Playing Cowboys: The Paradoxes of Genre

by
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By the time the average American reaches maturity—whatever *that* means—he or she has spent hundreds and probably thousands of hours watching or reading Westerns. In the 1940's, a dime got you two Westerns every Saturday afternoon; in the late 1970's, my teen-age daughter plans her week around television reruns of the Western series banished by the war on violence; the genre western novel is still enormously popular, as publishers' figures and garage sales indicate. In very few of these countless variations on a few basic plots will motives or action stand much rational examination, and in the popular forms they get very little. However, the cliches of Western characters and plots carry heavy emotional charges, nostalgic as well as archetypal, and in the immortal words of Dr. W. Paden, a cliche is something that everybody can understand.

It is not surprising, then, that many contemporary inventors of fictions—I use the term consciously in the broadest sense to include what have variously been called fabulators, literary disruptors, and so on and on—have taken over many of the conventions of the genre Western. In *Warlock* (1958), Oakley Hall used the mythical figures of gambler and marshal, dance hall girl and schoolmarm, as well as elements from "real" history to question the implied teleology of heroism and to blur the already uncertain boundaries between history, legend, and myth. In *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), E. L. Doctorow anticipated the spaghetti Westerns of Clint Eastwood by creating the figure of the Bad Man, scourge of liberal capitalist complacency and greed. Ishmael Reed selected elements from the Western for *Yellow-Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) to create in "the first Voodoo Western" an allegory of the struggle between European reason and African imagination, in which the showdown is not the Trampas walk but an unresolved debate between the Loup Garoo Kid, a disguised hero of the Lone Ranger type, and the Pope. Donald Barthelme's "Porcupines at the University" (1970) used the

old convention of the trail drive and the new one of the country and western singer's rise to fame to ask his recurrent question, "What is Wonderful?" and to show that both old and new cliches are incapable of providing a positive answer. And in "Blazing Saddles," more familiar than any of the printed variations, Mel Brooks expanded and reduced to absurdity the cliches of the Saturday afternoon Western, ostensibly to explode them but in the end to testify to their hold upon our imaginations.

More consistently and more deeply than any of these creators, Alvin Greenberg uses in *The Invention of the West* (1976) elements from the Western, specifically the series tracing the adventures of a single hero, to question the adequacy of fiction or of any art to portray human reality and at the same time to show the grip which the conventions and achievements of previous writers has upon the imaginations of writers, readers, and in this case the characters embroiled in a conventional form. As one of the characters says, "How is one not to worry about that which one knows?" What we know, of course, are both the conventions of the mock-naive Western and a good deal which would call into question its literary and philosophical assumptions.

In external form, *Invention* is a replication of a genre Western, down to the lurid Avon cover, the cleverly incorporated typographical errors, the monolithic Western hero with two fast guns, a mysterious past, a collection of memorable if not always coherent traits, and a spectacular and rapidly changing landscape which purports to be Kansas but looks no more like Kansas than Oz or the California foothills which figure in hundreds of chase scenes just outside Dodge City.

In fact, the novel is a reflection on and criticism of "the terrifying high comedy embodied in the mutual collapse of those two usually, and conveniently, exclusive realms": modern literature and modern life. MacLean, the eponymous hero of an indeterminately long series of novels which includes *Passage to India*, *The Golden Bowl*, and *Swann's Way*, has a taste for gourmet cooking, for experimental literature, and for the company of intellectuals and artists including, it is delicately hinted, Borges. In fact, Maclean has read some of the novels about him by the shadowy Berkeley, and he not only criticizes Berkeley for leaving out internally significant events—as opposed to action dictated by convention—but at times actively works to direct the plot towards his own ends; writes his own version of one of the stories; and, apparently with Berkeley's knowledge and consent, draws the cover illustrations for the novels

in the series—one of them depicting a daring if irrelevant leap (from horse to stagecoach) in Berkley's deeply pessimistic novel *Lord Jim.*

Even more complex is the relationship between work, character, and audience embodied in the unnamed first person narrator, soft, near-sighted (like Berkeley and sometimes MacLean), less widely read than MacLean, who for want of better purpose in life follows MacLean not only in fiction but in what must be called "life," and who at MacLean's invitation becomes involved in one of the "gaps," significant only to MacLean, which a conventional plot would fail to treat. "Bill," as he is called by MacLean, not only becomes absorbed in (and into) the action of the plot which, having already read, he can recognize and imperfectly remember, but in a movement far beyond the usual limits of empathy actually replaces MacLean, who "abruptly gives up the place carefully carved out for him through all these years," resigns his role as hero, and—at least in "Bill's" invented story—returns by way of O'Hare Airport to a shadowy woman and to "the bewildering cities," where in "Bill's" view he will render "himself virtually useless." "Bill" takes up MacLean's role—his saddle-sores, his taste in food, his guns, his manuscript—which has "a bulk, a density, not unlike that of the guns themselves"—his anticipation of the "gaps," and his sense that, indeterminate though they are, "there are things to be done."

In fact, the first thing he does is to ape MacLean's action from the novel he has already read by killing a dog—but a different kind of dog, in a different context, with a different outcome. His certainty abated, his attention turned from the end to the immediate task, "*Bill*" rides away, thinking in the final sentence of the novel that "Someone following behind me could see me now . . . ." And so we can, for we are surrogate Bills who have been forced to move one step closer to reality. No longer do we watch Bill watch MacLean, but *Bill himself* as he moves in confusion and hope towards the end, if there is an end, of an adventure which itself may be only one in an endless series and which in any case seems to make little sense.

By this time it should be clear that like many fictions of its type--the *regressus ad infinitum*—*The Invention of the West* and in fact much of Alvin Greenburg's work is *about* the act of inventing: what it is; what it does; why it is necessary. For Greenberg, the act of inventing cannot be separated from the actions of living: "We are, after some years of dubious apprenticeship, what we make ourselves to be, in the simple acts of our day-to-day re-creation. What we create, *is*. Where we live, we are; in an open territory of our own making . . . . the same thing that is true for myself is also

true for what I write: *it is.*" Philosophically, Greenberg is what can be loosely described (by me, anyway) as a phenomenologist in that "The phenomenological approach . . . designates the world outside and not the pysche within as the arena where the self is to be discovered, and the relationship between man and the world as both affirming and denying man's existence. The question of the reality of this external world . . . is phenomenologically irrelevant, because real or not, the world *is* as it is experienced." Furthermore, Greenburg is both philosophically and formally what John Steinbeck used to call a non-teleological thinker. He has argued that the artist, expecially the modern artist, should (or is it merely does?) approach "his subject from what the phenomenologists have termed the natural attitude, a point of view prior to the development of an intellectual structure; that he gives his materials a sensory priority, not an intellectual one . . . ." He goes further still: "To *make sense* of things is not only beyond his call of duty, but is likely to put him in danger of destroying, in the attempt to do so, the primary, human, experienced or experienceable sense of those things." Elsewhere, he says that "Poetry" means "to bump into," and asks "What have you bumped into lately? Not 'plot' or 'character,' not 'structure' or 'meaning,' but whatever is there, and happening, in its upredictability, most of all in its solidity, and then maybe even more so in the need—for the sake of survival—to meet it in the tangible and independent reality of its own being, its own taking-place."

The goal of fiction based on such premises, at least for Greenberg, is, "by avoiding or shattering" the "firm aesthetic boundaries" of the conventional novel, to discover "a technique of closure wherein the novel . . . will *not* be conveniently sealed off from the reader's continuing experience, but will, somehow, subtly merge the flux of its own independent time-continuum with his, and become, thereby, a part of his world." Form and theme thus merge, for this kind of ending, which forces the reader to question the very possibility of explaining or ordering human experience, is "able to give us a world that goes on, so, rather than one that is magically dissolved, poof!"

Taken to a logical extreme, this position would preclude a Greenberg novel from having any form at all or being in any way distinguished from his poetry—or, for that matter, his writing anything at all. In fact, his novels clearly *are* novels, his poetry clearly poetry. He is able to preserve generic distinctions philosophically as well as practically because in his world ideas, including ideas about form, are as substantial as physical entities.

"Touch a man's ideas," he writes, "and watch him wince."

Our ideas include, of course, all that we have experienced, both in "life" and in art, so that ideas about ends become part of a process as well as retaining their ability to give form or shape. In Greenberg's novel *Going Nowhere* (1971), for example, the belief that there is no purpose in life gives purpose to the life of Arthur Hoppe; all of the conditions established by Art's lies about his life are fulfilled in the novel's resolution; and the non-teleological novel ends with the hero and heroine living happily ever after while not knowing what to expect at the next moment.

The Invention of the West is even more paradoxical. At the end—if I can still use that term—of the book MacLean has repudiated the limitations of the generic Western, has become not simply a rival of Berkeley's by writing another version of what *had* happened, but, as "Bill" says, "his own artist once more." "Bill" notes that "Berkeley has always favored a project-oriented morality: commitment to doing something is good, action is better, completion best." Berkeley is, in a sense, an Aristotelian. In "Bill's" novel, however, the certainties of traditional resolution become the ambiguities caused by the overlapping of the "range of the natural" and "the range of the acceptable" to become "for MacLean 'the range of the possible.' " This mixture or confusion raises the flurry of unanswered questions in the closing pages.

One thing is clear: "Bill" has become a participant, *the* participant, rather than a spectator. In taking over MacLean's role, he assumes not only his predecessor's quickness of hand but his sense that so much happens and his hope that, if he follows a pattern, he can transcend the action which both recognize as hackneyed to reach "the best, the most important times of all times when he really got to know things." But resolution remains only a distant possibility, a hope which lures "Bill" through the many things that are to happen, that he or Berkeley or someone is to invent. However, Bill has taken an important step towards becoming *his* own artist, towards inventing himself, even though he is still caught in the old generic pattern, unable quite to give up playing cowboys. As both he and Arthur Hoppe show, though they do not learn, the process of becoming oneself involves playing pre-existent roles until the roles can be abandoned.

As Greenberg and MacLean insist, "It's *all* a matter of invention." It seems highly probable that Greenberg knows as well as we know that Marshall is in Missouri, not Kansas, that "invention" is a very slippery word. It comes from the Latin word meaning "to come

upon, discover"—or, in Greenberg's term "to bump into." It can refer to a "a device a useful contrivance"—something mechanical, like a generic plot. It can, in rhetoric, mean "the choosing or finding of topics suitable for discussion or argument"—potentially a chill and formal exercise in which many people, including MacLean and "Bill," become quite passionately involved—or "Inventiveness in selection of theme, arrangement of design, treatment," which Greenberg's novel certainly exemplifies. Or it can mean "the power to conceive and present new combinations."

The psychology on which this definition rests is perhaps more appropriate to Alexander Pope than to Alvin Greenberg, but it does help to describe the importance—and some of the fun—of *The Invention of the West*. Like all traditional heroes, including generic Western heroes, MacLean appeals to us because he seems immune from the distractions and worries, the *dreck*, of everyday life. Yet MacLean, like Shane and countless other gunfighter heroes, seeks to escape the role imposed upon him, to stop playing cowboys and grow up, and to return to normal life. But this time the hero rides off into the sunset and leaves us not with Joey and the incomprehending dirt farmers but in the trackless wilds which may be inaccessible to public transportation, our privileged position as spectators destroyed, to contemplate not his apotheosis but our immersion in the complexities of a situation which from the outside seemed clear and definite, and in a preposterous landscape which, nevertheless, "real or not, *is* as it is experienced." To an even greater extent than other authors of the sophisticated or parody Western, Greenberg has used our complacency towards the form and our nostalgia, which we disguise as condescension towards our younger, uncritical selves, to force us to examine or relationship to conventional patterns of behavior, including the patterns we have learned from fiction. Playing cowboys can be amusing and even salutary, Greenberg implies, but the bewildering cities await where Bill—and we—cannot yet follow MacLean. As the novel implies, the journey can be made only as the result of an act of invention, of discovering where one is and who one imagines oneself to be.

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