9. Romance and Nostalgia in The Virginian

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PART THREE

“Traces of a Vanished World” in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*

There is a zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies. The rest belongs to the dead machinery of the stage.

—William James, *The Will to Believe* (1897)
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wenty-five years old and depressed to the point of nervous exhaustion, Owen Wister followed his physician’s advice and sought rest with a change of scenery in the summer of 1885. When he left Philadelphia by train, bound for Wyoming, Wister was distraught by both his present circumstances and his prospective future, but the effect of the trip was immediate and dramatic. Wyoming, he wrote home to his mother, looked to him “like Genesis,” primitive and unspoiled, filled with promises of new life and adventures.1

In a journal entry from that first summer visit, Wister celebrated the mythic potential of the west, predicting “it won’t be a century before the West is simply the true America, with thought, type, and life of its kind.”2 Certainly there was something ironic and belated in Wister’s prophecy, especially because he first looked on the landscape only through the prism of modern industry, the railroad car window. When he emphasized the west as the land of the future, Wister must have been thinking of something other than the raw symbolic value of the frontier, which by then had already been saturating America for decades.

Indeed, not only as a traveler but even as an author, Wister was arriving late on the scene of the frontier west. All sections of the continental American West had been claimed as territories before Wister’s birth in 1860, and as Edwin Fussell has written, by that time “the West was no longer a field of boundless opportunity.... The figurative frontier and the teleological West were drained of expressive value.”3 Well before Wister’s time, the construction of American self-definition in relation to the frontier was a familiar literary topic, dominating many genres, from Puritan captivity narratives through travel diaries, emigrant guides, and Cooper’s Leather-Stocking Tales. In these texts and others, the land had been mapped by contradictions that prompted symbolic thought: American and European audiences knew the West as a land of freedom and lawless

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violence, hardship and potential wealth, savagery and civilization. Though he was young and the scenes were new to him, when Wister first looked on the Western landscape through the window of a transcontinental train, even he must have sensed the interpretive dilemma his generation faced in their engagement with Western mythology.

Wister was not alone, however, in this somewhat anachronistic enthusiasm; his writings were eagerly received in the literary establishment of the East without any label of belatedness. In fact, upon *The Virginian*'s publication, the reading public made Wister one of the most popular and influential authors in American literary history. Even now, critics acknowledge that this novel “is the template on which every Western since has been cut”; a century of critical attention has not always agreed on the quality of the novel or on particular approaches to its interpretation, but all attest to the fact that “[t]he most remarkable point about *The Virginian*’s influence is how thoroughgoing it has been.”

This Wyoming story of the courtship and marriage of a cowboy—complete with a Southern drawl—to a New England schoolteacher—descendant of Revolutionary heroes—became a prototype for a new American story and provided America with a new (if oddly belated) embodiment of a national hero. Traditional Western heroes had intrigued audiences with their isolation, independence, and inscrutability, and the Virginian has all of these traits. Critics throughout the twentieth century have proven the multiplicity of established symbolic roles that Wister’s hero can play, beyond even those of Western folklore. Whether seen as a “synthesis of Cooper’s opposition of nature and civilization with the gospel of success and progress” or as a fictionalized version of a past American icon—from Andrew Jackson or Theodore Roosevelt back to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson—the Virginian (the character and the novel) has been consistently placed within familiar, well-established contexts of the national imagination.

This chapter begins by surveying the romantic machinery that Wister inherited for the construction of this character, the surrounding cast, and the plot within which all of these figures would act. Here the relationship between the novel and the popular legends underwriting it is somewhat different from that in either of the two previous chapters. First of all, unlike Revolutionary or Puritan legend, Western lore is an industry unto itself; the odd prominence of the legends of Jane McCrea and John André during the Revolutionary years, for instance, does not have a direct parallel here, where at once there are more varieties of circulating stories as well a more immediate sense of the folktale’s function as entertainment within broader culture.
As with Cooper’s Spy and Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, early critics of The Virginian sometimes sought historical models for the central character, but this has not been part of my project in the use of popular legend in either of the two preceding chapters, nor is it here. In those two chapters I show how a particular narrative shape—a set of questions, expectations, and answers—is set up in certain popular tales and then recast—but now with only questions and expectations, not answers—in the form of the historical romance. Here, the materials interact differently, and so the structure of this chapter is different as well.

First (in the second part of this chapter) I provide an overview of the general trends of representation in the legends of the West; this I do not for particularities of narrative shape, but rather to illustrate a broad sense of the romance of frontier history, as emblematized by Western heroes preceding Wister’s novel. I then turn to an analysis of the novel (the third part of the chapter) to illustrate the ways in which the novel invokes and yet challenges these narrative bounds. Following this section of the analysis, I argue that the novel, in its late plot developments, returns to the narrow bounds of romance rather than leading readers outward into further historical questions, as Cooper and Hawthorne had done. Thus there is less in the way of specific historical material here, but further attention to a layered reading of Wister’s landmark novel as both “storyteller’s story” and plot romance.

WISTER’S WEST

While knowing that he had missed the actual years of the “Wild West,” still it seems evident from his writings that Wister sought and found glimpses of lingering novelties on his first trip to Wyoming. His return trips to the area were regular, and so it appears that in his experiences traveling west from 1885 on, perhaps Wister imagined that he had lived a condensed version of frontier history. In any case, when he published The Virginian in 1902, he crafted it into his own vision of a culminating romance of the frontier. By exaggerating the historical distance between its fictional setting and its cultural context, The Virginian assured readers of America’s safe remove from the risks of the Wild West. The dangerous allure of the “half-savage romance” was here packaged within a tale of the power of an individual frontiersman’s new and evolving virtues.

As a product of the distance Wister constructed between his own world and that of his fiction, a seemingly deliberate and structured nostalgia emerged to characterize readers’ relations to the novel. This crafted
nostalgia dominates particularly the early portions of the novel, where the perspective of its tenderfoot narrator—a distinctly Eastern consciousness—brings to a new century’s readers a growing sense of familiarity and comfort toward the once mysterious, even menacing, Western frontier. That nostalgia remains (though less overtly) entwined with later sections of the novel as well, even as the narrator, as character, becomes much less visible. When reviewers of *The Virginian*—and even Wister himself—spoke of the novel’s hero, it was with affection driven by this determined nostalgia, reflective of the troubling knowledge of the vividly recent loss of this rich world: Reviewers lamented that *The Virginian*, as a “final apotheosis of the cowboy,” reminded them longingly of a world that was believed to have “almost completely vanished—although it was real enough a quarter of a century ago.” Wister encourages exactly this sentiment, as he writes in his preface:

[The cowboy] will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday. You will no more see him gallop out of the unchanging silence than you will see Columbus on the unchanging sea come sailing from Palos with his caravels.

And yet the horseman is still so near our day that in some chapters of this book, which were published separately at the close of the nineteenth century, the present tense was used. It is true no longer. . . . Time has flowed faster than my ink. (xlviii)

Clearly this setting is something other than the familiar Old West of tall tales and legends. By placing the romance on the frontier, the historic borderland within which traces of savagery and civilization were long believed to have mingled, Wister enhances that sense of immediate and self-constructing nostalgia, and the force of this imagined distance is further highlighted in the comparison of the cowboy’s remoteness to that of Columbus. Here Wister offers a central imaginative shift; with the cowboy as the new Columbus, the West is not future only, but also a site of origins for America. In these ways—as Western hero or as symbol of the nation’s future now visualized in its origins—the Virginian as a character exists most powerfully within a romance of nostalgia.

But the backward glance of nostalgia—no matter how carefully and deliberately crafted by the novel’s narrative frame—does not prove strong enough to hold as a design enclosing frontier history. Like *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Wister’s novel speaks to its contemporary culture by evaluating and even challenging the systems of belief it inherits and in doing so exposes established modes of cultural memory as the outmoded machin-
ery they had so quickly become. By playing out expected plots, *The Virginian*, as narrative, enacts a search for a different form of memory. Within this process, the nostalgia deliberately offered as an opening paradigm will be among the first forms of memory to be proven inadequate and in need of revision. Nostalgia is not abandoned as a narrative model, however; it is instead reinvigorated in a new form. Thus the novel becomes a key cultural artifact because it finds new “living options” still viable among the outmoded machineries of the romance, vital methods of historicizing to be excavated from the debris of a century of nationalist storytelling.11

This chapter goes on to consider Wister’s attempt to animate these new living options as both invocations and critiques of the power of tradition, from Western tall tale to the historical romance of the East. I argue that the narrative form he constructs bespeaks a distinct struggle for a culturally controlled use of character, setting, and other familiar trappings of romance and that the achievement of the novel is ironically the proof that such a struggle for narrative control must eventually fail. With this failure, the novel shows that history, shattered as a monolith, will now cover the land even more visibly, materially, and powerfully, blowing across the plains in dangerous and often unrecognizable fragments.

Ironically it is the Virginian’s identity—seemingly mapped with the figurations of previous frontier heroes—that first signals the existence and then persistence of these dangerous and decontextualized fragments of the historical. Oddly and noticeably, the Virginian had always haunted audiences with ambiguity. There was no consensus among Wister’s friends about the proper fate for this hero. After seeing the character’s early appearance in print in the short story “Balaam and Pedro,” a fellow law clerk asked Wister, “Is that man dead, that Virginian?” Wister claimed that he did not know, that he had cast the Virginian there as a minor figure, a bystander to the action who disappears into the forest, perhaps to meet his fate at the hands of Indians. The clerk was more than dissatisfied, declaring to Wister, “If you kill that man, I’ll never speak to you again.”12 This threat, Wister recalls, prompted him to revive the character for a novel, and more significantly, it seems that Wister’s own attachment to the nameless cowboy grew in kind. He would not kill his cowboy even when so many of his plot’s circumstances mark him for death. Henry James objected to the novel’s sentimental ending: “Nothing,” he wrote to Wister, “should have induced me to unite him to the little Vermont person, or to dedicate him in fact to achieved parentage, prosperity, maturity. . . . I thirst for his blood. I wouldn’t have let him live & be happy; I should have made him perish in his flower & in some splendid sombre way.”13
James’s instinctive critique points to the fact that nothing marks this novel as a story bearing witness to the simple solutions of the familiar struggles of romance, and what the law clerk, Wister, and James all share in their response to this character is the sense that he is larger than his context, that he cannot be treated as a pawn in a narrative driven by forces outside of his own character. This is, in large part, a comment focused on the mythic strength of the character Wister created. At the same time, it suggests that the novel in which he has his freest play must be a clear testament to the limits of designed narrative resolutions.

When Wister addresses the question of why the Virginian is never given a name, he writes in the preface to his 1928 edition of the novel, “Who was the Virginian? The answer is—metabolism” (xliii).14 From that answer alone it is clear just how little this character has in common with the heroes and villains of the Old West. He is the life of change embodied, a process inseparable from the product he creates. Whoever he is, he exists beyond the boundaries of a particular fictional character, and Wister attaches a strong historiographical significance to his life. The Virginian is anything but a frozen icon. Despite the mythic qualities that threaten to seize him, the Virginian absolutely resists being frozen in time—he will not be fixed in death or in dramatic climax, and this marked adaptability in relation to historical process distinguishes Wister’s cowboy from the conventional frontier hero of Western lore.

Through this model, beyond experiments in character, Wister’s novel presents a theoretical perspective on historical narrative: When the historiographical significance of one life is transmitted (like metabolism) to a new generation, it faces new sets of circumstances, new contexts.15 Its transmission signifies continuity joined with unpredictable adaptation, an inherited map of the historical imagination, updated to include the boundary shifts and landmarks established by new life histories. Merged with these ideas of biological adaptation, however, Wister’s novel conveys a living model of the ways that cultural narratives, no matter how deeply ingrained with pattern, remain vulnerable to the intrusions of history; adaptation, that is, is here directly focused on the ability to negotiate the surprises emergent from an unknown past. In this novel no one character has the sustained ability to live and convey the archetypal mysteries newly assumed by the form of the historical romance, and so these fragments of history acquire an agency of their own, an agency that directly challenges the development of the characters into modern heroes.

In these ways—both explicitly through character and implicitly through form—the novel suggests that the symbolic systems of narrative
romance had left inadequate methods for telling a national story by the end of the century. Rather than abandoning those limited symbolic frames, however, Wister’s novel leans heavily on those old paradigms once again, and the pressure of the Virginian’s myth of identity exposes their common weakness: Wister’s novel clearly reveals that, as narrative frames, both nostalgia and progress are similar and deeply intertwined expressions of a manifestly desperate search for order and continuity to overwrite the increasingly present ambiguities of experience.

Whether seeing in the Virginian echoes of Revolutionary patriots, outlaws of the Old West, turn-of-the-century figures such as Buffalo Bill or Roosevelt’s frontiersman, readers would slowly discover that the Virginian is only superficially, perhaps even deceptively, familiar. His resemblance to both the founders and early heroes of the Old West first works predictably, overtly, but then paradoxically turns to illustrate important symbolic distinctions through a series of reversals. All of the Virginian’s traits that suggest such myths prove themselves to be starkly time-bound, and all in turn cast suspicion on the highly crafted nostalgia that the book announces at its opening.

Perhaps what is most surprising is that even the critique of these myths is time-bound and usurped by the end of the narrative. Like The Spy and The Scarlet Letter, The Virginian animates historical secrets within its narrative silences. Unlike these earlier texts, however, Wister’s novel recovers the power of design—not in compliance with the early model of nostalgia offered by the text’s opening, but rather by a revised design that is no less romantic. In fact, ever since its publication, the novel has troubled readers with its sudden acquiescence to the familiarities of romance. A pattern of problems in form, character, and plot all suggest that if nostalgia is at the heart of this novel, The Virginian is an exercise in a decidedly unfamiliar form of that sentiment.

The romance of the frontier is only one layer of Wister’s story, and its resolution leaves many questions unanswered, questions turning reader attention not backward but forward. The nostalgia that The Virginian had invoked from its beginnings is closely intertwined with nineteenth-century nationalist beliefs in progress, and the interdependence of these ideas is written directly into the central character’s narrative life: By the end of the romance, Wister’s hero has triumphed according to both Eastern and Western values. Not only is he a renegade cowboy turned into a devoted husband, but he is also a cowboy-turned-capitalist, whose shrewd investment in land rich with coal promises to carry his family comfortably from frontier to industrial-era living. As a survivor in a Darwinian world, he is a virtual machine of national progress, demonstrating continuity with
original pioneer strengths and a progressive movement on the scale of economic and social virtues.

In fact, Wister goes to some trouble to extend the plot (somewhat awkwardly) beyond the anticipated showdown between hero and villain, to a telescopic conclusion ensuring the fairy-tale domestication and modernization of the Western hero. Henry James was certainly justified in pointing out that the longevity of Wister’s hero is somewhat perverse. The Virginian far outlasts the expected life span of the hero of historical romance, with the final scene of the novel picturing the aged cowboy settled into domesticity and slated “to live a long while” yet (392). However, this seemingly forcible extension of plot appealed to readers.

No doubt much of the novel’s overwhelming popularity at the turn of the century was a response to that vision of progress born of nostalgia, the romantic sketch of American incorporation that left to the twentieth century a new order of nationhood—imagined as a product of an economic and regionalist evolution—ascendant on the frontier, superseding the older conflicts of East and West, North and South. In the context of turn-of-the-century America, the nostalgia implied in this model of memory becomes a yearning not simply for lost symbols and forms, but also more broadly for a system of perpetual order. Here, that is, nostalgia for the wild and innocent West was an invitation to return to a world comfortable in its belief in social evolution, a world where change would promise to clarify rather than to disrupt the known patterns of culture. In history, literature, and social science, this myth of unity had become fundamental to the national symbolic identity of the West around the turn of the century.17

As Jane Tompkins notes, however, the novel’s romance is only one layer of its story.18 Woven among this highly developed, even strangely paradoxical, machinery of the romance of progress, Wister’s nostalgia serves an atypical purpose not only within the plot but also within literary history: The Virginian’s adaptability has ensured his survival into another century, but precisely that elastic conformity has drained his character of its primary authority and power. His mythic frontier individualism snare him into the world that his independence demands he should scorn; ironically, the traits of the frontier loner become effective only as mechanisms of definitive control over the ever-narrowing world that we expect the hero to elude and even to disdain. As long as he is contained within such structures, his popularity is easy to explain, and yet his power as cultural icon is limited. Precisely because of his capacity to represent so many sides of American life, the Virginian is trapped within a carefully framed symbolic system that inheres in the very concept of nostalgia: He can neither challenge nor threaten the symbolic vocabulary of
his culture because—at so many levels and in so many ways—he so perfectly conforms to it.

Cowboys had been ruling the Wild West in legend and fiction for decades, but Wister’s hero pleased audiences with more than the mastery of a type. To the usually static, even timeless, cowboy of folklore, Wister added new dimensions of change and adaptability. Yet in this ability to grow, the Virginian is not simply a survivor, one who escapes or rises above the expected traps of the fictional hero, nor is he a timeless allegory, absolutely standing for any one aspect of his social world. Instead, early in the novel the Virginian makes his primary claim to heroism in his unique ability to negotiate, even control, an increasingly changing world. Surprisingly, while the Virginian is a hero insofar as he controls his world, that ability to control makes the Virginian anything but representative; that is, his unique capacity for control does not lie in the expected realm of the powers of the mythic frontiersman. Through an analysis incorporating a view of Wister’s hero, the effect of the hero on narrative structure and its possible readings, and the relevance of such structure to broad changes in social theory at the turn of the century, this chapter argues that the Virginian is a unique “Western” hero because he both stands for and illustrates the limits of evolutionary understandings of history.

In this context, with Frederick Jackson Turner’s speech on “The Significance of the Frontier” (1893), Wister’s romance stood at the climax of a century-long project to define the changing continent. While Turner’s reception at the exposition in Chicago was at best lukewarm, it would not be long before the impact of his theory would be clear. As his thesis seeped into cultural consciousness, it was evident that he had given voice to a tremendously important idea that had been in the air for some time and that—now as the century was ending—had become urgent. In 1919 Turner himself recalled, “the ideas underlying my ‘Significance of the Frontier’ would have been expressed in some form or other in any case. They were part of the growing American consciousness of itself.”

Wister’s book is shaped by that same growing consciousness, and it synthesizes that transitional intellectual moment as well—here within a different layer of cultural expression. For both Turner and Wister, the frontier West had at its core a simple and powerful myth of continuity, moving (for instance) from dream through evolution to fulfillment, from the raw West through the real West to the West as symbol, or from the easterner’s West through the emigrant’s West to the synthesis of America at the turn of the century. What The Virginian proves, however, is that even the uncontested triumph of continuity is not without its own losses.