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*Don D. Walker*

## FREEDOM AND DESTINY IN THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Nearly two centuries since he first turned west to face a wilderness and the Indians, the frontier hero still rides his lonely way across the unsettled reaches of the imagination. Every year brings new Western fiction titles in hard and paperback, new movies in spectacular color or plain old horse-opera black and white, new television productions with a one-chase climax or ninety minutes of assorted romance, psychology, and shooting. And every year the cultural prophets declare we are just about sated, that we are about to grow up and stop chasing Indians, in short, that the Western fad is nearly over. But still year after year the cowboys gallop along the frontiers of the mind.

Why for so long have we indulged this fascination? Are we stunted children forced by an adult world to put away our stick horses and turn in our cap guns for the sedentary imagination of the easy word and the electric picture? Are we adults bored with our civilization and dreaming like Huck Finn of some territory ahead? Or do we sometimes sense, through the shoddy writing of a million words and the cheap vulgarity of the electric screen, the shape of human meanings more appropriate to Greek tragedy than to the dime novel and *Ranch Romance*? Do we continue to read and watch because these meanings, hinted and half-realized at best, hold us with a shadow of our truth?

If there is some danger of pretension in our claiming such meanings, there is also some hope of seriousness and significance, a significance we may have denied ourselves in our habit of denigrating the very thing which has fascinated us and a significance we may yet fully realize in our literature. In short, let us allow the myth of the West its deepest comment on the condition of man.

What are the elements by which it might do this? In what ways does it have the deepest grounding? A great many things can be

claimed for the myth of the West, but one need not, I think, go past the most obvious to find these elements of highest importance. In various degrees of clarity and confusion, two notions prevail about the West. Together, they result in a human paradox: nowhere in all time and all space was man more free than he was on the Western frontier; but nowhere in all time and all space was he more lonely and more doomed to violent death. Two aspects of the frontier thus define its central meaning for man: its freedom and its ceaseless threat of death.

In telling the story of the frontier, writers from Hector St. John de Crevecoeur to Frederick Jackson Turner emphasized its freedom. "The demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom," said Turner in his first famous essay, "drew the frontier ever onward." Ten years later, in his discussion of contributions of the West to American democracy, Turner again wrote of the free life of the West: "To the peasant and artisan of the Old World, bound by the chains of social class, as old as custom and as inevitable as fate, the West offered an exit into a free life and greater well-being among the bounties of nature. . . ."

The frontiersman himself embodied this freedom, and among frontiersmen in the myth of the West no one came to seem more free than the American cowboy riding across his unfenced world. In one of the first accounts of him, Joseph G. McCoy wrote of his "freedom and abandon." The life of a cowboy, he observed, "is hard and full of exposure, but it is wild and free, and the young man who has long been a cowboy has but little taste for any other occupation." An old Texas trail driver remembered "the wild, care-free life of a cowboy." "The cattleman and his family," writes one historian, "were wedded to the concept of unlimited time and space, freedom of movement, and individualistic action characteristic of the West. In many ways, and to many who lived there, it was more a concept than a reality, but it was one dream nearer to realization than in any other place readily available to them." Dream or reality, its meaning is caught in these words of a cowboy: "From the Canadian Rockies to the Platte, from the Platte to Dodge on the Arkansas, from Dodge to the Gulf of Mexico, the land was free and open and it belonged to the cowboy. I was free too and, therefore, I was happy."

Consider here the prospect for Western man. Throw him a hundred miles out into unsettled space. He is beyond society, except perhaps the most rudimentary relations that may develop among a hand-

ful of his frontier friends. He is beyond law, except the law of his conscience which he may carry with him. If the trail divides, he can go either way. If the snow piles deep, he can wait another month, for time means nothing to him. Alone, or nearly alone, in a land empty of society, law, fences, and obligations, he is free, totally free.

And yet however free he may be, he seems preoccupied with death. He fears freezing, starvation, and tongue-swelling thirst. He is always alert against Indians, grizzly bears, and the trampling hoofs of stampeding cattle. And stranger still, he must arm himself, a solitary man, against other solitary men. In his freedom, he must learn to shoot, and having learned to draw fast and true he may be lucky enough to live a long time, or he may be unlucky enough to die young. This will be his destiny.

Contemporary critics of the popular Western attack its image of the frontier hero on the ground that shooting was not the central experience of his life. Certainly the myth selects and intensifies this experience, but history does show the common practice of carrying guns. How often men died from the bullets of these guns is impossible to determine, but as Texas Ranger James B. Gillet observed, "In a country where all men went armed, recourse to firearms was frequent." Yet however frequent, the myth undoubtedly selects and intensifies this violence. The result, at the level of the myth, is thus an imaginative emphasis upon violence and death.

Critics who object to this emphasis on the ground that it is not historical miss an important point and impose on the imaginative writer an unfortunate limitation. Myth is not history, though it may arise out of historical experience, and all human meanings are not historical, though they may be manifested in history. The question ultimately to ask here is not did men actually have freedom on the frontier and yet die violently, but do men have freedom in their existence as men and yet die. Myth may have its meaning not in history but in philosophical anthropology. However much we may be concerned with historical freedom and destiny, we must ultimately be concerned with ontological freedom and destiny.

What seems to be contradiction in history thus becomes, or may become, a meaningful paradox in myth. The conflict between freedom and destiny has its resolution. Instead of being opposite fragments of history, freedom and destiny become what Paul Tillich has called a "polar unity."

From mythical cowboys to Christian existentialism may seem a long leap, but let me suggest that it is not an impossible one. For some contemporary philosophical anthropology, particularly the views of Tillich and Nicholas Berdyaev, is suggestive toward an understanding of the myth of the West. At no time in the history of our concern with the nature of man have we been so convinced of his freedom and yet so poignantly aware of his doom. And these paradoxical features, I repeat, are the meanings of man in the West.

In our effort to understand Western man, naturalistic anthropology could have little relevance. It denied freedom, making man the product, the effect of a thousand predetermined causes, and it defined destiny in terms of environment thick with aggressive nature or equally aggressive society. If Theodore Dreiser's *Carrie Meeber*, Frank Cowperwood, and Clyde Griffiths had gone out West, they would have become undefinable as naturalistic objects. They would simply have faded away in the empty and sunlit space.

Idealistic anthropology, though it was the American fashion from Emerson to Turner, was equally irrelevant. In its emphasis upon the unlimited spiritual self-reliance of men, it supported an ideal freedom, but it neglected the materialistic forces impinging upon Western experience. On the Staked Plains of Texas or the salt deserts of Western Utah, Emerson's *Nature* was untrue to both man and nature. And no amount of Platonic contemplation could ever lift a painted Blackfoot warrior into transcendental being.

Existential anthropology, however, has an immediate bearing on the Western condition of man, for while emphasizing freedom it qualifies this freedom with its finiteness and relates it meaningfully to destiny. "Man has freedom," writes Tillich, "in contrast to all other creatures," and this freedom has many facets and dimensions. "Man is free, in so far as he is able to ask questions about the world he encounters, including himself, and to penetrate into deeper and deeper levels of reality. . . . Man is free, so far as he has the power of deliberating and deciding, thus cutting through the mechanisms of stimulus and response." Nevertheless, this freedom is a limited freedom, a finite freedom. "All the potentialities which constitute his [man's] freedom are limited by the opposite pole, his destiny. In nature, destiny has the character of necessity. . . . In man freedom and destiny limit each other, for he has finite freedom." And man's finiteness, his ultimate limitation, his final submission to destiny, is of course most dramatically manifest in his inevitable death.

All of this remains inchoate in the myth of the West. We have rarely realized its deepest meaning. And yet surely the maturity of literary concern requires such philosophical sophistication. Why have we refused to recognize the deeper implications of one of our great national dreams?

We have kept ourselves in a sort of philosophic childhood because we have been reluctant to put two aspects of our experience into a meaningful whole. We have experienced freedom, and we have lifted this freedom to a mythic dream. But in this dream freedom has had little relation to anything, least of all to the destiny which limits it. We have experienced frontier death, and we have lifted this death to collective phantasy. But death, too, has little meaning. It has no clear relationship to the freedom which it limits.

Our works of the imagination have projected man out into the unlimited social and moral space of the West. There in his self-reliance he has claimed his freedom, but in imaginative literature this freedom has been hypostatized, as if it were, like gold or beaver furs, merely something to discover and own. There is no clear sense of what man is free from or free to do. The American fetish of freedom has been simply projected out into the Eden world of the unsettled West, that world which is the American future. As the web of society was woven ever more tightly in the East, we could always say, but it's free out there.

But in the realities out there, how free was man? And what meaning and value did he put upon the freedom he could find? Take another Western hero. Take the mountain man. Presumably he chose his life of utter loneliness. In a real way he could be his own free agent. On the whole white map of the West he could mark his own particular spot. He could go up the river or down, live with this Indian or that, go back to St. Louis in a month or be gone forever along his undiscovered rivers. Certainly in a sense he was free. Yet the greatest of them all, Jedediah Smith, had his skull laid bare by the teeth of a grizzly, lost ten men in an ambush by the Mojaves, another eleven in an ambush by the Umpquas, and died at thirty-two on the lances of the Comanches. There is, I think, no evidence that Jed Smith was seeking freedom. On the contrary, he seemed moved by an almost mystical sense of destiny.

In American imaginative writing, however, the awareness of destiny seems as unsophisticated as the dream of being free. In popular fiction destiny has no roots in the nature of man and remains un-

related to the geography of freedom. In the simple moral determinism which controls the West, man is destined to be good or he is destined to be bad. There is little evidence that he has ever stepped out on the plains of unlimited moral choice to take the rightness or wrongness of his future upon his own broad and manly shoulders. From the beginning of our literary account of the West, in spite of the fact that history in this way conflicts with freedom, the good destiny of the good marshal and the bad destiny of the bad outlaw have been manifest. But without roots in his nature as free man, neither the good hero nor the evil villain has any real human meaning. He becomes a mere pawn, wearing a white shirt or a black shirt, in a Calvinistic allegory played out upon the high plains and sun-bleached deserts of the West. If violent death in the West has usually seemed to make no sense, it is no wonder. Whether a man killed or was killed was unrelated to his nature as a man in a world of freedom. If he died, this was the way the dice rolled, as if Fortune, not man, had freedom.

What we must do if we are to move toward imaginative maturity is plain. We must accept the two aspects of the West as parts of a single view of man. We must claim his freedom, let him ride into the great emptiness of the world which is not man, let him try out the many relationships between this world and himself; but let him remember, or let him discover, that his self, however self-reliant it may hope to be, cannot transcend its existence in nature, cannot escape its destiny. "Everything man as a centered self does," writes Tillich, "has the double character of responsibility and necessity. There is destiny in everything we decide in freedom. And there is freedom in everything we experience as destiny."

The trouble with our literary image of the West has not been a persistence of the dream of freedom and the dream of death. Both are to some extent real in our history; both are heroic in our myth; and both are integral in the nature of man. The trouble is that as writers we have usually made freedom silly and death sadistic. No one protests that there is too much killing in Greek tragedy. We accept death in this literary context not because we believe the Greeks to have been a bloodthirsty people but because we know death was a part of their total vision of life. Any total vision of man must recognize his destiny to die; any total vision of man will to that extent be tragic. When we come to see free Western man not as an individual but as a person, we will understand this. "Tragedy," as Berdyaev ob-

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served, "is always connected with the personality—with its awakening and its struggles," with, one might add, its awareness of freedom and its awareness of doom.

So must be the Western image of man. No one presents a starker image of total freedom than does the Western hero; and when, contrary to the childish demands of a host of followers, he is allowed his full role in nature and history, no one presents a more imminent awareness of death. In him consequently the tension between freedom and destiny is ever taut. In him the possibility of tragedy is ever present. This I think we at least vaguely sense, for this meaning lurks even behind the cardboard stereotypes of our popular fiction and our TV screens. But however implicit it may be in our myth, we cannot come to full awareness without the help of the writer. If he can be persuaded to turn from his slick manipulation of our unexamined cultural symbols, to an imaginative rendering of this tragic tension, we may eventually discover the real literary importance of Western man.