

SECTION III

Beginnings of Genres in the West



Introduction

WHAT RENÉ WELLEK and Austin Warren have said of literature in general is now especially true of western American literature: "The history of genres is indubitably one of the most promising areas for the study of literary history" (*Theory of Literature* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956], p. 251). What varieties, or genres, of literature have flourished in the West? To answer that question to everyone's satisfaction, one would have to settle the continuing and probably unresolvable argument about what constitutes a genre and about how many genres there are. Nevertheless, while remaining aware of the disagreements about the nature and number of genres, one can proceed to study the evolution of the categories or kinds of literature that have traditionally been viewed as identifiable groups. The chapters in this section of *A Literary History of the American West* trace the early development of the western novel and story, western poetry, drama, the nature essay, and movies.

Most western American literary criticism has been devoted to the novel. Critics offer various reasons to explain the focus of attention on that one genre: 1) novels are the only genre of western literature worth studying; 2) the West is too vast to treat in a short work; 3) the novel comes closest to giving a sense of the West's most distinctive feature—its wide open spaces; 4) since 1890, the western novel has served as a repository for the frontier spirit; and 5) not only the western novel, but *all* American novels have enjoyed great popularity. Whatever the reason for their popularity, frontier and western novels evolved through the stages in the history of all American novels: from the beginnings until 1810, a stage of imitating the Gothic and sentimental novels of Europe; from 1810 to 1865, the more philosophical fiction of romanticism; from 1865 to 1890, novels of local color and realism; from 1890 to 1920, the stage of naturalism; from 1920 to 1960, modernism; and from 1960 to the present, postmodernism, including the fiction of "fabulators" who attempt to replace the former rationalist sense of time with a mythic sense. In following that broad evolutionary pattern, the western novel has obviously not been unique, but it has been distinctive

because it treats the particular landscape and history of the West. From Mary Austin to Edward Abbey, from Willa Cather to Leslie Silko, from Mary Hallock Foote to Wallace Stegner, western novelists have depicted the West as a land of little rain, a land of mountains and deserts and prairies, a land of Anglos and more than a dozen other ethnic groups, and—above all—a land of wide open spaces.

Frontier and western novels are also distinctive in having as their prototypes a series of novels by one author: James Fenimore Cooper. In his chapter on Cooper and other precursors of the western novelists, James K. Folsom says that Cooper explored the “pull between two contrary sets of values, represented on the one side by civilization and on the other by wilderness.” Folsom adds that the “combination of the novel of action with the novel of reflection is Cooper’s greatest single legacy to subsequent western story, both philosophically and from the point of view of technique.” Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, along with the works of other early frontier novelists such as Timothy Flint, David H. Coyner, and Emerson Bennett, provided the inspiration for the avalanche of dime novels that poured off the presses from 1860 until 1895. Following Cooper and the dime novelists, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) and the works of Zane Grey served as models for the popular western novel, which is discussed by Michael T. Marsden and Jack Nachbar in Part Three of *A Literary History of the American West*. “It seems fairly clear,” according to John R. Milton, “that the serious Western novel (as distinguished from the popular western) is descended from the western travel narratives and journals of exploration, from the nonformulaic side of Cooper, and from the mixture of determinism and mysticism as found in the naturalism of Frank Norris” (*The Novel of the American West* [University of Nebraska Press, 1980], p. 106).

The serious western novel had become a distinct class of fiction at least by the 1920s, and writers labeled western were usually Anglo males who wrote mostly about the Old West, Willa Cather being one of the few exceptions. Unfortunately, so much attention has been paid to Anglo male writers and so little to other groups that many readers are unaware of the many excellent western novels written by women, by immigrants, by ethnic groups, by Mormons, and by contemporary writers who have created what William Bloodworth calls the “literary Western.” As those groups of novels are studied from new theoretical perspectives such as the reader response approach, we may soon gain a significantly enlarged and altered view of the western novel.

A new view of the novel may also usher in new approaches to the novella and the short story and to sub-genres of the western novel. For years western short stories have been collected in anthologies of all sorts, the best among the most recent being J. Golden Taylor’s *Great Short Stories of the*

West (1967) and Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones's *The Western Story: Fact, Fiction, and Myth* (1975). Gerald Haslam offers in his chapter an historical survey of the genre as it has developed in the West. So many western writers (Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, Jack London, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and John Steinbeck, among others) figure so prominently in the history of the American short story that a critical history of its western branch should reveal it to be one of the richest cultural assets of the region. And, in another somewhat neglected field, who can consider the work of L. Frank Baum, Will James, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Mary O'Hara, and Fred Gipson without seeing how great has been the West's contribution to American children's literature? A similar point can be made about detective fiction just by mentioning Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonal, and James M. Cain; and many science fiction writers are westerners whose works often have a western setting.

The western novel is not, however, the exclusive property of westerners, nor even of Americans, as Richard H. Cracroft explains in his chapter on world Westerns. From the days of Cooper to the present, Europeans and other foreigners have written novels about the American West. Reading such fiction enables us to see ourselves as others see us; and the existence of so many hundreds of world Westerns confirms the wide and enduring popularity of western fiction.

Although western fiction of all sorts is regarded as among the region's assets, some critics think our poetry is among our liabilities. However, while contending that fewer than a dozen pre-1960 western versifiers can be called poets, most critics will admit that many recent western poets have written outstanding works. Why did it take the West so long to find its poetic voice? In the absence of a critical history of western poetry, many students of western American literature have arrived at the view that Jay Gurian expresses:

We have plenty of Western American verse, but little poetry—and no poetics. We have no attitudes by which poets can discipline their imaginative responses to the West's landscape, history, folklore, language, or simply its humanity. From before Bret Harte till after John Neihardt, western verse has lacked wit, irony, paradox, metaphor, or symbol. Instead, it has been a single dimension response to a giant landscape and a noisy history. Excepting Thomas Hornsby Ferril and Yvor Winters, the consciously "western poet" has not attempted to transmute this landscape, or its history, into troubling emotion or complex idea. As a cause, and as a result, western poetry is without literary criticism. (*Western American Writing: Tradition and Promise* [Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1975], p. 95)

In a brief note about Gurian's essay, A. Thomas Trusky says that "like most critics of western American poetry, [Gurian] overlooks women poets and critics and the influence of Native American and Hispanic poetics as well." Trusky's "Western Poetry, 1850–1950," included in this section of *A Literary History of the American West*, shows that by the 1930s Ferril, Winters, Robinson Jeffers, Sharlot Hall, Alice Corbin, Genevieve Taggard, Mary Austin, Hildegard Flanner, Peggy Pond Church, and Norman Macleod had found a western voice that could express itself in poetry. Although Trusky says that "The history of early western poetry . . . [is] no more a record of failure and obscurity than is the history of any other region's early poetic efforts . . .," he explains in some detail why fine poets like Hall, Corbin, Macleod, and Church have been neglected. Thanks to Trusky's literary sleuthing and his efforts as one of the founders and editors of Boise State University's Ahsahta Press, the possibility of a western poetics now seems much greater than it appeared to Gurian in the 1970s.

The development of western drama has lagged behind that of poetry and the novel. Although at least a dozen outstanding plays constitute the basis for a nascent tradition, by rights, drama should be far more advanced than any of the other genres in the West, since most western cities built theaters almost before they constructed churches, schools, or jails. In Salt Lake City, for example, the theater built by the Mormons in 1862 was widely regarded as one of the best in the entire country; and almost from their beginning, the Mormons had enthusiastically staged great world dramas. The would-be dramatist of Salt Lake, or of any other western city, had few good contemporary models for inspiration, however. Most nineteenth-century American dramas were mediocre.

It was, in fact, a western play—William Vaughn Moody's *The Great Divide* (1906)—that is said to have signaled the beginning of modern American drama. Though many promising western playwrights succumbed to the lure of Broadway, the strong regional movement of the 1930s kept some of them at home, including E. P. Conkle, Virgil Geddes, and Lynn Riggs. Of those three, Riggs came closest to rivaling easterner Eugene O'Neill, but most audiences know only *Oklahoma!* and not the play it is based on: Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In the 1940s and 1950s, Hollywood and Freudianism left their mark on the plays of western dramatists such as William Saroyan and William Inge. From the absurdist Beatnik plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s to the wild surrealism of Sam Shepard in the late 1960s and early 1970s, post-Sputnik western drama seemed to have little connection with earlier regional plays that dramatized historical events or the lives of local, often rural, westerners. Shepard's recent fame and a sudden surge of new ethnic plays by westerners are signs of a new phase in the development of western drama: an attack on the petrified, popularized for-

mula myths of the Old West and on the technological junkland that much of the contemporary West is rapidly becoming.

While western drama attacks the present by surrealism, and the traditional western novel shows its disgust by ignoring the Space Age West in favor of a mythic past, the twentieth-century western nature essay criticizes our industrial-technological throw-away culture by showing us what we are destroying in our onslaught against the land. In his chapter in this section, Thomas J. Lyon writes that the western nature essay is like poetry in that both genres “seek to establish continuity between man and nature.” In their most recent stage, then, most of the genres in western American literature picture our present way of life as leading in the direction of destruction.

The nature essay, according to Lyon, did not begin as one of the prophets of doom. Instead, it emerged from passages of descriptions in the reports of western exploration and fur trapping, reports written by Lewis and Clark, Prince Maximilian, Osborne Russell, and John Charles Frémont; and it grew to encompass whole pictorially accurate books on aspects of western nature, books such as Thomas Nuttall’s *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansas Territory* (1821). Around the turn of the century, John Muir and Mary Austin brought the western nature essay to a new and higher stage, one that not only saw nature clearly, but also pondered its philosophical significance.

After World War I, a new school of western nature essayists appeared—government scientists such as Aldo Leopold, Robert Marshall, and Olaus Murie—who recorded the essence of thousands of hours of in-the-field observations of wildlife and the natural environment. And when Joseph Wood Krutch moved to the deserts of the Southwest, western American literature was blessed with a twentieth-century Thoreau. Lyon says that current western nature essayists such as Edward Abbey write with an urgency forced upon them by their sense that time is running out because of our destruction of the natural world.

Given the importance of its message, why hasn’t western nature writing been studied before? It has been, not so much as *literature*—as Lyon discusses it—but as documents in the history of the idea of wilderness—as Roderick Nash examines it in his *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Nash does not restrict his study to the West, but Peter Wild does so restrict his in *Pioneer Conservationists of Western America*, a collection that includes a wealth of biographical details. What Lyon emphasizes is that the best of the nature essays should be read not simply as scientific reports, but more importantly as literature that can, through the aesthetic process, reshape our perception and thereby help us to achieve greater harmony with nature and with ourselves. Paradoxically, a study of this genre can give us a better understanding of other western genres. To understand the poetry of Robinson

Jeffers or Gary Snyder, for example, one needs to have some sense of how they see the land. Those critics who see only heartless inhumanism in Jeffers and only naive primitivism in Snyder fail to recognize in their work the wisdom that comes from a close and perceptive look at the land and its creatures.

Perhaps such critics have also been unduly influenced by western movies. From its beginning, Hollywood has given us various versions of the West, as William T. Pilkington explains in his chapter on western movies. In fact, one of the first American movies was Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). More than three-quarters of a century and thousands of western movies later, English departments have added film courses to their curricula, and scholarly journals such as *PMLA* and *Western American Literature* have published critical studies of movies—signs that this twentieth-century celluloid form of popular entertainment has been accepted for what it is: an art form so closely akin to drama and the novel that the criticism of it has found its natural home among literary studies. Western radio and television programs are also beginning to receive critical attention, as in Ralph Brauer's *The Horse, the Gun, and the Piece of Property: Changing Images of the TV Western* (1975).

Additional genres or sub-genres exist in western American literature. But in seeing literature only in terms of dozens of generic divisions, one runs the risk of sounding like Shakespeare's Polonius with his labels: "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." To avoid that risk and to shed more light on the literature, the following chapters treat only the major types of western literature; in the second part of *A Literary History of the American West*, there are chapters on major authors and on the sub-regions of the West; and in the third part, chapters on current trends in western literature. Our intention is that this variety of approaches—a sort of critical triangulation—will establish more cogently the nature and value of western American literature. As one part of that method of triangulation, the following study of the early development of genres in the West is essential, since, to return to Wellek and Warren, "The literary kind is not a mere name, for the aesthetic convention in which a work participates shapes its character" (p. 215).

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