Dancing with Our Skeletons: Some Reflections on Time

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I turned fifty this year, and, all of a sudden, Time has taken on a whole new meaning for me. Thomas Mann, in The Beloved Returns, wrote, “Hold fast to time. Guard it, watch over it, every hour, every minute. Unregarded it slips away, like a lizard, smooth, slippery, faithless, a pixy wife.” I determined to regard my remaining time on earth like a jealous lover.

It helped when my daughter, for a birthday present, took me to France for the first time in my life to meet Marie-Paule, a woman with whom I have been corresponding for twenty-three years and had never met, and the family of the young French girl, Isabelle, who spent several summers on our farm over fifteen years ago. But that, in turn, made me realize how quickly those intervening years had slipped away from me.

My obsession with Time has also made me notice the many references to temporality in the literature I have been reading. My favorite, and the one that is the genesis for my topic today, is from Sherman Alexie’s The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. He writes:

There are things you should learn. Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you. Maybe you don’t wear a watch, but your skeletons do, and they always know what time it is. Now, these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming. …

Sometimes, though, your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, breathe a little. Maybe they’ll make you promises you want to hear. …

Sometimes your skeletons will dress up as beautiful Indian women and ask you to slow dance. …

But no matter what they do, keep walking, keep moving. And don’t wear a watch. Hell, Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That’s how it is. We are all trapped in the now. (21-22)
I began searching for connections to this passage in my own life, in the literature I have been reading and teaching, and in the life of the Western Literature Association. I asked myself: “How do our personal, literary, and communal pasts and our expectations for the future affect us at 10:20 A.M. in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on October 14, 1997, trapped together in the now?”

Turn around and look at the skeletons that are walking by each of you!

When I looked, I realized that I have led several lives in my half of a century. Behind me is the skeleton of a country girl riding bareback on a horse through the wheat fields; another skeleton of a farmer’s wife who fixed lunch for field hands; and another of a mother who rocked babies, read them books, and sat on cement bleachers for ten years of volleyball, basketball, and football games. Then I looked beside me and saw the skeletons of a university professor, writer, and past president of the Western Literature Association. What a motley crowd!

Reading daily about the approaching new millennium forces me to constantly consider the skeletons walking ahead of me, too. Even now the economy is gearing up to cater to all of the aging needs of my baby-boomer generation, to help us spend those TIAA and CREF funds that we have been watching grow over the years as we corrected essays, attended committee meetings, and wrote papers for conferences. The skeletons of Post-Tenure Review, Early Retirement Buyout, Medicare, and Social Insecurity look back at me over their shoulders. I am really not ready to think about wills or assisted-living; right now, I’d like to slow dance with the present.

The rapidity of social, scientific, and economic change has made Time a dominant force in our literature as well as our lives. We all have a need to arrange life and stories about life into a temporal pattern that we can understand. But how do we go about doing that? In Alice in Wonderland, the King of Hearts advises the White Rabbit on how to tell his story: “Begin at the beginning … and go on till you come to the end: then stop”(161).

Even literature has its skeletons. Theories of temporality date back to Aristotle and the classical narratives which adhered to the unities of time, place, and action, all neatly organized around a beginning, a middle, and an end, emblematic of traditional society.

In my high school and college classes, that linear progression in the literature I studied—exposition, conflict, complication, and suspense moving smoothly to climax and denouement—mirrored the forward movement of my own concept of life once upon a time—grade school, junior high, high school, college, marriage, family—and they lived happily ever after. “Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end.” However, I soon discovered that Life and Time aren’t so tidy.

In 1889, Henri Bergson complicated Aristotle’s premise in Time and Free Will, explaining his concept of durée, or duration: time “untouched by the conception of space … a state in which we do not part the present from the past or from the future. … We do not set up time in any order; rather all states melt into one. … There is space in which objects may be enumerated, and there is duration in which one state of consciousness flows into the next” (Church 6-7).

Loren Eiseley concretely experienced such a merging with Time while floating in the Platte River. In The
*Immense Journey*, he writes: “I was streaming over ancient sea beds thrust aloft where giant reptiles had once sported; I was wearing down the face of time and trundling cloud-wreathed ranges into oblivion” (19). For Eiseley, Time and Timelessness meld. He saw that even though each individual measures time by the dates of his or her own birth and eventual death, one is never isolated in the ever-flowing stream of life. The life of the mind, psychological time, often defies the indifferent ticking of the clock.

In addition to psychological time, the renaissance of ethnic mythologies and oral traditions and the explosion of new minority literature faces us with culturally different concepts of time. Paula Gunn Allen notes in *The Sacred Hoop* that “acronology is the favored structuring device of American Indian novelists since N. Scott Momaday selected it for organizing *House Made of Dawn*” (147). “Acronicity is the kind of time in which the individual and the universe are ‘tight,’” states Allen, “not ignorant of the future” nor “unconscious of the past” (150). Traditional tribal narratives, freed from a particular time line, event, or main character, often possess a circular structure. Meaning piles upon meaning; stories form by accretion. “Ultimately,” Allen believes, “Indian time is a concept based on a sense of propriety, on a ritual understanding of order and harmony” (154).

So to which theoretical skeletons of the past or present should we listen? What kinds of skeletons wait ahead? Many believe that temporality in narrative (and in Life, I might add) cannot be reduced to the polarities of order/disorder, harmony/disharmony, or chronology/acronicity. In “Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations,” Barbara L. Pittman suggests a “mediative reading” between cultures that “focuses on the dialogic relationship between the two cultures represented” and “creates a bridge that not only allows either culture to be viewed through the lens of the other but also reveals the complex exchanges inherent in such a reading and in a nation composed of multiple, coexisting Americas” (777).

In Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, for example, the disconnected road scenes, which involve many of the novel’s main characters, fuse time and space yet involve “a movement away from linear continuity toward a postmodern, anti-linear discontinuity” (Pittman 780). The motif of the road from the Euramerican literary tradition, believes Pittman, “can compete via dialogue” with the disconnected yet cyclical sequences of Erdrich’s culturally inspired narrative pattern (783-84).

In literature, then, we can enter into a multichronologic world where past, present, and future walk together like Alexie’s skeletons. But, is it only in literature that we can escape the constraints of Time? Or does the visionary pattern found in literature extend to communities? Do the skeletons of Time have something to say to us about the past, present, and future of the Western Literature Association?

As a national association, we have a strong heritage of leadership and scholarship—lots of skeletons are walking behind us! When J. Golden Taylor wrote the “Editorial” introducing the first issue of *Western American Literature* in the spring of 1966, he predicted that a “new phase in Western literary scholarship ha[d] begun” that would “make a significant contribution to the cultural development of the West” (3). He believed that western literary scholars should commit themselves “to the serious study of all types of Western writing” and that the literature of the West needed to be recognized and taken seriously, not only at home but also abroad.
“We do not mean that we have arrived,” Taylor stated, “but at least we have begun to move in the right direction” (5).

We must remember the goals set by our founders and continue to dialogue with the past. Last year, the WLA Conference in Lincoln, Nebraska, held jointly with the Western History Association, stressed the importance of the constant interaction of the past with the present. Americans are future-oriented and prone to historical forgetfulness, writes Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Edwin M. Yoder Jr. in *The Historical Present*. However, he argues that history, far from being a dry accumulation of facts, is a fascinating inquiry into “transformations.” Patricia Nelson Limerick concurs. In “The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual,” she argues that “Turner was, after all, one of the historical profession’s most consistent spokesmen for the necessity of updating our thinking about the past in response to current events” (62). This process of rethinking, or of “Revisioning” the past, as we emphasized in Wichita, is vital to our life as an association.

Much of our present has flowered from our rich past. In the “Introduction” to the WLA’s *Literary History of the American West*, Jim Maguire states that “the first stage in the literary history of the West is the literature of the frontier. … Every literature begins with such a seedtime, which can be profitably studied for its own sake and for what it reveals about the work that grows from it” (3). This tradition continues today in our association, as seen by the tribute we pay to our founders through our awards: the Deb and Edith Wylder Award for valuable contributions to the WLA, the Don D. Walker Prize for excellence in a published article, the J. Golden Taylor Award for outstanding scholarly papers written by graduate students, and a new Editorial Fellowship being considered in honor of Tom Lyon.

Moreover, WLA can empathize with “outsiders” excluded from the literary canon, for western scholarship itself has a history of “critical condescension” that was, according to Taylor, “notoriously uninformed and prejudiced” (3). We have had to prove to the world that western literature is not just dime novels about outlaws and cowboys. And, as a “regional” literature within the larger geography of American literature, we have had to fight for rightful recognition. Because of our own battle, we can and must include in our canon all of the voices that comprise our region’s literary history.

Donald Worster in “Beyond the Agrarian Myth” urges scholars to revise their vision of the American West so that “the invaded and subject people’s of the West … be given a voice in the region’s history.” He believes that “the West has, in fact, been a scene of intense struggles over power and hierarchy, not only between the races but also between classes, genders, and other groups within white society” (21). Moreover, “the drive for economic development of the West was often a ruthless assault on nature and has left behind it much death, depletion, and ruin” (18).

Where has WLA traditionally stood in regard to Worster’s challenge? Has WLA given a voice to our region’s subject people? Have we noted the struggles within our Euramerican society? Have we addressed the issue of environment? Analyzing our own scholarly tradition, beginning with the first Annual Bibliography of Studies in Western American Literature in 1967 and progressing at ten-year intervals to the current 1997 listing, I
discovered some pertinent trends and transformations.

In the first Annual Bibliography published in *Western American Literature* in 1967, the three authors eliciting the most critical inquiry were John Steinbeck (14), Jack London (8), and Willa Cather (7). One article was published on nature (Tom Lyon’s work on Washington Irving’s wilderness), one on women writers, two concerning Native American subjects (a bibliography of Frank Waters and a critique of Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man*), and one historical piece entitled *The Negro Cowboys*. There were no articles about Hispanic, Asian American, or Canadian writers. The winter 1967 journal also published the WLA membership listing: 204 from 27 states, but none from Canada. We were off to a slow start, but we were on our way.

By the Winter 1977, the range of subjects in the Annual Bibliography had widened. Robinson Jeffers (25) held the lead, followed by Steinbeck (23), and London (9). Cather and Twain trailed with 6 articles each. However, two new subject listings were added: one on Nature (5) and one entitled “Mexican American” (2). Barbara Meldrum published “Images of Women in Western American Literature,” Brown Weber wrote about “Multi-ethnic Origins and American Literature Studies,” and David J. Wilson analyzed “Nature in Western Popular Literature.” Fueled by the turmoil of the seventies, WLA was keeping pace.

By 1987, WLA research was becoming more inclusive. The Annual Bibliography listing added sections on Native American writers (29) and Chicanos (20). Mark Twain lead the pack with 75 articles, followed by Willa Cather (25). Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko, Ray Young Bear, Zitkala Sa, and Mourning Dove added their names to the listings of western American writers as did Canada’s Margaret Atwood. The study of the West in film had also become a subject of critical inquiry.

In the WLA’s current Bibliography, an amazing transformation has taken place. General section headings now include Canada (71), Native American (51), Environment (18), History (10), Canadian Aboriginal (9), Asian American (8), Chicano/a (5), and Film (2). Willa Cather usurped the lead (49), followed by Canadian Robert Kroetsch (21) and Mark Twain and Robinson Jeffers with 17 each. The individual listings of authors grew from 35 in 1967 to 138 in 1997.

Carlos Fuentes, Latin American novelist, critic, and essayist, wrote that “the future can only be a creative community if it belongs to a shared past” (344). I believe that WLA can take pride in its past, not only for its awareness of regional, cultural, and social differences, but its continuing and ever-increasing inclusiveness. As educators and writers, we must continue to open our ranks and actively encourage readers and writers from diverse cultures. Eric Cheyfitz in “What Work Is There for Us to Do?” points out that “a significant part of the population who are represented in the texts of current multicultural curricula” do not have access themselves “to the institutions in which these texts are taught” (845). Dialogues with differing texts and contexts must, then, be supplemented with diverse readers.

Now that the new millennium is approaching, where is western scholarship headed? What skeletons are walking in front of us? I see at least four of them.
Some critics warn us that we are becoming lost in the “Age of Criticism.” We seem to be slow dancing with theory. Tey Diana Rebolledo in “The Politics of Poetics” asserts that scholars are too preoccupied with theoretical structures, stating, “I personally find it difficult to have theory (male oriented, French feminist, post structural or whatever is the current fad) be what dictates what we find in our literature. I prefer to have the literature speak for itself and as a critic try to organize and understand it” (208). She believes that “we should internalize and revolutionize theoretical discourse that comes from outside ourselves, accepting that which is useful and discarding that which is merely meant to impress” (211). As scholars, we sometimes find ourselves writing for one another in academic jargon on specialized and trivial subjects that excludes public audiences, and, occasionally, even each other.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn sees the future of our profession differently. She suggests that critical discourse forces writers to be analytical, thoughtful, and acquire confidence in their own literary tastes and interpretations. She states, “The intellect must be held accountable to humanity, and I know of no way other than ‘critical’ evaluation of one’s fellow human beings to say what the accountability amounts to in terms of our creative lives, intellectual pursuits, and human communities. For those who don’t buy that argument, there is, of course, day-time television, the prime-time miniseries, or any John Wayne movie” (5).

Somehow, we as scholars must confront this skeleton of our future and mediate our differences, forming a dialogue between the creative act and the multiple readings inherent in such texts, without excluding one or the other.

A second issue that will confront us as the year 2000 approaches is the increasing importance of international interests. The American West—with its emerging immigrants from Europe, Asia, Mexico, and even freed slaves of African descent—has a history of international connections and significance. William G. Robbins in “Laying Siege to Western History” writes that “the historic connectedness of the West to wider geographical and cultural phenomena, to reciprocal continental and transoceanic relations, has never been so central to scholarly discussions about the region until recently” (183). Eric J. Sundquist agrees. In “American Literary History—the New Century,” he predicts that “the literary criticism of a coming generation will encompass a literature of the Americas” (793).

The Western Literature Association, I believe, has taken the scholarly lead in border-crossing. In 1996, after electing our first Canadian president, we held our first International conference in Vancouver, crossing our northern border and broadening our scholarly horizons to the northwest. This year, in New Mexico, we will become more aware of our southern border neighbor, Mexico, and its significant impact on western literature. Next year, we’ll cross the border to Canada again, this time experiencing another culture in the northeast. And in 1999, we’ll travel to yet another foreign country: California! Just kidding!

As western scholars, we can lead the way and become pioneers in new lands, both geographic and literary. This time, however, with our knowledge of the past dangers of colonization and a recognition of the errors and atrocities committed in the name of progress, perhaps we can enter these new territories with respect for the
integrity of native inhabitants, their cultures, and their lands.

And while we are crossing new borders, what about, as a third issue, taking that dreaded step east across an old boundary, the mighty Mississippi? In 1989, Ian Marshall from Pennsylvania State University attended his first Western Literature Association meeting. Subsequently, he published an article in WAL entitled “The Easterner in Western Literature—And in the Western Literature Association.” After acknowledging that he became a member due largely to “the sociability and collegiality of the group,” he contended that “as friendly as members of the WLA are to Easterners as individuals, I have found them to be hostile to the idea of the Easterner.” He traced this hostility to the tradition of western literature, with authors such as Mark Twain, Owen Wister, Stephen Crane, and even Larry McMurtry representing Easterners as “inept greenhorns,” furthering the long-held stereotype of the East as “the stronghold of hoity-toity literary theory, all concept and idea with no muscle or meaning or practical application” (230).

Marshall’s concern was well-founded. In 1966, in “The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment,” Vardis Fisher wrote that he could not “see any reason why we should pay attention to supercilious Eastern minds that sometimes come among us” and that Westerners should “declare their independence of the emotionally immature, intellectually sterile, and morally bankrupt literary establishment in the Northeast” with their “cult of the unintelligible” (255, 244, 251).

Marshall’s contention that “the West is a state of mind as much as it is a place west of the Mississippi” (232) is substantially the same as that of Susan Rosowski’s, who, in her Past President’s Address in 1988, crossed the river when she included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller into the ranks of western writers. As an organization, perhaps we, too, need to head east and visit our landscapes of origin.

Still another skeleton beckons us. In addition to crossing geographical boundaries, we must continue to cross genre and disciplinary lines to keep our scholarship vital. The first annual meeting of the Western Literature Association was cosponsored by the American Studies Association. In October 1966, WLA acted as cosponsor of the Western Americana and Folklore section meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association. In recent years, the American Society of Literature and the Environment has become a vital part of our association, and, of course, last year we met jointly for the first time with the Western History Association. As J. Golden Taylor forecast in 1966, “With western literary scholars organized and committed to the serious study of all types of Western writing, our region is giving up its adolescent inferiority complex and aimlessness and is assuming its mature responsibilities” (5).

Western Literature and the Western Literature Association, like me, is no longer a naive country child riding bareback across the plains. We’ve all matured, not only individually but collectively. And we will continue to assume our scholarly responsibilities if we remember not to slow dance with our skeletons—either from the past, the present, or the future. We must keep walking, in step with our skeletons—even if we want to sit down, take a rest, breathe a little. We all have a past we can rely on and learn from, a present that is expanding our intellectual horizons, and a future full of promise. “Remember the future,” admonishes Fuentes. “It happened
once. It is happening all the time” (351).

Works Cited


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