden of Alejandra Ruiz” for inclusion in this issue. Nelson, a native of Ouray, Colorado, now resident in New Hampshire, is the author of several novels and an accomplished short fiction writer whose work first came to my attention in the *Sewanee Review*. And Stephen Bodio, like myself a refugee from the urban East, who came to rest in Magdalena, New Mexico, an easy 17-hours' drive by Western standards from my home in Kemmerer, Wyoming, is in many ways the very model of a modern Western author. For one thing, he was born in Boston. For another, he has responded to Western people, Western habits, Western landscapes, and Western values as only a born writer and a spiritual Westerner could do. Nobody has ever learned to write about the American West better, more strongly, and more poignantly than Steve Bodio has taught himself to do. His memoir of the first seven years in Magdalena—*Querencia*, published last spring by Clark City Press in Livingston, Montana—is a brief masterpiece left untouched, naturally, by the New York publishers.

Since M.E. Bradford and, much more recently, Richard Wheeler are already known to readers of *Chronicles*, I am going to let them proceed without further introduction.





Jan Vandenbiesen

The Garden of Alejandra Ruiz

A Short Story

by Kent Nelson

It was April and beginning to warm up in the mountains. Snow melted from the deep basins, especially from the exposures facing south and, in shrinking, formed pictures on the slopes—a snow hawk, a pack of running coyotes, an antelope. Alejandra Ruiz knew these animals would disappear as the sun slid into its higher arc, so she told the neighbor children, who belonged to the woman Ernesto Saenz lived with. “That’s an antelope,” she said to them. “Can you see it?” She pointed to the mountain peaks and the children nodded. “That’s a hawk,” she said, “and a bear standing on two legs.”

The children smiled. “We see them,” they said.

But Alejandra Ruiz knew the mountains were too far away for them to make out what she meant to show them. It was too bad, she thought, because in a few days the antelope and the hawk would be gone, and the bear standing on two legs would be water in the rivulets and streams and in the river which was already brown and filling with the melt.

One afternoon on a day of fast clouds, with water tumbling into the gullies, Aleja Ruiz set out from her adobe house to prepare her garden. The best earth was above the river on a narrow plateau. Her mother had planted there, too, and with the same implements Aleja used. She had a hoe and a rake (whose handles had each been replaced by

Ernesto Saenz, who had whittled the ends of two crooked junipers to fit rightly into the metal collars) and a small trowel Aleja had bought at the K Märt in Española.

Aleja was not so old as she appeared. Each year she gathered wood for her fires, baked bread, raised chickens (from which she made egg money), hitchhiked into town for her groceries on the days when Ernesto, though he promised her a ride, could not get his truck started. She worked in her garden during the long dry season of summer. She had fine features, a skin tough from the weather, and sharp eyes. But she was prone to ailments. Her hip ached now and then, and sometimes her shoulder. She healed them by working.

From the plateau by the river the dry land rose to the east in uneven hills of piñon and juniper laced with ridges of red sandstone and troughs of arroyos and eroded ravines. Higher up were the foothills and then the mountains where the hawk and the running coyotes and the antelope disappeared day by day. These mountains were called the Sangre de Cristos for the color they bore in the evenings when sunlight flowed down red against the line of ascending shadow.

To the west was the river which, even though brown with the melt, glittered with sunpebbles as it curved away downstream. Beyond the river was a paler terrain of plains and mesas—lower, dryer, hotter.

The crops for which Aleja was readying the soil were corn and squash and beans and potatoes, the usual ones for which she had culled the seeds the previous year and the same ones her mother had planted. Aleja bent over the hoe. Her

This story is included in Kent Nelson's The Middle of Nowhere, published this fall by Gibbs Smith in Layton, Utah.