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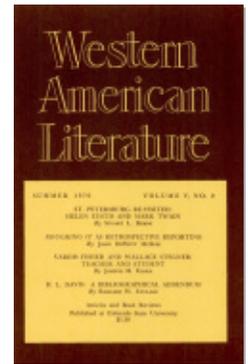
Walter Van Tilburg Clark by Max Westbrook (review)

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Reviews

Walter Van Tilburg Clark. By Max Westbrook. (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.; TUSAS 155, 1969. 166 pages, index. \$3.95.)

This is not an easy book; it is, on the contrary, a most complex—and intelligent—one, much different from what one usually thinks of as a Twayne book. For it is not just a routine presentation of an author, but, rather, an attempt to give the essence of the Western myth (I use this word in the best sense), or of the Western vision, through an exploration of the ideas and practice of the writer whom most of us, I believe, consider our finest Western novelist, Walter Van Tilburg Clark.

But, of course, what do any of us mean by “Western,” by the “Western vision”? Certainly not just the views of a writer who happens to live in the western United States; certainly not just those of the man who writes one more repetitive chapter about that conventional West which was invented for and by the movies (with the help of some novelists, yes); certainly not those of Leonard Cohen whose delayed adolescent prose (i.e., *Beautiful Losers*) Leslie Fiedler in his late middle age is seriously touting as a kind of Western.

The Western writer, who by definition must be something different from “eastern” writers, must also be more than west, cinematic, fakely mad, if he is to be really meaningful. And Max Westbrook, in a number of articles (see *South Dakota Review*, Summer '66, and *WAL*, Fall '68) has already made the summary statements of what he thinks that other, that authentic Western, writer should be. This book on Walter Clark is Westbrook's amplification, clarification, test.

The essence of the myth, as Westbrook perceives it, or rather the essence

of the vision of this true Western writer, i.e. and e.g., Clark, is based on what Westbrook calls "American sacrality":

'sacrality' because Clark believes that the authoritative voice of the unconscious has ontological status, and 'American' because Clark believes that man has a paradoxical obligation to recognize his ethical role in American democracy. Man's duty is to unify his sacred self and his historical self.

(The second chapter of the book, "The Western Esthetic," gives the full development of that statement—and this chapter is, for anyone really interested in Western writing, an absolutely necessary document.)

But this statement implies that the authentic Western writer, that is, the authentic Westerner, has a special relationship with the natural, in particular with the land, since he "can contact the primordial only through the language of land, place." This is not to be taken as a sentimental identification, but as an insight into the doubleness of the land, of nature, and so of man; the artist, as Westbrook says Clark does, must hold "that man's beliefs must accommodate both the brute force of nature and the affirmation of nature." Or, in other words, the true Western artist affirms, but he affirms ironically—an act of the conscious mind that is nevertheless the result of a deep unconscious knowledge.

It is this doubleness that is necessarily oneness that Westbrook believes that Clark, of all our Western writers, has probably best explored, felt, realized in his works, works that are as different as *The Ox-Bow Incident* and *The City of Trembling Leaves* in style and apparent subject matter because of the complexity of the vision, but which are still ordered, related, by that vision, a vision, finally, that seeks "an emotionally meaningful contact with our sources."

Westbrook's approach, then, is that of a kind of myth-criticism, but one is convinced that it is a truly valid myth-criticism, one that works out from the fiction rather than being imposed; if one notices Jung in the background, it is because Jung applies (and Clark himself wrote to Westbrook that, if he "were to feel any real interest in formal psychology, . . . I'd find Jung's historical perspective and archetypal figures a good deal more interesting and trustworthy than anything in Freud.")

Now, there are weaknesses in the book (a reviewer must always protect himself): it is more an expression of the esthetic theory than it is an application, and there is a good deal, too much, of repetition of the main ideas. Still, Westbrook covers Clark's writing, including his two master's theses, giving us exact and surprising insights and well defended judgments—and I should like to point to his chapter on *The Track of the Cat*, a work that he calls "perhaps the finest Western novel written." I think he proves it. All in all, then, Westbrook has given us a most important primary document and an excellent demonstration.

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