

## THE NECESSARY IMAGINATION: EUROPEAN WRITERS ENCOUNTER THE WEST

by Thomas Austenfeld

Americans have imagined the West so often in literature that "the West" as concept, as image, as *mimesis*, has been at least as influential in our culture as the "real" West—the unimagined, the actual place where people live. As readers of Western literature we deal with images at least as much as with reality, yet we sometimes forget the extent to which images shape our perceptions of reality.

The West has been treated as a concept since its first recognition as a geographical region; indeed, the conjunction of the terms "Western" and "myth" is an accepted one. If we look back at the settling of the West and the gradual moving outward of the frontier as described by Frederick Jackson Turner, we recognize again that only a comparatively small number of human beings ever got to "see" the "real" West. The overwhelming majority of the reading population was back East, left to imagining what was out there. The split between reality and concept thus originates with the first Western explorers' need to communicate their experiences to Eastern readers and backers.

As a nation, then, our common cultural experience of the West has largely been mediated through stories, tall tales, pen-and-ink drawings, photographs, and, of course, Hollywood movies, the preeminent purveyors of Western myth. In inevitable consequence of all the mediation, our imaginations more than our senses have appropriated the West, and we have perhaps always been less interested in what the West is and have wanted more to know what the West means.

What is true of the general East Coast population is even truer of the large numbers of Europeans who did not emigrate but were nonetheless fascinated with what they heard of the American West. These Europeans, more than anybody else, relied on a mediated image of the West, on material that would help them imagine what it was like. Fiction, which by definition is invention, proved particularly influential.

Most American readers are not familiar with the German writer Karl May (1842-1912) who, in the latter third of the nineteenth century, published more than sixty novels disguised as travelogues and cast himself in the role of hero in all sorts of unlikely adventures. May, impecunious and temporarily serving prison sentences for minor offenses, did not travel to any of the places he described until long after his novels had become bestsellers. His imagination was based largely on maps and other published reports available at the public library. While his imaginary travels took him everywhere from the Balkans to North Africa to South America, his stories set in the North American West have proved to be

the most enduring ones to a European reading public, not just in his native Germany, but also in surrounding continental countries.

To this day, I hazard, nary a German teenager, irrespective of gender, grows up without suffering at least a brief attack of "Karl-May-fever,"—a condition in which the afflicted patient, cheeks burning and withdrawn from daily duties, devours one novel every few days and responds unfavorably to withdrawal of the chosen drug. I write here from experience.

More recently, British and French authors have continued to delight their audiences with renderings of the American West which exhibit a characteristic mingling of experience with the fulfilling of preexistent literary expectations. In 1965 British novelist Malcolm Bradbury, currently Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, published a novel entitled *Stepping Westward*—a campus novel featuring a British writer on a temporary exchange stint at a college somewhere in the West. The college is incongruously named Benedict Arnold University—a sign of the broad satire Bradbury intends—and is located in the Plains town of Party (no state). The French journalist Philippe Labro fictionalized his student exchange year abroad in the 1950s in two novels, *The Foreign Student* and *One Summer Out West*, published in 1988 and 1991 in translations in this country. Labro's second novel in this pair, *One Summer Out West*, is obviously of particular interest. Both authors employ recognizable fragments of familiar Western myths in an apparent attempt to lend authenticity to their texts.

Both Bradbury and Labro exploit the idea of academic Europeans—a writer and a student—encountering the West, thereby setting up right away a contest between supposed European sophistication and the wild American landscape. Both reach the West only in stages. Bradbury needs the entire first third of his book to transport his character, James Walker, out of England, have him cross the Atlantic in a steamer, spend time in New York, and finally get on the transcontinental train. In his first book, *The Foreign Student*, Labro has his first-person narrator spend a year at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, very close to the original frontier and not too far from the birthplaces of Lewis and Clark. Only in *One Summer Out West* does the same narrator finally arrive in Colorado. The encounter with the West, then, in both cases, needs preparation somewhere in the decompression chamber of the East, apparently more hospitable to Europeans and a necessary way station.

The illustrations on the paperback covers of Labro's two novels manifest the alienation of the European in the West: *The Foreign Student* features the title character in a white dinner jacket among other formally clad young gentlemen. He stands out but fits. In *One Summer Out West*, the same white-jacketed young man faces an unpeopled mountainous landscape with some prairie grass in the foreground. The illustrator here sends a message which the content of the book confirms: the ill-clad European visitor confronts the West in typical greenhorn manner. Only in the end, after a series of transforming experiences, has the

narrator become an initiate. Bradbury's hero, similarly unprepared and ill-clad, will encounter difficulties as soon as he disembarks from his train in a classic scene of a man confronting an apparently unpeopled landscape.

Both authors are indebted to specific aspects of the Western myth in their stories, time-worn devices such as the arrival by train of a stranger in town or the shootout between good and evil characters. Consciously or unconsciously, our two authors have their protagonists relive a classic Western mythical scene, as if to confirm to their audience that the West is really as one imagines it.

The European authors have a relatively limited set of Western myths available if they want to ensure that their audiences recognize the pattern. An anti-climactic, ironic exploitation would be far more difficult to pull off. American audiences, I think, appreciate the absence of a shootout in, say, Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" as an ironic inversion of the expected good-vs.-evil gun battle. European readers expect the battle. This makes it easy for Labro, who finds the adventure he is looking for, while Bradbury has to rely on verbal misunderstandings and situation comedy to achieve his satiric ends. Two representative scenes from the novels will illustrate the authors' devotion to Western myth.

James Walker's arrival by train in the college town of Party leads to an initiation ritual of which the visitor is wholly unaware. Bernard Froelich, the Anglophile associate professor who invited the English writer to Benedict Arnold, has been dispatched to the Bushville train station to meet Walker. He decides to submit the arriving Englishman to an initiation test. He remains in his car, unnoticed by Walker, who is the single passenger to alight at this desolate station:

[Walker] looked around twice, as if to make sure that what he was seeing was true—he was in the middle of nowhere. . . . Froelich could imagine the feeling, the special foreign shiver, the English nervousness (were there Indians, and if so were they friendly?). It was an old experience that the west had always given, felt the sharper now because of the distance this man had come. It was the first lesson, and Froelich lay back and watched while it sank in. It was not cruelty but regard that made him do this; this moment, which he had created, was one that he wanted to be a central one in Walker's life (176-77).

Bradbury successfully employs several elements of the Western myth, satirizing some of them through hyperbole, but using others to endow the scene with significance. The newcomer is alone. With two suitcases and a typewriter he is not mobile, and his tweed suit makes him visibly uncomfortable. It does, however, lend him some dignity: "For this western sun, the get-up was farcical, and in a sense noble," the author reports Froelich thinking (178). The Englishman is somehow expected to be afraid of Indians—a result, of course, of

his upbringing with stereotypical Western images. A mentor, observing but not visible, has put the greenhorn into this controlled situation to test his mettle. He allows it to develop up to the point where Walker picks up his belongings and strides away in an *easterly* direction. Then Froelich retrieves him, confident that the lesson, presumably of self-reliance, has sunk in. Yet Walker is not quite sure what he has learned. Invited by Froelich to loosen his neck-tie in deference to the heat and humidity, he answers with British correctness, "I'm all right, thank you. In a new place you have to be careful not to catch cold" (185).

What is most striking in the British paperback edition is the consistent spelling of "west" and "western" with a lower-case "w." Contrary to American usage, where the "West" is capitalized to suggest a proper name, the British visitor's bewilderment is increased, it seems to me, by his having only a general geographic noun, not a proper name, at his disposal.

Our French protagonist goes West to seek adventure, but the most significant adventure comes to him unbidden. "Frenchy," Labro's *alter ego* college student, will witness a shootout between his Forest camp supervisor and a threesome of motorcycled Hell's Angels. Labro's narrator is considerably more receptive to the allure of the West (which, incidentally, he capitalizes) than Bradbury's protagonist. On his opening page, he discloses his awareness of what he is about to encounter:

The West! . . . A nice young fellow brought up within the gray walls of a European city, I had spent a year in an equally well-ordered Southern college, and now I was heading into a world whose extent and boundaries I did not know. (3-4)

Frenchy has arranged to spend the summer working for the Forest Service in the southwestern part of Colorado. Over the course of this money-making venture, he works his way up from sprayer of insecticide to scout and befriends the camp's leader, Mack, a quintessential taciturn Westerner, a natural leader.

The climactic scene of the novel occurs near the end of the summer. Three thugs on cycles, Hell's Angels, have come all the way from California to find one of Mack's men and Frenchy's tentmate, Bill, in order to execute a ritual judgment for his desertion of the gang. Before Mack can effectually deal with the three, Bill emerges from his tent in his own Hell's Angels getup, shoots two of the motorcyclists and is in turn killed by the third, an expert knife-thrower, who escapes only to be shot on his way out of the camp by Mack.

Frenchy, the observer, has analyzed the scene as it unfolds, particularly the mute testing of determination between Mack and the three Angels. He has noticed Bill's reticence and watchful behavior throughout the summer. The final showdown has been carefully prepared. A Western story will end with a scene in which weapons speak louder than words and in which ritual takes precedence over reason. Frenchy realizes that Bill "had to conform to a code of behavior I

didn't understand" (207). Once his former gang mates have found him, Bill faces them in the proper attire. They, in turn, demonstrate their awareness of the necessary formalities by reading a formal proclamation of indictment before the shootout.

What is interesting is the manner in which the European writers use the Western experience as well as the effect it supposedly has on their European protagonists—the more or less disguised autobiographical characters they portray. Bradbury and Labro write with very different intentions, yet both use the Western setting to accomplish their literary aims. Bradbury satirizes the American way of life by putting his British protagonist into all sorts of unlikely situations. In the process, James Walker himself becomes the object of ridicule on more than one occasion, but the Western lifestyle and the Western landscape are the normative background against which these incidents occur. Labro, who admires the American way of life and is predisposed to portray the American West as more representative of America than Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, also assumes the Western landscape as normative. There is a presupposed understanding, an unwritten contract, between the European author and the European reader that the West is the real America. This understanding is stronger, I think, than most Americans realize. The traditional image of "America" in many Europeans' minds, fostered by both literature and popular fiction, is a Western canyon landscape with a saguaro cactus by the roadside. This limited view applies, of course, in both directions. Countless Americans assume that Germany is one large Bavaria where beer is consumed at every turn or that Paris equals France and that all Frenchmen are seductive lovers. Malcolm Bradbury obliquely makes the same point when Froelich, in his initial conversation with Walker, offers the information that he has visited England:

"Oh, very nice. Which part"

"All of it, it's not so goddam big."

"Well, it's big enough," said Walker. (185)

Bradbury and Labro both invoke aspects of the Western myth which recall the days of the Old West and interpret their mid-twentieth century experiences in terms of that myth. Specifically: the arrival by train of James Walker may, for Bradbury, have overtones of Marshal Jack Potter's arrival in *Yellow Sky*, but there is no indication that his characters share the author's possible ironic debunking. And it is not even certain to what extent Bradbury uses Western myths to debunk them. He has Bernard Froelich attribute fear of Indians to the arriving Walker, but in doing so he commits a telling anachronism. Similarly, in portraying the gun-and-knife fight in the forest camp, Philippe Labro interprets the confrontation he witnesses as a contemporary reincarnation of the classic heroic gun battle between the personified forces of good and evil, complete with

the "good" guy, the forest supervisor Mack, emerging victorious at the end. It is striking to imagine an alternative mode of presentation: Labro could have interpreted this fight as an outbreak of senseless violence between hoodlums on motorcycles that is a far cry from any noble cause or noble manner. But the Western setting predisposes Labro to view it in terms of the region's mythical history. The Western landscape has normative power. European readers expect no less, because they carry the image and the "rules" of the West in their collective cultural consciousness.

The literary imagining of the West by the European writers here discussed thus confirms, with variations, the images previously held. Europeans tend to be overdetermined by preconceived images of the West. Even contemporary visiting Europeans respond to the West they see as much as they implicitly respond to the myths which first aroused their interest in the region. In other words: novices themselves, they are as yet unable to distinguish the West from the Western. Western myths have indeed taken on a life of their own.

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