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1990

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OWEN WISTER

WYOMING'S INFLUENTIAL REALIST AND CRAFTSMAN

LESLIE T. WHIPP

On 8 July 1885, while on his first visit to Wyoming, Owen Wister wrote in his journal, "This existence is heavenly in its monotony and sweetness. Wish I were going to do it every summer. I'm beginning to be able to feel I'm something of an animal and not a stinking brain alone."¹ Wister was being very candid and very appreciative in this statement of just how much Wyoming had done for him, but Wyoming was to be more fortunate and significant for him than he knew. Wyoming's affirmation of the animal in Owen Wister proved to have an incalculable impact on American culture down to our own time.

Owen Wister, a Philadelphia lawyer and composer educated at Harvard University, is one of Wyoming's most influential writers and

the author of one of the half dozen most influential texts in our culture in the twentieth century. He is influential partly, I will argue in this article, because of the Wyoming realism in the novel and partly because of the technical features which he chose in *The Virginian*; his influence on popular culture, of course, is well known, but his influence on canonical literature is less well known, so I shall end the argument with a close look at his influence on Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*.

OWEN WISTER AS A WYOMING WRITER

Owen Wister as a writer is born in Wyoming in 1885, at the age of twenty-five, although he will not begin writing for a few more years. It is true that Owen Wister comes from a prerevolutionary war Pennsylvania family, and that he remains a Pennsylvanian all his life, that he was born in Philadelphia, lived all his life in Philadelphia, and died in Philadelphia. Yet it is coming to Wyoming, experiencing Wyoming, and absorbing Wyoming life that makes him a writer; indeed it is almost as if he were reborn by coming to Wyoming.

An incident in *The Virginian* represents this experience in little—the narrator's first arrival

As a poet, a professor of English, and a teacher of writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Leslie T. Whipp has recognized the importance of place for a writer. This has informed his critical studies of such writers as Owen Wister and Frederick Manfred.

[GPQ 10 (Fall 1990): 245-259]

in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, an incident with clear connections to Wister's own experience. At the very opening of the novel, in the first paragraph, the narrator is on a train from the east, which has stopped at a small western town. Through the window of the train, he and other passengers are looking out the window at cowboys trying to rope a horse, and one passenger remarks, "That man knows his business." The narrator continues as follows:

But the passenger's dissertation upon roping I was obliged to lose, for Medicine Bow was my station. I bade my fellow-travellers goodby, and descended, a stranger, into the great cattle land. And here in less than ten minutes I learned news which made me feel a stranger indeed.

My baggage was lost; it had not come on my train; it was adrift somewhere back in the two thousand miles that lay behind me. And by way of comfort, the baggage-man remarked that passengers often got astray from their trunks, but the trunks mostly found them after a while. . . . I stood deserted among crates and boxes, blankly holding my check, furious and forlorn. I stared out through the door at the sky and the plains; but I did not see the antelope shining among the sagebrush, nor the great sunset light of Wyoming. Annoyance blinded my eyes to all things save my grievance; I saw only a lost trunk. And I was muttering half-aloud, "What a forsaken hole this is!"²

A bit later, as the Virginian is depriving the drummer of his bed, we learn just what kind of person this Easterner is and what kind of clothes it is he has lost: He is referred to as the "Prince of Wales," and he ruefully reflects that "it seemed my English clothes had earned me this title" (27). So the Easterner, as long as he is preoccupied with the baggage from the East, the English baggage, cannot even see Wyoming, can only conclude, "What a forsaken hole this is!"

Wister himself had come from the East, already an Anglophile who took pride in being mistaken for English even by English people,

and like the narrator, when he came west, he had a lot of baggage to lose. In part he became a writer because he lost it. A bit of biographical background will describe that baggage in more detail: As Wister approached the end of his undergraduate work at Harvard University, the long simmering tensions between the expectations of his very steady and solid paternal family and the expectations of his very erratic and impulsive and creative maternal family came to a head. His own inclinations were increasingly toward the arts. He had dabbled in theater in prep school and college, he had written music and musicals, and he was increasingly interested in pursuing a career in music. His grandmother, the great Fanny Kemble, sent him to consult her old friend Franz Liszt in Europe, and encouraged by Liszt, although over the objections and misgivings of his own father, Wister began to study music in Paris. He did so under constant pressure from his father to return to Philadelphia or Boston and to take up gainful employment. For whatever reasons, he then interrupted his studies and returned home to work in a Boston bank, a position for which he knew himself to be most unsuited. Always a nervous and sickly person like his mother, Wister became even more so in this new life. John Cobbs says, "Wister was approaching something very like a nervous breakdown. His father, the doctor, became increasingly worried and wrote privately of his son's 'mental illness.' Face swollen, eyes blurred, racked by headaches, and plagued by nervous depression, Wister was ready for a change."³ His doctor prescribed a trip west for him, and in 1885 he boarded the train for Rock Creek, Wyoming. He had baggage to lose. He did indeed lose it. He had already begun to lose it when he could write, "I am something of an animal and not a stinking brain alone."

Wyoming, he implied, effected an integration of his fragmented and overwrought personality. The affirmation of the animal in this human being is the affirmation of the whole self. He would soon come to believe that indeed the West that Wyoming represented offered a similar hope for the tired out cultures of the northeastern and southeastern United States,

that a fusion of the East and the West promised cultural rejuvenation.

There had been some long-developing preparation for this dramatic renewal he experienced. After he became school age, Wister spent most of his time away from his parents, first at a series of boarding schools, then at college; his parents though absent tended to be overprotective and over-refining. His letters reflect several times a frustration with his over-cultivated ways and an appetite for a more robust kind of life. He wants to box, he wants to go hunting and camping, he wants to be more sturdy and independent. He does learn to ride horses and becomes a very competent horseman; he gets reluctant permission to take up boxing; but his desire to camp and hunt and live in the outdoors remains frustrated, until his first trip west in 1885.

His biographer, Darwin Payne, has written of this trip:

By the third day out of Philadelphia, the tracks had crossed the Missouri River between Council Bluffs and Omaha, and Wister observed from his Pullman car that the West was "a very much bigger place than the East." With nothing more than the view from his window as a basis, he decided that here was the future America, "bubbling and seething in bare legs and pinafores."

Before he ever got off the train, "he seemed fully aware that the West offered to him challenge and opportunity of a new kind. . . . Life, it seemed, was beginning anew. Past frustrations and old dreams could be left behind."⁴

Not long after he arrived in Rock Creek Wister wrote the passage with which this paper opened, in which he sees himself emerging once again as a whole human being. It takes little figurative anticipation to see this as a very early adumbration of the theme he would live out in his personal and professional life and would articulate so powerfully in *The Virginian*, the theme of the integration of the eastern and western culture into a whole national culture.⁵

OWEN WISTER AS REALIST WRITER

From the first moment of his trip to the West, Wister began his meticulous journal keeping, a practice he would continue as long as his trips west continued. He would compile fifteen such journals, one for each of his fifteen trips. He was to write later in life of his own journals in his book on his relationship with Teddy Roosevelt:

Upon every Western expedition I had kept a full, faithful, realistic diary; details about pack horses, camps in the mountains, camps on the sage-brush, nights in town, cards with cavalry officers, meals with cowpunchers, round-ups, scenery, the Yellowstone Park, trout fishing, hunting with Indians, shooting antelope, white tail deer, black tail sheep, elk, bear, mountain sheep—and missing these same animals. I don't know why I wrote it all down so carefully, I had no purpose in doing so, or any suspicion that it was driving Wyoming into my blood and marrow, and fixing it there.⁶

The concern for detail which Wister recognizes here served him well. Nearly fifty years after his first visit to Wyoming Wister was credited by the first serious folk song collector, John A. Lomax, with being the first person to write down the words of "Git Along Little Dogies." Such concern for detail is the more remarkable because it seems to have been so intuitive and so lacking in conscious purpose. Later it will become clear that in both the sketches leading up to *The Virginian* and in *The Virginian* itself, Wister is writing directly from the observations made in his journals and from the profusion of detail which he records there. In his early journals he has no sense of recording details for later use as a writer, but they did indeed work that way.

For example, his description of Medicine Bow:

Medicine Bow was my first, and I took its

dimensions, twenty-nine buildings in all,—one coal chute, one water tank, the station, one store, two eating houses, one billiard hall, two tool-houses, one feed stable, and twelve others that for one reason and another I shall not name. Yet this wretched husk of squalor spent thought upon appearances . . . (14)

That comes almost directly from his journal of his 1885 trip to Wyoming; although Wister himself had gotten off the train at Rock Creek, he did visit Medicine Bow in 1885 with his rancher-host to pick up some trout fingerlings to stock a stream, and while there he did count and label the buildings in Medicine Bow, Wyoming. There were in fact twenty-nine buildings there in that year. In instance after instance, the setting and the anecdotes recounted in Wister's western sketches and novels come from his direct observation and detailed journals of life in Wyoming.⁷

As the narrator and the Virginian leave Medicine Bow after an evening of high jinks, the narrator records the scene as follows:

We passed the ramparts of Medicine Bow,—thick heaps and fringes of tin cans, and shelving mounds of bottles cast out of the saloons. The sun struck these at a hundred glittering points. And in a moment we were in the clean plains, with the prairie-dogs and the pale herds of antelope. The great, still air bathed us, pure as water and strong as wine; the sunlight flooded the world; and shining upon the breast of the Virginian's flannel shirt lay a long gold thread of hair! (35-36)

The contrast between the ugly details of the urban community and the almost sacred character of the natural details continues the sense of rebirth I noted above, but more important, I want to call attention to the presence of such precise and realistic and even ugly detail. Throughout this odd and eclectic book, Wister draws upon the compulsive and realistic detail of his journals.

One should also recall that in some ways this novel was extremely daring for its own time. It does include by the implication of dashes hardcore profanity in conversation which Wister tries hard to render faithfully and in detail. It does include mixed nude bathing, which was also daringly realistic at the time, even though the bathers were man and wife. It does include scenes of lynching, animal abuse, and a wide gamut of social class types and situations.

Thus in both his intuitive preparation for writing, his journaling, and in his writing itself, Wister's work is consistent in its handling of detail with the theory and the practice of his friends, William Dean Howells and Henry James. We have in recent years paid so much attention to the romanticism of the novel, and to the sentimentality of the marriage with which the novel closes, that it may be difficult for us to see in the myriad of detail that loads every page of this novel that the author identified admiringly with the work of Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and even Emile Zola. His work at times, as in the lynching story "Salvation Gap," is as brutal, direct, and realistic as anything they ever did. In his prefatory "To the Readers," immediately preceding the opening of *The Virginian*, he is quite explicit about asking the reader to recognize that his intent is similar to that of William Dean Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*:

We know quite well the common understanding of the term "historical novel." *Hugh Wynne* exactly fits it. But *Silas Lapham* is a novel as perfectly historical as is *Hugh Wynne*, for it pictures an era and personifies a type. It matters not that in the one we find George Washington and in the other none save imaginary figures; else *The Scarlet Letter* were not historical. Nor does it matter that Dr. Mitchell did not live in the time of which he wrote, while Mr. Howells saw many Silas Laphams with his own eyes; else *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were not historical. (3)

Although Wister is sometimes dismissed today as a romantic or sentimental writer, he in fact began as a realist with rather more intestinal brass than the Dean of the Realists himself. As a very young and unpublished writer, Wister submitted a first novel to Howells in manuscript, a novel entitled *A Wise Man's Son*; the title apparently was a bit ironic, and the novel apparently quite autobiographical, but we can't be certain about that for the manuscript seems not to have survived. Howells's response was very discouraging; it was based chiefly on Wister's being too much of a realist in this first work, although Howells did encourage him as a writer. Later Wister would say of Howells, "Howells, one timid eye on Mrs. Grundy, was trying to see life steadily and see it whole with the other."⁸ So Wister from the outset was in fact a realist in his fiction.

In the preface to *The Virginian*, where he asks the reader to think of *The Virginian* as like *Silas Lapham*, Wister is equally explicit about his realistic and representational intent in that novel; he says, "Any narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation is of necessity historical; and this one presents Wyoming between 1874 and 1890." Even in *The Virginian* he seeks to recreate Wyoming in fiction, to write as a reporter who had been there and seen it, to create a picture so clear and so veracious that those who live there will recognize it, and those who do not, especially those who do not, will understand it and see it for what it is, the hope of the nation. There is a good deal of evidence that he succeeded. Darwin Payne retells a story which seeks to attest to his success with those who lived in the territory:

Among the book's readers was a curmudgeonish University of Wyoming geology professor who was thoroughly familiar with the state's physical features and history. The professor never read novels; he considered them to be "nothing but a pack of lies." His friends urged him to make an exception for *The Virginian* because of its fidelity. Upon spraining his ankle, the professor relented and read the novel with great enjoyment until he reached



FIG. 1. *The Virginian* and the narrator discover the body of Shorty. The narrator has adapted to the West in style and skill, while Shorty, who has failed to adapt, has been killed. Illustration by Arthur I. Keller from the first edition of *The Virginian* (1902).

the closing passages about the island honeymoon. He then threw the book across the room in disgust, saying: "The God damn liar! That stream wasn't stocked with trout until ten years after that time."⁹

Correspondents and reviewers repeatedly focused on Wister's fidelity to Wyoming fact and praised the book for its realism.

Not all of his readers responded that way, of course. The story "Balaam and Pedro" is a case in point. When it was published in *Harper's Monthly*, Wister was quite proud of it and of the realism of the story: "I know that I have never done anything so good, or that contains so big a swallow of Wyoming."¹⁰ But Teddy

Roosevelt upbraided Wister for being offensively realistic in describing the evil horse trader's gouging out the horse's eye. Wister had of course experienced such an incident directly, and although he defended his fidelity to fact to Roosevelt, he deferred to his friend's judgment; when that story was worked into *The Virginian*, Wister left vague the details of the cruelty to the horse.

Few passages in Wister will impel anyone to argue that Howells or any of the other persons prominently identified as realist writers could have written them. As John Cobbs has shown very clearly, Wister in *The Virginian* combines many different stylistic and generic traits, and the label perhaps best suited for this book is eclectic or mongrel. Yet that is a judgment that is much easier for us to make than it was for the author himself or his contemporaries to make. Wister in 1929 received the Roosevelt Medal for his contributions to history; the *New York Herald Tribune* reported that Wister had recorded "for all time the character and atmosphere" of the West during the last quarter of the 19th century. Similar articles appeared in many newspapers. Eugene Manlove Rhodes, who had some personal experience with this issue, in a letter to Jack Thorp, 5 February 1926, wrote that Wister was one of "the only truth-telling 'Westerns' that get by," that is, that were not diluted and falsified by editors. Very clearly, Wister's own sense is that he is much more interested in recording the truth of Wyoming than in creating romantic fictions and fantasies: he says that his is a "narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation; . . . Wyoming between 1874 and 1890." His success with those who in fact rode the Wyoming trails and talked the Wyoming talk certainly urges the same view.¹¹

OWEN WISTER AS INFLUENTIAL WYOMING REALIST

Yet the sales figures for *The Virginian* attest to its success with those who did not live in the territory as well, despite the amount of raw detail "dancing in bare legs." Owen Wister's *The*

Virginian was so successful that he felt a bit ambivalent about it. Within three months there were 100,000 copies in print, the first edition went into thirty-four printings, and by 1990 the novel has sold well over 2,000,000 copies. It was filmed three times in Wister's lifetime, and it was the basis for a television series in the 1960s. So the direct impact of the novel is astonishing. Philip Durham has written that when *The Virginian* was published, "the country was presented with a book whose influence it is now impossible to measure." John Cawelti is not atypical when he says, "Surely no twentieth century American needs to have the Western's importance as a cultural form demonstrated to him. . . . The modern Western apparently began with Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*."¹²

IMPACT ON POPULAR CULTURE

The indirect impact of *The Virginian* is even more dramatic than the direct impact, especially its influence in shaping the popular western in both fiction and film, one of the most powerful popular genres in twentieth-century culture. We have cowboy cults very much alive today not only in Calgary, Canada, and Sheridan, Wyoming, but also in Japan and Germany, and that is the continued working out of the impact of Wister's *The Virginian*. It is generally accepted and so needs no argument that in his characters and plot and themes in *The Virginian*, Wister achieved a configuration that would become an archetype out of which writers would wring variations down to the present day.¹³ His description of the Virginian prepared for the stardom of Gary Cooper and John Wayne and for such features of western film and television shows as the opposition of law and lawlessness, of corrupt human law and sensitivity to a higher law, and the final confrontation of the good and evil forces in a one on one gunfight—in all these and countless other details, Wister was the source and fountainhead.

One of the most significant influences on the western, however, was Wister's loading the letter or history of the western story with political allegory. This was a matter of great im-



FIG. 2. Molly Wood's introduction to Wyoming and to the Virginian, her rescuer. Illustration by Arthur I. Keller from the first edition of *The Virginian* (1902).

portance with him, and perhaps accounted in part for the astonishing success of the book when it first appeared; certainly it has accounted in considerable measure for the profound influence the text has continued to have, although as Edwin Cady has demonstrated, Wister's effort to load his narrative with allegorical significance diminished its aesthetic achievement.¹⁴

Interestingly, the allegory is not part of Wister's "first essay" at writing a western novel, *The Romance of Chalkeye*, begun in 1891, which I'll discuss in a few pages. In brief, the letter of the story of *The Virginian* brings the culture, education, and literature from the northeast, in the person of Molly Wood, and the strength, insight, and courage from the southeast in the person of the Virginian, and joins them in marriage, leaving them to look forward to success in an industrial age. The allegory focuses on the

history and politics of the nation in Wister's own lifetime. Wister was born with the Civil War, in 1860, and born into a family divided by the War. His maternal grandfather, Pierce Butler, was a slave-holding plantation owner, and Wister all his life had a profound sense of identification with southern values, as his last novel, *Lady Baltimore*, reflects;¹⁵ his paternal antecedents, though, and his primary identification were with the values of the northeast. As a young adult he was deeply distressed by the continued regional animosities of his own time, and he anticipated that the West would lead the nation to overcome those animosities. In the allegory of his western story, that is what happens—the North marries the deep South in the West and everyone lives prosperously thereafter. Thus Wister sets the precedent not only for adding an allegory to the letter of the story,

but also for making it a political and social allegory, and for using the letter of the story to address major issues of national policy.¹⁶ The allegory tends to be very conservative in its economic, political and social implications—a denial of political and social equality, a denial of democracy, and a justification of oligarchy, if not aristocracy—but the point is that the western story clearly takes on political and social allegory in *The Virginian*.

The Virginian is thus the antecedent for the antifascist allegory in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the political overtones of Jack Schaefer's *Shane*, whether as novel or film, and the aim taken at the House Un-American Activities Committee by the film *High Noon*, starring of course the actor who was so successful in the third film version of *The Virginian*, Gary Cooper.

IMPACT ON HIGH CULTURE

The Virginian as a precedent for the political allegory of serious westerns in the past fifty years reminds us that Wister himself would be appalled at the extent to which his work has come to be identified with popular culture instead of high culture.¹⁷ He was of course a patrician, as we have noted, and that identification continued for him as a man of letters. His lifelong interest in serious music was not interrupted by his passion for the West. He was asked to be the librettist for an opera of Antonin Dvorak's on Hiawatha, but declined. In 1924, he wrote a satiric opera entitled *Watch Your Thirst*, much informed by various retellings of the Dido-Aeneas story, to express his disapproval of Prohibition; it was sufficiently successful to be revived in 1927 and again in 1933.¹⁸ After the novel *Lady Baltimore*, Wister turned increasingly to writing in support of the social and political programs of a patrician man of letters—a biography of Washington, an exploration of the need for the United States to enter World War I (*The Pentecost of Calamity*), a post-war argument for renewing close ties with England against Germany and the League of Nations (*A Straight Deal, or The Ancient Grudge*). Wister

sees himself as a patrician, guiding the nation.

Certainly in his own lifetime, Wister was one of the literary notables of the nation. Mark Twain noticed him and encouraged him as a writer very early and has been identified as a major American literary influence on Wister's own writing.¹⁹ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Rudyard Kipling, William Dean Howells, Henry James—all treated him with a great deal of respect. When Henry Harper gave a dinner in honor of Wister as a writer in January 1896, six years before the success of *The Virginian*, the guest list suggests something of his importance as a writer even at the time—William Dean Howells, Paul Dana, Howard Pyle, Carl Schurz, Edward Martin, Brander Matthews, J. K. Bangs, Richard Harding Davis, Charles Dudley Warner, and Theodore Roosevelt. For Twain's seventieth birthday dinner on 5 December 1905, three years after the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister was one of the twenty-three celebrities at the head table along with William Dean Howells, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Alice Brown, George Ade, Julian Hawthorne, Winston Churchill, Charles Major, and Rex Beech. In 1922, to celebrate the three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Moliere, the American Academy of Arts and Letters had as its guest of honor the French war hero Marshall Joffre and as its speaker Owen Wister.²⁰

The Virginian as well as its author is taken seriously by members of these same literary circles. In an eight page letter in which he remonstrates with Wister for not sending him a copy, Henry James expresses great admiration for the book. Although James objected to the happy ending, he particularly liked the subject matter and wished he could discuss with Wister "elements of the art we practice & adore." James was a close and admiring friend of Wister's mother, it is true, but his literary judgments remain the perceptive and informed judgments of Henry James.²¹

Wister was taken seriously as a man of letters throughout his later life, and he exerted his influence on American letters in some rather surprising ways. The story of his relationship with Upton Sinclair is so unflattering to every-

one except Molly Wister that it has rather prejudiced the case. Sinclair sought Wister's support before and after his espousal of socialism, and although Molly Wister helped him, Sinclair, after he was successful, made a point of accusing Wister of being niggardly toward aspiring writers. Ellery Sedgwick, a lifelong friend who knew Wister very well, did write Wister, though, in quite the opposite vein: "When your obituary is written, there will be plenty said about your talents and your distinguished name in the world, but I am afraid no one will mention your kindness and sympathy to young authors. If you are in hopes of a Christian Heaven that passport will get you there."²²

There is some evidence to support Sedgwick's view. Wister admired the realist writers who were not immediately popular in his social circles—even Emile Zola, whom Wister's great friend and admirer Teddy Roosevelt heartily disliked, and of whom Willa Cather had written, "He has never got beyond a species of fetish working. He crouches like Caliban upon his island, and the music of Ariel is to him only a noise which frightens and disturbs." Among the American realists, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Frank Norris, and Sinclair Lewis all were writers he admired. Wister somewhat snobbishly turned away an aspiring and presuming Hamlin Garland but lived to regret it and to admire his writing; he had given Frank Norris's last novel, *The Pit*, a favorable reading for Doubleday, Page & Company immediately before that young man's death, which Wister much lamented, and he very actively promoted Sinclair Lewis for membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.²³

Perhaps the most surprising and revealing connection of this sort was between Owen Wister and Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway was delighted when Gary Cooper, who had played the Virginian in 1929, was selected in 1931 to star in his own *Farewell to Arms*, so delighted that he wired his jubilation to Wister. By that time the two men had a fairly well-developed relationship as friends and correspondents, despite the difference in their ages. Hemingway had visited Wister in 1928 in, appropriately enough,

Shell, Wyoming, where the two of them went prairie dog shooting and talked over *A Farewell to Arms*, which Hemingway was then writing. Wister, for a time a mentor for Hemingway, was even instrumental in easing the relationship between Hemingway and his publisher when *Farewell to Arms* was being prepared for publication. Perhaps more strikingly, Hemingway observes of him, "He does, personally, seem to belong to the same generation as we do." Indeed, Wister himself observed of Hemingway's prose that, if he were thirty again, he would want to write like Hemingway.²⁴ That there should have been such an affinity between the two men, I suppose, is natural enough, for it was the Virginian at a climactic moment in the novel who first embodied one of Hemingway's major themes; when the Virginian is grieving at having to hang his good friend Steve, the narrator reports:

His voice had trembled, and I felt the deep emotion that seemed to gain upon him now that action was over and he had nothing to do but think. And his view was simple enough: you must die brave. Failure is a sort of treason to the brotherhood, and forfeits pity. It was Steve's perfect bearing that had caught his heart so that he forgot even his scorn of the other man. (240-41)

That such an astonishingly and persistently successful book had an influence on later American writers is not really surprising, yet one may be surprised at some of the places where that influence is discernible. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is a good example. Cather is such a self-conscious crafter in her novels, in *My Ántonia* no less than the others, that finding Wister's novel in the background is very surprising, or at least it was for me. "Art is not thought or emotion," she wrote, even before she had dedicated herself to fiction, "but expression, expression, always expression. . . . Today it seems that many people have lost sight of the mighty craft there is in literature."²⁵ Wister's novel *The Virginian* is difficult reading today largely because, as critics have repeatedly

charged, he seems to have lost sight of "the mighty craft there is in literature." Yet, despite that, some of the very basic and very obvious technical features of *The Virginian* seem to have informed Cather's artistic decisions in *My Ántonia*.

John J. Murphy has discussed the character development of the *Virginian* and of *Ántonia*, yet his discussion doesn't necessarily presuppose Wister's direct influence on Cather.²⁶ Here I want to outline some additional features concerning the narrators of these two novels, features that do suggest direct, although probably not conscious, influence.

At the time that *The Virginian* so surprised its author and its publisher and everyone else with its success, Cather's career as a writer was still largely ahead of her. She was then freelancing in Pittsburgh and teaching English at Pittsburgh's Central High School and having her collection of poems, *April Twilights*, published by a vanity press. *The Virginian* appeared in 1902, and on 1 May 1903 she met with S. S. McClure, the dynamic head of McClure's *Magazine*, who was to be "next to her father and brothers . . . the most important man in her life." She was probably very intensely aware of the phenomenon of Wister's success with *The Virginian*. Certainly McClure was, as he set about to get some of Wister's stories for his own magazine.²⁷ Cather herself has suggested that this kind of influence is indeed a matter for writers to be sensitive to, particularly young writers:

One is sometimes asked about the "obstacles" that confront young writers who are trying to do good work. I should say the greatest obstacles that writers today [1920] have to get over are the dazzling journalist successes of twenty years ago, stories that surprised and delighted by their sharp photographic detail and that were really nothing more than lively pieces of reporting. The whole aim of that school of writing was novelty—never a very important thing in art.²⁸

Cather probably has in mind in this passage writers like William Dean Howells and Hamlin

Garland, and perhaps not specifically Owen Wister, but he would have, as we have seen, associated himself with this school of realists. Her accounts of the genesis of *My Ántonia* suggest that compared to some of her other works, this one presented itself pretty much full-blown and was less of a struggle. For example, in the essay entitled "My First Novels (There were Two)," she says that after publishing *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* she changed style in *Song of the Lark*, self-consciously loading the book with detail, leading to the critical rejection of the novel. And she adds, "But when the next book, *My Ántonia*, came along, quite of itself, and with no direction from me, it took the road of *O Pioneers!*—not the road of *The Song of the Lark*."²⁹ That was in 1916-17, fifteen years after the publication of *The Virginian*. I think it is clear, as I shall go on to show, that the book that wrote itself took some direction from *The Virginian*.

John Murphy, by focusing on the protagonists of *The Virginian* and *My Ántonia*, has illuminated both books. I want to focus on the narrators, rather than the protagonists, and I wish to compare them, not contrast them. In these two novels, it is clear that the protagonists are intended to be the "main characters," but it is just as clear that the novels are first and throughout the stories of their narrators, and that the protagonists' stories are stories within stories; the foremost character in both novels is the narrator, not the protagonist. Further, the two narrators are comparable in several ways, in their experience, in their relationships to their authors, in their relationships to their protagonists, and finally in how they mediate between the authors and the protagonists.

In the first place, the opening chapters of these two novels are remarkably alike in the character and experience of their narrators. In both, the narrators arrive in the West on the train. In both, the narrators first become aware of the protagonist while on the train, with a clear sense that they have become aware of a very unusual person, but no sense yet of the very significant part that that character will play in their own life stories. In both, the narrators

then dismiss the protagonist from their thoughts and concentrate on their own desolation as strangers in a strange land. As the two narratives continue, the narrator remains an outsider who in some sense grows up in the West but who lives in the East and who returns again and again to the West to continue the narrative of the protagonist.

As one looks more closely at the writer-narrator-reader relationships, one sees still more parallels between the two novels, for in both novels the narrator is something like the writer's alter ego; although one must grant that Jim Burden is presented much less sympathetically than the Easterner is, in both books the narrator incorporates much of the author into his personality and experience. The narrator in Owen Wister's novel is not Owen Wister himself, but is very close to him. Like Owen Wister, his speech and dress is very English. Like Owen Wister, he goes West as a young adult to heal, becomes enamored of the West, and over the course of several visits, matures. Like Owen Wister, he becomes attached to a single westerner and returns again and again to visit him. Like Owen Wister, the narrator continues to derive his material sustenance from the East, although we are not told that he is like Owen Wister a lawyer or a writer. In perception and thought as well the narrator again and again expresses Wister's own sentiments, as when he says, "For the Virginian had been equal to the occasion: that is the only kind of equality which I recognize" (126).

Also, the parallels between the biography of the author and the fictitious experience of the narrator in *My Ántonia* are similar in kind and number; the identification is so close, in fact, that the opening lines of the Introduction are strikingly ironic: "Last summer, in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train. He and I are old friends, we grew up together in the same Nebraska town, and we had a great deal to say to each other."³⁰ In the first chapter of the novel, the protagonist's experience is very close to Willa Cather's experience; she too could say of herself that she first came to the West, as Jim Burden

says (in beginning his narrative), "on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America. I was ten years old then . . . and my Virginian relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska" (3). Like Cather, Jim grew up in a small Nebraska town, then went East to pursue a career, but like Cather he returned again and again to keep in touch with particular persons in that small Nebraska town; indeed, the intense heat with which the first sentence of the Introduction opens reports the conditions of the summer of 1916 when Cather went west to work on *My Ántonia*. Like Cather, and like Wister, Jim Burden earned his living in the East, and we know what he did—he was, like Owen Wister, a lawyer. So there are significant parallels in the conception and experience of the narrators of Wister's novel and of Cather's novel, and in their relationship to their authors.

There is, however, a significant difference between the two narrators in their relationship to the authors, and that is in their genders. Wister has chosen to make his narrator the same gender as himself, and Cather has not. Before I examine that more closely, it will be useful to look at the relationships between the narrators and the protagonists. In each novel, there is a curious kind of erotic tension between the protagonist and the narrator. In *The Virginian*, the tension is created by the presence of quasi-erotic expressions inappropriate for what is manifestly intended to be a non-erotic relationship, but in *My Ántonia* it is created instead by the absence of erotic expressions and experience, and the presence of erotic imagery, in what has for much of the story the potential for being an erotic relationship. In *The Virginian*, for example, the narrator's view of the Virginian at first sight is as follows: "Then for the first time I noticed a man who sat on the high gate of the corral, looking on. For now he climbed down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin" (7). His next view of him intensifies this:

Lounging there at ease against the wall

was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. . . . [He was covered with dust.] The weather-beaten bloom of his face shown through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength. . . . Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all. (8-9)

In a manuscript version, this last sentence reads, "Had I been the bride, I should have flown into the giant's arms, dust and all."³¹ A few pages later, the narrator refers to the Virginian as "this handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil" (13). The narrator says that the Virginian is restless at having to watch out for the easterner: "His tiger limberness and his beauty were rich with unabated youth; and that force which lurked beneath his surface must often have curbed his intolerance of me. In spite of what I knew must be his opinion of me, the tenderfoot, my liking for him grew, and I found his silent company more and more agreeable" (47). Gradually the narrator grows to be more and more agreeable to the Virginian, until the narrator says, "We were thorough friends, and had exchanged many confidences both of the flesh and of the spirit" (55).

In thinking of this technical feature of the novel, it is useful to recall *The Romance of Chalkeye: A Wind River Romance*. This is an unfinished novel, thirty-six pages in typescript, that bears the notation "(This was a first essay—begun early in 1891 and never finished)."³² In short, this appears to be not a preliminary version of *The Virginian* but one of the formative efforts that preceded it, "a first essay"; in fact one of the negative characters is a "Link Trampas" (27). The book was apparently to be about two easterners going West on a hunting expedition, Ludlow Weeks, the main character, and Livingston, his friend; between them they divide much of the character of the narrator in *The Virginian*. Interestingly, in this fiction, the narrator and the main character are separate, although the main character is again an eastern

tenderfoot, and the speaker frequently mocks his main character. We are told that Weeks is overly fat, that he could not read faces very well, that he was a dull young man. Often the mockery is more subtle; for example, the typescript ends with the following passage:

"But this extraordinary crystal silence!" rhapsodized Mr. Weeks. "It's like the opening bars of Lohengrin."

"Lohengrin made a lot of damned noise when I heard it," remarked Harry, and continued his breakfast. But Weeks was edified with his comparison, and afterwards wrote it to several friends. (36)

The homosexual eroticism of *The Virginian* also recurs in *The Romance of Chalkeye*. Chalkeye is a young man, as young as Ludlow, twenty-five, and Ludlow is "attracted by the extreme sweetness of his glance and smile" (9). When Chalkeye cleans up and shaves and combs his hair, it is "a yellow mat of waves that grew with unexpected regularity" (12). In the second chapter, Chalkeye tells the story of an Omaha apothecary who arrived in the West as a tenderfoot who knew everything. He even advised his cowmen hosts how to improve their branding procedures by using acid. At an all-male Thanksgiving, Chalkeye had pulled his gun on this apothecary after the unfortunate man had spilled whiskey on Chalkeye's pants, and then, to make amends, "He was for irrigating my pants with violet bokay where he'd recently put the whiskey . . ." (20). With his gun out, Chalkeye made the apothecary get up on a table and take his clothes off:

"Strip off yer clothes!" says Chalkeye, putting his gun right close to the chap's face, 'and let yer naked pink body shine on this company like the rising sun.' Well, sir, he did, shakin' but expeditious. And we luffed to see his little mean legs" (22).

For the next two hours, Chalkeye painted in rubber cement on the apothecary's soft, pink flesh all of the brands in the territory, while the

other cowboys were drinking, circling the table, and reinforcing by their jibes whatever Chalk-eye was doing. The apothecary was known to the cowboys as the "Turk's Delight." The homoerotic overtones of this incident are even louder than in *The Virginian*.

Considered from the perspective of *The Romance of Chalkeye*, *The Virginian* shows Wister making a conscious artistic choice in moving from a narrator who is not a character in the novel to a narrator who is a character in the novel; between the main character and the idealized cowboy hero in the early essay there are again quasi-erotic overtones, and the cowboy hero tells a story in which he acts out a little homoerotic drama, so it is not surprising to find these threads in the published novel. Clearly, however, Wister has toned them down from the 1891 draft.

In *My Ántonia*, just as clearly the overall narrative intends to contrast the overtly erotic relationship the narrator has with Lena Lingard, which itself is not all that erotic, with the overtly non-erotic relationship he has with Ántonia. And yet, there are occasional erotic overtones to episodes and to imagery involving Jim Burden and Ántonia. For example, as the two youngsters are growing up neighbors on the prairie there comes a point where they clearly assume adolescent gender roles in relation to each other:

Much as I liked Ántonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner. Before the autumn was over, she began to treat me more like an equal and to defer to me in other things than reading lessons. (43)

The incident, of course, is the killing of the snake on the prairie, the killing of the serpent in the garden; the imagery of that episode is very erotic indeed:

We were examining a big hole with two entrances. The burrow sloped into the ground

at a gentle angle, so that we could see where the two corridors united, and the floor was dusty from use, like a little highway over which much travel went. [Ántonia screams.] I whirled round, and there, on one of those dry gravel beds, was the biggest snake I had ever seen. . . . He was not merely a big snake, I thought—he was a circus monstrosity. His abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick. He was as thick as my leg . . . He lifted his hideous little head" (45-46).

Jim kills the snake, and everyone, not just Ántonia, regards him as a man.³³

There is another layer, however, in the similarities in the rhetorical structure of the writer-narrator-protagonist relationships. A moment ago, I observed that the authors contrasted in choosing the gender of their protagonists, for Wister has chosen a narrator of his own gender, and Cather has chosen a narrator of the gender opposite her own. But the authors did indeed both choose to make their heroes of their own gender, and through their narrators to look at their heroes in sometimes quasi-erotic ways. The result in Wister's case is much less successful than in Cather's. By adopting, like Wister, a male narrator and by substituting, unlike Wister, a female protagonist, Cather appears to have learned from Wister. The contrast of genders of author and narrator in *My Ántonia* insulates the reader from the undeveloped and unresolved homoerotic overtones Wister left in *The Virginian*.

Even in the contrasting aspect of the writer-narrator-protagonist relationships, Willa Cather may have been learning from the work of Owen Wister. And more generally, even in matters of craft, even on such a hyper-crafter of fiction as Willa Cather, and such an apostle and embodiment of literature as art, Owen Wister, the Wyoming writer, appears to have left his mark. The situation and character of the narrators at the outset of the novels, the narrators' experience in the West and their continuing relationships with it, their relationships to their authors and to their protagonists, and their roles

in relating their protagonists to their authors—in all of these features, *My Ántonia* reflects the influence of Owen Wister on Willa Cather. One might go on to make a similar argument, I suppose, on the relationship between Owen Wister's short story "Padre Ignazio" and Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, although the relationships are less striking and the implications would be those already developed here.

Owen Wister was indeed a Wyoming writer, for in Wyoming he was reborn as an artist and found in the country and the people both a method and a vision. As he embodied that in *The Virginian* it became a powerful fiction and a seemingly endless source of other fictions in popular culture and a formative influence even in canonical literature. Wister had more cause than he knew to rejoice that Wyoming enabled him to begin "to feel. . . something of an animal and not a stinking brain alone."

NOTES

1. Quoted in John L. Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, Twayne English Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 11.
2. Owen Wister, *The Virginian*, edited and with an introduction by Philip Durham (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), pp. 7-8. All further citations are from this edition in parentheses in the text.
3. Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, p. 7.
4. Darwin Payne, *Owen Wister, Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), pp. 77-78.
5. Neal Lambert, "Owen Wister's *Virginian*: The Genesis of a Cultural Hero," *Western American Literature* 6 (Summer 1971): 99-107.
6. Owen Wister, *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 28-29.
7. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, pp. 205-6.
8. Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, pp. 6-7; Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, pp. 74-75.
9. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, p. 207.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
11. Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, pp. 110-12; *Herald Tribune* cited in Sanford E. Marovitz, "An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Material," *American Literary Realism* (Winter 1974): 57; Eugene Manlove Rhodes, *A Bar Cross Man: The Life and Personal Writings of Eugene Manlove Rhodes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 219; Cf. Neal Lambert, "A Cowboy Writes to Owen Wister," *American West* 2:312-36.
12. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, p. 208; Durham, "Introduction," p. vii; John G. Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, n.d.), p. 2.
13. Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 39-45.
14. Edwin Cady, *The Light of Common Day: Realism in American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 171-73.
15. Cf. Julian Mason, "Owen Wister and the South," *Southern Humanities Review* 6 (Winter 1972): 23-34; John L. Cobbs, "Charleston: The Image of Aristocracy in Owen Wister's *Lady Baltimore*," *South Carolina Review* 9 (November 1976): 44-51; and Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, pp. 102-9.
16. Cf. John A. Barsness, "Theodore Roosevelt as Cowboy: The *Virginian* as Jacksonian Man," *American Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1969): 609-19 and Sanford E. Marovitz, "Testament of a Patriot: The *Virginian*, the *Tenderfoot*, and Owen Wister," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15 (Fall 1973): 551-75.
17. Cf. John Cawelti, *Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 215-17.
18. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, pp. 309, 328-29.
19. John Milton, *The Novel of the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 16-17; on Wister's relations with other major American writers, see Ben Vorpahl, "Ernest Hemingway and Owen Wister," *Library Chronicle* 36 (Spring 1970): 126-37; "Henry James and Owen Wister," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (July 1971): 291-338, and "Very Much Like a Fire-cracker: Owen Wister on Mark Twain," *Western American Literature* 6 (Summer 1971): 83-98.
20. *New York Times*, 25 April 1922, cited in Marovitz, "Annotated Bibliography," p. 50.
21. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, p. 201; see also Marovitz, "Testament of a Patriot," pp. 568ff.
22. Quoted in Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, p. 319.
23. William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 141. Interestingly, Sinclair Lewis did not return Wister's admiration; Wister had promoted Lewis as a writer, but in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Lewis listed Wister as one of the writers whom he did not admire. See Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), p. 605; see also Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, pp. 180-81, 191-92, 219-20, 325-26; and Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, pp. 13, 34-36, 52, 90, *passim*.

24. Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, pp. 320-21; Hemingway quoted in Cobbs, *Owen Wister*, p. 35.

25. "The Passing Show," *Nebraska State Journal*, 1 March 1896.

26. John J. Murphy, "The Virginian and *Antonia* Shimerda: Different Sides of the Western Coin," in *Women and Western American Literature*, edited by Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 162-78; Murphy includes a very crisp and insightful analysis of the inconsistent perspective in Wister's novel.

27. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 171; Payne, *Chronicler of the West*, p. 208.

28. "On the Art of Fiction," *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 101.

29. Cf. Janet Ross, "Willa Cather and the Re-

alistic Movement in American Fiction," Ph.D. Diss., University of Iowa, 1960; Cather, *On Writing*, p. 96.

30. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, (1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), n.p. All further citations are from this edition in parentheses in the text.

31. Manuscript B-W768-O-W, Coll. #290, American Heritage Center, Coe Library, University of Wyoming (AHC); I am particularly grateful to Emmett Chisum, Director, American Heritage Center, for his courtesy and help when I was working with these materials.

32. Manuscript B-W768-O-W, Coll. #290, AHC.

33. A similar use of nature imagery with erotic overtones is found elsewhere in Cather, as in her treatment of the subduing of the horse in her early short story "Eric Hermannson's Soul" and in the wood chopping episode in *A Lost Lady*.