WLA—James Work's Past President's Address

THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION'S
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Who's Afraid of The Virginian's Wolf?[1]

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WLA past-presidential address, given fall 1992 in Reno, Nevada

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The Reverend Doctor McBride calls at Judge Henry's ranch. His visit puts a strain on western hospitality: the judge finds him overbearing, overly rapacious, and generally irritating. Dr. McBride's sermon stresses that all cowboys are low-minded sinners: "The cow-boys were told that not only could they do no good but that if they did contrive to, it would not help them. Dr. McBride never thought once of the lives of these waifs … they were invisible dots in creation." (Ch. XXI)

Offended by this presumption and moral self-righteousness, the Virginian unleashes his humor and sets it on the good reverend doctor. The Virginian spends the night pretending to be suffering from repeated attacks of sin and temptation. With each recurrence, he awakens Dr. McBride to sit with him and preach to him. Morning comes, and the exhausted minister still fails to see that he is the butt of a clownish joke. "I'll worry through the day somehow without yu'," says the Virginian. "And to-night you can turn your wolf loose on me again."

Like McBride's cowboy congregation, we sometimes feel intimidated by important critics and reviewers when they tell us that Western literature is insignificant, or that we have been going at it all wrong. It is "regional," and that's that. Some of us might be embarrassed, a little, by that scene in Wister's novel: here is a refined, aristocratic scholar of letters and theology being subjected to the humor of the barroom and the cattle train.

The Western cowboy, as seen in *The Virginian* or in Andy Adams's *Log of a Cowboy*, enjoys "turning his wolf loose," having a good time, enjoying satire and practical jokes. Often, it *is* coarse. But I have suffered through more than my share of stuffy literary essays. I have heard my share of dusty, pretentious presentations. I advocate turning our Western wolf loose. Faced with bad writing or false theories of history, confronted with dishonest politicians and exploitative "developers," whether of real estate or culture, let us turn that wolf loose. Let us demonstrate that we prefer honesty over refinement, that we prefer self-amusement to self-aggrandizement. Let's set that wolf loose and see if we can run the phonies right off the range.

The Editor, or "*I'm* Supposed to Know?"

So long as that wolf is loose, we will preserve a literature that will be looked upon as being "regional." And the American West can remain the largest literary "region" in the history of letters. But if we are going to remain

“regional” in our literary future, what IS our literary future? A person asked me that because she knew that I always have an answer. And I DID have an answer for her. I told her that I didn’t know. I didn’t have a ghost of an idea. But now I’m editor of this anthology, and I’m expected to know stuff like that.

I didn’t realize, back then, that people see an anthology editor as some kind of an expert. In fact, I was in agreement with the writer who said that “being an editor does not necessarily disqualify a person from being an intelligent citizen.”

Well, I learned. First, I learned how to identify an editor. You can do this, for instance, at lunch. Let’s say that four persons are at a table and that you know that one of them is a writer, one is a marketing director, one is an agent, and one is an editor. I have learned how to tell them apart:

(1) The person studying the menu is the marketing director. However, he is not interested in the selections; he’s trying to determine who printed the menu and how much it cost.
(2) One person is adding accent marks over the French words on the menu, correcting the punctuation, and interrogating the waiter to find out exactly what is in each entrée and how much it would cost if some of the ingredients were deleted. This is the editor.

(3) The person already eating is the writer.

(4) The person who has finished eating and is making sandwiches from everyone’s leftovers is the agent.

When the check comes, you can confirm your identification:

(1) The editor pays the tab, then leaves a wrinkled $5 bill for a tip, then picks up the worn five and substitutes five crisp new $1 bills, then picks those up and puts the five down again, then picks up the five again and puts down four of the new $1’s.
(2) The marketing director picks up the four $1’s, counts them carefully, puts two back down and pockets the other two.

(3) The writer is still eating.

(4) When the check shows up, the agent is in the bathroom.

I also learned a few basic laws of editing, something akin to Mr. Murphy’s laws. As an editor, by the way, I agree with a popular bumper sticker: Murphy was an optimist. The laws:

(1) The number of days between today and the next deadline must be kept INVERSELY proportionate to the number of pages required.
(2) If an introduction explains a concept so clearly that no reader can possibly misunderstand it, some reader will.

(3) Anything not protected by copyright will appear in a new edition two weeks prior to yours.

(4) Anything protected by copyright will go into public domain a week after your permission check has been

cashed.

(5) If a writer sends along a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the return of the manuscript, use it.

Periods Past, Present, and Future

Another thing I didn't know about editing was that I would be responsible for making up "literary periods." And I sure as hell didn't know that I would be asked to make up periods for literature yet to be written. But that is exactly what happened.

Just HOW literary periods are born is something of a mystery. Dame Edith Sitwell said it well, in her 1926 book: "Every hundred years or so it becomes necessary for a change to take place in the body of poetry … a fresh movement appears and produces a few great men, and once more the force and vigor die from the results of age; the movement is carried on by weak and worthless imitators, and a change becomes necessary again."

Going back to major literatures of the ancient and modern worlds, we *can* see that literature has consistently reflected cultural temperaments. A period of legend and religious history is followed by a period of heroic poetry and political history; then comes a re-awakening or a refinement, producing a renaissance of classical literary forms or art for art's sake; this is followed by a romantic reaction, which in its turn is neglected as another classic or neo-classic era of intellectualism thrives. Next we see romanticism again, only this time it is more refined, more self-conscious; it then becomes quaint and begins to fade when scientific exploration and intellectual inquiry capture the public mind. That leads to more realism and symbolism; symbolism evolves or spawns impressionism and introspection. And so it goes, giving English literature (for example) a progress through a Beowulf, a Bede, a Chaucer, a Shakespeare, a Donne, a Pope, a Blake, a Wordsworth, a Byron, a Browning and an Arnold, a James and a Conrad, a Forster and a Virginia Woolf.[2]

It often happens that a historical event signals the beginning or end of a literary period. The link between the French Revolution and English Romanticism is a familiar example.

In *Prose and Poetry of the American West*, Coronado's expedition of 1540 provides a literary line of demarcation with unwritten native legends on one side and "entrada" or discovery literature on the other. The second period starts with the appearance of the first steam-powered boat on the upper Missouri in 1832; this is a symbol of a new culture, a culture ready to create its own new myths.

The decade around 1890 again saw signs of important change. The "frontier" was declared closed. Geronimo surrendered. Pulp magazines came into demand. The Populist movement supplanted the pioneer movement.

Around 1915, the U.S. involvement in World War I symbolized another major shift; throughout the ensuing era of world wars and police actions and supportive alliances we saw literature changing its face once again.

I was afraid that someone would challenge the literary periods into which my anthology is divided. But so far I have been lucky: only one reviewer has raised the issue. There *was*, however, that one particular late night intellectual discussion. My best friend posed the Dreaded Question. "What comes next?" If another "period" of

literature shows up in the next ten or one hundred years, what will it be called? What kind of literature is coming? No one else has ever thought to ask me that, and I must admit that I am a bit at a loss to answer.

However, as part of my talk this afternoon, I want to see if I can answer that question. This is my chance to take the wolf by the horns and beard him in his den.

In the first place, it is not too hard to see an overall trend in the last four hundred and fifty years of Western American literature. From the writings of the Spanish explorers up through the journals of the fur trappers and mountain men, we see what John Milton described as the "Jungian" stance. That is, the writing begins with the individual and quickly moves outward to embrace the natural world, the wilderness. As we come forward in time, there are fewer journals of exploration and more works of fiction. In fiction, characterization evolves into something more formalized and deliberate, and we see that novels now have a more balanced focus—the "bigness" of the land in Adams's
Log of a Cowboy is balanced against the everyday heroism and character of the trail drivers.

Coming forward again, to a point somewhere between Mary Austin and Edward Abbey, the landscape is essential and influential, but *only* as it affects the major characters. In theater, the phrase is "supporting role."

Forward again, we find that the protagonists of Silko or Shepard, the poetic voice of Snyder or Stafford, can almost exist without
landscape … the focus has turned Freudian, inward.

Now, compare Gary Snyder and Walt Whitman. Or instead of Snyder, compare any contemporary serious poet, playwright, novelist, or essayist. And what do you see? A more comprehensive consciousness. In *Book of the Hopi* and *Mexico Mystique*, Frank Waters writes about a prophecy that a sixth world of consciousness is coming. Simply stated, the sixth world is nothing more than human consciousness finally expanded, or evolved, to a perception of the inherent unity of all living things. The consciousness thus expanded will seek to re-establish its personal and cultural relationship with all the forms of living nature. I do not see Whitman as being close to this, for all of his transcendental yawp. But I *do* see Snyder drawing close.

This idea has a concrete symbol—or objective correlative—in the sign of the two crossed lines. Each represents a direction: at their extreme ends, the lines are in opposition, are distanced from each other, are divided. The outside ends are as far from each other as they can be, geometrically. But at the meeting point, where the lines cross, the center, everything converges again. The diversive tendency is reconciled and unified. No east, no west, no north or south: no red line, no black line, no difference. In the Hopi philosophy, it is there that the conscious and the unconscious arrive at a perfect blend. In Waters's words, it is at the center that we find the "spiritual ecology of one universal pattern."

Let's bring it closer to home. Looking at the program for this 1992 convention, I see some interesting lines coming to cross each other. Oppositions are disappearing. We have a scholar from Texas—who is talking about Alaska! We find Anglos interpreting Indian writing, and Indians speaking about the Anglo. *East of Eden* is

being examined by a scholar from OHIO, for heaven's sake! And I see Willa Cather and Edward Abbey combined in a single paper. Talk about opposites coming together!

Getting Down to Cases …

I don't know what we will call this "Sixth World Period" of Western American literature-yet-to-come. But general characteristics will include a de-emphasis of the vastness; writers will find inspiration in more limited space; writers, being more in harmony with surroundings, will see the world more gently; there will be far less interest in the individual ego and in the superego, and more in the potentiality of the human mind. There will be more interest in the ecology, less interest in heroic adventures, little attention paid to stories of territorial conquest. Comedy will be defined as literary work depicting some wild incongruity between ego and environment; tragedy will dramatize a hero's inability to reconcile that incongruity.

Let's look at some of the major character groups that I have listed in *Prose and Poetry of the American West* and see what will happen to them as the years roll by.

One is the character of the explorer, including travelers and nature writers. In our future period of Western American literature, there will be no more vast and unknown wilderness; explorers will find new excitement in small or unusual places … much as Tennyson found all of his nature and all of his God in a single flower plucked from a crannied wall. *Any* scene will do for these new writers. Thus, instead of "Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons," we will see a work titled "Exploration of the Coors Brewery Outflow and Effluent Conduits." Instead of "Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail," we will have the less expansive "Wah-to-Yah and the Interstate 25 Rest Area." We'll see a book called *Patio Solitaire*. Ann Zwinger's great-granddaughter will write *Beyond the Edge of the Linoleum*.

As literature moves toward oneness with the land, a new sort of gentleness will set in. Homelessness, wandering, even economic tyranny will be viewed in a more tolerant manner. Therefore, I predict the appearance of three major novels about migrants, helpless pioneers, and farmers: *The Octopus Re-examined*; *Giants in the Compost*; *The Grapes of Mild Annoyance*;

The Cowboy Character. As this literary figure undergoes expanded consciousness and unification with his livestock and with the open range, we will begin to see him meditating in the saddle, in a novel titled *Karma Shane*. His violent nature will be a thing of the past, as seen in another new novel, *The Ox-Bow Apology*.

Indian writers will adapt quickly to this new, more sensitive West. They will not need to rely upon the magical and mystical as a vehicle for unified thought, as in the semi-biography *Black Elk Reconsiders*. There will be no need for suicidal, morose, dark fiction, and instead we will see one of James Welch's descendants writing *Winter's in the Blood, But There's Summer in My Heart and Spring in My Step*. Reconciling the circle with the cross, the idea of destiny with the idea of personal freedom to choose, we'll see a book called *The Way to Rainy Mountain … Or Wherever*. Other young Indian writers will give up trying to explain mystic unity to Birkenstock Anglos and will try instead to explain things to them on a level they can understand. The foremost

book of this new approach will be called *House Made of Biodegradables*. And finally, to return to Frank Waters and to the approaching new age of eco-holistic consciousness, I predict that we will see a future writer so totally in tune with all life forms that he or she will write *The Man Who Only Thought about Killing the Deer*.

Peroration

A glossy picture, I admit. It's a dream, an ideal, to see all this "regional" literature going its own way, evolving, seeking its own best level. We can let it flow and become a unified medium with its own integrity, its own depth, with its own beauty. It will have its own storms, too, but they will be in keeping with the element and its native environment. For all of this integrity to happen, however, we must resist hyper-sophistication. We must set our wit against pretentiousness. We must allow no one to tell us that we are unsalvageable sinners against some artificial code of literary conduct, that the works we love are "invisible dots" of literary creation.

The wolf is an animal of territory. Our territory is the American West, the largest literary "region" in the world. The wolf is our Western sense of humor. The wolf is our refusal to become domesticated as a pet breed of some "higher" and "more civilized" species of publishers, readers, and critics.

Our wolves haven't been muzzled yet. Our wolves haven't been trained to heel—they haven't been spayed or fixed. And take note of *this*, you who are the Reverend Doctor McBrides of the world: our wolves haven't even had their *shots*.

Notes

1. This paper is not about Owen Wister's novel: this is one of those "whither Western literature" papers. It is also a *reading* copy and not intended to be an essay.

2. In my anthology, I simplified things by using four major categories, following Victor Hugo's suggestion that all national literatures move from lyric poetry to epic poetry to dramatic poetry. See page xiv of *Prose and Poetry of the American West*.
