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OWEN WISTER

The Virginian

THE VIRGINIAN

A Horseman of the Plains

OWEN WISTER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY JOHN SEELYE

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

"It was once in the saddle I used to go gay"
Cowboy's Lament

I.

ON JULY 3, 1885, a young Philadelphian stepped down from a Union Pacific Pullman car into a Wyoming night, lit only by a waning moon and distant flashes of sheet lightning. He could barely make out the horizon, the far margin of a vast rolling sameness that was the prairie, yet out of the western darkness light was already coming. The young man had by then begun to record his initial reactions to the landscape in a journal, a record that stresses the uniqueness of what he was seeing while attesting also to his cosmopolitan outlook. He compared the western landscape to "the northern part of Spain," as being at once vacant of variety yet beautiful, "vast stretches of barren green" that stretched away to the skyline, and as for the sky itself, "there is none. It looks really like what it scientifically is—space." This sophisticated yet wonder-struck youth was Owen Wister, and it was his destiny to fill up that space with the theater of his imagination, peopling the western scene with types and themes drawn from his highly civilized repertoire. In more ways than one, when Wister stepped down from that Pullman car, he stepped off into history.

"The train steamed away into the night," he recorded, "and here we are," a line reminiscent of Henry James, as were the maiden ladies, friends of his mother, who accompanied him on the trip. But the land which Wister had entered would appear to have been hostile to a Jamesian sensibility: "We passed this morning the most ominous and forbidding chasm of rocks I ever saw in any country. Deep down below, a campfire is burning. It all looked like *Die Walküre*—this which is much more than my most romantic dream could have hoped." Wister had thought himself intended for a career in classical music, and had even tried his hand successfully at composing, but the opera he would eventually be associated with is the kind called horse opera. Still, the man who was reminded of Wagner by the Wyoming land-

scape might be counted upon to transform significantly his western experience as he shaped it into literature.

There is no entry in Wister's journal for July 4, which he and the two maiden ladies spent in a stagecoach on the first leg of a fifty-mile journey, from the Rock Creek station to Fort Fetterman. On July 14, his birthday, there is the simple entry, "I am a quarter of a century old today," that teems with meaning, for Wister had yet to find his true *métier*. He had abandoned classical music for banking, laboring as a teller in the safe deposit vault of a Boston firm, but had recently left banking to try for a career in law, and had taken a lowly position in a Philadelphia office awaiting the start of the fall semester at Harvard Law School. Having early on evinced a talent for writing, contributing as an undergraduate to both the *Harvard Crimson* and *Lampoon*, Wister had spent his free time over the past year working on a novel about a young man with artistic ambitions who is forced into a business career, a clearly autobiographical story which he had shelved at the disappointing advice of his friend and literary mentor, William Dean Howells. On the occasion of his twenty-fifth birthday, then, Wister seems to have been feeling rather more old than young, and perhaps something of a failure.

Yet his journal vibrates with the excitement of discovery, the exhilaration of first encounter. For Wister, the land through which he was passing seemed, like himself, a curious mixture of youth and old age:

When you go for miles though the piled rocks where the fire has risen straight out of the crevices, you never see a human being—only now and then some disappearing wild animal. It's like what scenery on the moon must be. Then suddenly you come around a turn and down into a green cut where there are horsemen and wagons and hundreds of cattle, and then it's like Genesis. Just across this corduroy bridge are a crowd of cowboys round a fire, with their horses tethered.

Those cowboys seated around a fire, pastoral and primitivistic figures with the force of primal terrain surrounding them, would eventually figure in a number of stories and two novels written by Wister, drawing on the journal entries for 1885 and the material gathered during the several summers he subsequently spent in the West. For a while he would continue to pursue a law career, but in time, and with the encouragement of his friend from Harvard days, Theodore Roosevelt, Wister would set out to become the American Kipling, transforming

into literature the particulars of his own personal encounter with the Wyoming landscape and its exotic inhabitants.

The journals Wister kept and the letters he wrote home to his mother (with whom he maintained almost a daily, lifelong correspondence), reveal the extent to which his stories and novels are based on the facts of encounter, but the frame within which he contained and gave meaning to those facts, most particularly in his best-known work, *The Virginian*, was very much a product of his eastern and highly cultured background. It was also, inescapably, a frame that reflected his personal crisis of identity, a division in personality and career motivation that had precipitated his first trip west, in 1885. Like the novel in manuscript Wister had shelved earlier that year, *The Virginian* is an autobiographical fiction, but one that evinces its subjectiveness indirectly, through subliminal signals rather than by means of the major characters and the plot line that sustains them. What the cowboy was, we can learn from cowboy writers like Andy Adams, but what the cowboy is, in terms of the American popular consciousness, must be credited to Owen Wister.

II.

Though new to him, the West that Wister stepped off into in 1885 was already a part of history. The way of the cowboy was about to pass from the plains. By 1893, as Frederick Jackson Turner observed on the symbolic occasion of the Columbian Exposition, the last frontier, which was the cattle frontier, had ceased to exist. By 1902, when *The Virginian* was published, the days of the *remuda* were truly over, having passed like little Joe the wrangler and his Texas pony into pulp literature, myth, and song. As Wister wrote in his introduction to the novel, the cowpuncher continued to ride only in "his historic yesterday. You will no more see him gallop out of the unchanging silence than you will see Columbus on the unchanging sea come sailing from Palos with his caravels." With the closing of the cattle frontier, the great cycle that began four hundred years earlier had ended, the Spanish conquistadors joined at the last by the ultimate cavalier, the horseman of the plains, whose mustang was the descendant of the Barbary steeds brought to America from Spain.

It was Wister's self-chosen task to define the "historic yesterday" through which the cowboy continued to ride. Though the tone of *The Virginian* is realistic, its materials factual, in keeping with the domi-

nant literary trend at the turn of the century, the bones of the book as Wister acknowledged were those of the historical romance, the grand tradition of Sir Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper that had inspired an earlier generation of American writers. It was a tradition that celebrated the spirit of chivalry, exemplified by deeds of heroism and courtship acted out according to a rigid code and set against a clash of opposing cultures. Like Scott and Cooper, also, Wister often ignored historical fact for the kinds of truths contained in myth, although, like Mark Twain, a writer who noisily objected to the "stretchers" employed by both Scott and Cooper, he was fairly successful in conveying the impression that the myths he purveyed were historically verifiable. If his Virginian cowboy has something of both Leatherstocking and Ivanhoe about him, he should remind us most of Huckleberry Finn, a Huck come to manhood in the Wyoming Territory.

Mark Twain's greatest novel, published in 1884, the year before Owen Wister first went west, ends with Huck's famous intention to "light out for the Territory," by which he meant the Oklahoma Indian Territory, where he and Tom were to have "howling adventures amongst the Injuns." That was not Wister's intention, for he came to Wyoming to hunt wild game not men, but he did carry with him something of Mark Twain's élan. When young Sam Clemens had arrived in the Nevada Territory, shortly after Wister (and his Virginian) were born, he too had assumed a literary destiny after an uneven, undirected early career, and in *Roughing It* he not only made the Far West literary terrain, he established the terms by which the western experience as literature would be defined thenceforth. Mingling autobiography with elements of fiction, Twain introduced the reader to the West by means of a tenderfoot narrator, whose comic misadventures educate the reader as he himself is initiated into western ways. It was a technique that Wister would modify for his own purposes in *The Virginian*.

In terms of biographical background, however, Owen Wister more closely resembles earlier eastern travelers into the western landscape than he does Sam Clemens—Harvard-educated young men like Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Francis Parkman, who also cast themselves as greenhorn initiates in their writings, but for whom western excursions were somehow invariably associated with the recovery of health as much as with the gathering of literary materials. Theodore Roosevelt likewise had preceded his friend Wister into the western

landscape, gaining the initiatory experiences recorded in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888), where he retreated in 1884 to recover from the devastating effects of the twin loss of his mother and young bride and of his political defeat in the Republican Convention of that year. Wister throughout his mature life was pestered by a "nervous" condition, a mysterious illness which took a number of painful and debilitating forms, variously diagnosed, but with one, apparently psychological, origin, as suggested by those letters to his mother.

Wister was the only son of an unlikely marriage, between Dr. Owen Jones Wister, a Philadelphia physician of German-American ("Pennsylvania Dutch") descent, and Sarah Butler, daughter of Frances ("Fanny") Kemble Butler, the British-born actress and author, and Pierce Butler, South Carolina planter-aristocrat. His mother was a talented writer, whose work regularly appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and she spent much of her time traveling about the continent, in quest of improved health and a cultured life. Her husband is said to have had a marvelous sense of humor. But where Dr. Wister tolerated his wife's whimsical and temperamental ways, he insisted that young Owen set aside musical ambitions for a career in some "useful" profession. The novel Wister tried to write in 1884-85 was clearly derived from this familial tension, but turning his personal dilemma into fiction had less a cathartic than a traumatic effect, for the rejection of his work by Howells apparently triggered an incapacitating breakdown in his health.

A "rest cure" was recommended by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell—not only a physician, author, and family friend, but a pioneering psychologist—resulting in Wister's western tour, the first, like his mysterious attack of illness, of several. Not surprisingly, Wister's literary version of the West took shape along lines reflecting the conflict that came to a head in 1885. Though he had inherited his mother's creative drive, Wister also, if less obviously, shared his father's convention-bound conservatism. When he had abandoned his intended career in classical music for banking, it was a voluntary decision, for by then his father had given in to his son's desires. The fiction that eventually emerged from exposing this deeply divided consciousness to the West was very much shaped by the struggle within the author between a romantic sensibility, inherited from his mother, and a need, even a compulsion, to champion mechanisms of social stability, his paternal bequest.

Mark Twain also saw the West through a divided perspective, his

appreciation of the personal freedom expressed in the western way of life matched by an abhorrence of the lawlessness such freedom could produce. In *Huckleberry Finn*, likewise, there is a constant struggle between Huck's love of freedom and his deeply moral nature, a struggle that takes added complexity from the legal sanctions given slavery by the antebellum world through which his raft floats. But where Huck is a relatively passive figure—he is after all a fourteen-year-old—Wister's Virginian is a dynamic, commanding, even paramilitary hero, the kind of athletic, authoritarian type, the "splendid animal," associated by Theodore Roosevelt with "the strenuous life." Wister's West, like Roosevelt's, resembles a vast playing field, a territory of adventure in which a man's character is tested, resulting in the elimination of incompetents and malefactors in favor of those gifted and hardworking individuals who know how to take charge of circumstances—and men. His West is dominated by a larger-than-life romantic superman who is associated with the introduction into a turbulent society of law and order and other mechanisms of stability, including marriage.

Still, though it undoubtedly emerged from the same psychosomatic origins as his illness, the central issue in Wister's novel—the tension between the romantic freedom engendered in the West by sheer space and the deep-felt need for social order, without which no community of men can function—was endemic to the frontier experience, transcending regional influences or historical periods. As early as 1783, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in *Letters from an American Farmer*, had deplored the degeneracy of frontiersmen, who became debased to mere hunters by their exposure to the wilderness, becoming little more than white savages. Only with the coming of the second wave of settlers, the farmers, would the ideal "New Man" emerge, drawing his deep sense of individualism and love of liberty from the ownership (and cultivation) of the soil.

Fenimore Cooper, who more than any other writer before Twain lay down the literary ground rules for dealing with the frontier experience, in his first Leatherstocking Tale, *The Pioneers* (1823), expressed both a painful sense of loss over the passing away of the wilderness—along with the noble way of life it engendered—and an equally painful awareness that an orderly and sensible method of settlement was a westering necessity, that natural "laws" were not sufficient for the purpose. But where Leatherstocking, the noblest creation of nature, first comes afoul of man-made laws, then determines to

light out ahead of the rest, fleeing the advancing line of the frontier for the great prairies, the Virginian is both a noble child of nature and the means by which law-and-order is introduced. He is the agent of the process and its product, like the man Mark Twain told of who got caught up in the machinery of a carpet factory and became a parlor ornament thenceforth.

There are other aspects of the book which also can be traced to the author's troubled and divided self, less relevant perhaps to the western than to Wister's condition, aspects which emerge from the character of the narrator, that first-person presence who seems to maintain a Jamesian distance from the characters and events he is describing but who may be more "involved" than first appearances would suggest. A comparison with Wister's diary and letters reveals how close the narrator was to his younger self, for though both are rather shadowy persons, they are the kind of people called snobs. Here, Wister can best be compared to Dana and Parkman, whose sympathies with the kinds of people they encountered in the western landscape were decidedly imperfect. Like them, Wister came by his snobbery naturally, having been high-born (by American standards) and educated in private schools, both in Europe and the United States. While at Harvard, he had been invited to join the most exclusive college clubs, which gained him entry to the "right circles" in Boston also. Entry was further facilitated by family connections, and Wister enjoyed the aegis of his famous grandmother as he traveled about Europe, leading to a long friendship with Henry James, whose literary influence resonates so delicately throughout *The Virginian*.

Thus Wister's western experience was filtered through the biases of the eastern establishment. If young Wister regarded the landscape of the far west as similar to the topography of Genesis, then he was relieved to discover that the new Promised Land was inhabited by a Chosen People of proper origins:

Every man, woman, and cowboy I see comes from the East—and generally from New England, thank goodness. If that's the stock that is going to fill these big fields with people, our first hundred years will grow to be only the mythological beginnings in the time to come. I feel more certainly than ever that no matter how completely the East may be the head waters from which the West has flown and is flowing, it won't be a century before the West is simply the true America, with thought, type, and the life of its kind.

This view, recorded in Wister's journal in 1885, that the western frontier would be the shaping experience producing a "New Man," had been current in the United States since its beginnings, from Crèvecoeur's *Letters* to Henry James's *The American* (1877), and would be formalized as a "theory" of American history by Frederick Jackson Turner in his address of 1893. In 1885, Wister agreed with Turner in regarding New England as the source for the seed (or "germ" as current academic jargon had it) of the emerging New Man. But, by the time he came to write *The Virginian*, Wister had abandoned such a simplistic genesis for a much more complicated geopolitical mix.

Darwin Payne, in a recent biography of Wister, has located a number of real-life models for his heroic cowboy. Chief among the many candidates was a young cowpuncher named George West, a native of New England, whose ambition to have a cattle ranch of his own inspired him to write frequent begging letters to Wister, resulting in an embarrassing and ultimately doomed relationship. Nor was West the only "original" whose subsequent career was greatly at variance with the Horatio Alger-like rise mapped out by Wister for his ideal cowboy, differences that help us to determine the broken line between factual reality and the needs of fiction—most particularly the kind of fiction represented by *The Virginian*. That West was from New England, the region which Wister in 1885 thanked God was the source of most cowboys, whereas his ideal cowboy is not, suggests that other factors were involved as Wister transformed the materials of his experience into fiction.

Wister first met George West in 1887, on his second western trip, when the young cowhand served him as a hunting guide, and in a letter from Wyoming to his mother, Wister describes him as "about twenty-four and much too good looking. He is much better looking than any of us, but he is suffering from indigestion just now." The *Virginian* likewise is early described as "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures"; but he does not suffer from indigestion, only from the heartburn caused by unrequited love. He is clearly an ideal, abstracted from a number of admirable western men Wister encountered—none however with a name so impossibly symbolic as "George West," and only one with identifiably Virginian origins. Why then is Wister's cowboy identified with a region often thought of as antithetical in values and culture to Wister's favored New England?

Wister was no admirer of Thomas Jefferson, but his southern

heritage and conservative nature inspired admiration of the "other" Virginian, George Washington, about whom he wrote a hagiographic biography and to whom his marvelous cowboy is at least twice compared. In his cowboy hero, moreover, who is called "Jeff" by his friend Steve, Wister put forward the kind of "natural" aristocrat theorized by the first Virginian and exemplified by the other.* Moreover, it is the certifiable New Englander, Molly Stark Wood from Bennington, Vermont, who is the transforming agent in the story, exerting the genteel and intellectual force that converts her cowboy hero into a reasonable facsimile of a gentleman. Though self-determined when it comes to the leadership of men, the Virginian is instructed by Molly to appreciate the finer things of life, thereby qualifying him to assume a position of highly placed authority, graduating from a mere foreman to part-owner of a cattle ranch. As the Virginian asserts the natural rule of moral right over the forces of wrong, so the New England schoolteacher sees to it that his manners become more correct, in effect combing his coarse, homespun fibre into something approximating fine linen. It is rather much as if George Washington had fallen into the care of Abigail Adams, or as if Huck Finn had decided to stay on at Aunt Sally's instead of lighting out for the West.

By making his heroic cowboy a Virginian, and then marrying him to a Vermonter, Wister was observing the tradition of the western novel as invented by Fenimore Cooper, who likewise implemented transsectional marriages with geopolitical connotations. In *The Prairie* (1827), Cooper belatedly celebrated the Louisiana Purchase by joining in wedlock an Army officer from New York with an Hispanic lady from Louisiana, and in *The Spy* (1821) he had wed an officer from Virginia to a lady from New York, by way of memorializing the confederated spirit of the Revolution. In 1867, J. W. De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* ended with the marriage of a Louisiana lady with a gentleman from Connecticut, an enforced celebration of the spirit of Reconstruction that seems also to have been what Wister had in mind in 1902. Himself of southern origins, he had that year married the granddaughter of William Ellery

*"Jeff," of course, could be a kidding reference to Jefferson Davis. The Virginian, in writing to Molly's mother, says that "my father and two brothers were killed in the Valley sixty-four," presumably on the Confederate side of the lines. Steve is a great kidder.

Channing, the great Unitarian minister of Boston, a young woman who shared the name "Molly" with the New England-born heroine of his novel.

In sum, by means of his courtship of a New Englander, the Virginian is transformed from the s.o.b. beloved of his old buddy Steve into a reasonable equivalent of the s.n.o.b. who in the course of the novel becomes the handsome cowboy's new friend and confidant, that shadowy witness who tells us that he learned the details of the Virginian's courtship from his other confidential friend, Molly Wood, the events of which provide a counterplot to his participatory account of the Virginian's heroic exploits. This gentleman also would seem to be from the East, within the zone of New England's influence if not precisely at the center. Not much critical attention has been paid to Wister's narrator, who is clearly quite close to the author's own point of view, yet he is very much a third party to the affairs of the Virginian and the schoolteacher, and should not go unremarked. His progress from tenderfoot to seasoned western traveler is something more than the aforementioned narrative device. His role is not unlike that of Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, being a ubiquitous presence who never quite solidifies into a fully realized human being, yet who is sufficiently involved in the action to warrant some attention as an individual character. As we shall see, his function in relation to the culminating event of the story, the marriage of the Virginian and Molly Wood, is crucial.

That marriage may have been important to Wister's Reconstructionist plot, and its sentimental aspects no doubt helped the book gain contemporary popularity, but it has been a bone of critical contention from the beginning. As Edwin Cady has pointed out, a letter from Henry James to Wister, for the most part praising the novel, raised a definitive objection to the story's resolution: "Nothing," wrote James, "should have induced me to unite him to the little Vermont person, or to dedicate him in fact to achieved parentage, prosperity, maturity. . . . I thirst for his blood. I wouldn't have let him live & be happy; I should have made him perish in his flower & in some splendid sombre way." This is the typically Jamesian tragic view, that the "American Adam" (as named by R. W. B. Lewis) is fated to fall. It is the fate of that American Eve, Daisy Miller, and of Melville's Billy Budd, Lewis's quintessential Adam. Frederic Remington, Wister's friend and frequent illustrator, in *John Ermine of the Yellowstone* (1902), his

novelistic response to *The Virginian*, likewise brought his own wilderness-nurtured hero to a tragic end.

In *The American*, despite the pleas that he do otherwise from William Dean Howells, Henry James had controlled circumstances in such a way that Christopher Newman is disappointed in his love for Claire de Cintré, for James knew that a marital bond between an American like Newman (who in many ways prefigures the Virginian) and a cultured European like Claire (Molly's equivalent) would be a realistic impossibility however much a sentimental ideal. Cooper's Leatherstocking meets less a tragic than an apothecotic fate, but Cooper also realized the impossibility of his hero's ever marrying, being too "noble" to wed some backwoods belle, yet too rustic for a woman with sufficient education to appreciate his virtues. Instead, Cooper opted to let Leatherstocking perish in his celibate old age, dying without an heir, disappearing like the frontier with which he is associated.

Still, we must concede that Wister knew what he was doing, despite the Great Tradition he ignored and James's lament. Modern critics may decry the mismatch between two lines of development—the Virginian's triumphant rise to heroic mastery and the sentimental interludes that make up his courtship of Molly Wood—but no one can deny that Wister managed to mount an archetypal action. In promoting the argument that the forces of good (equated with moral order) invariably triumph over the forces of evil (equated with moral disorder), Wister set the stage for countless novel and cinema reenactments of the final duel between the Virginian and Trampas, often followed by a marriage signifying the subsequent establishment of civilized community. Moreover, the novel's popularity was no sudden, inexplicable phenomenon, for its success, like its geopolitical plot, may be credited at least in part to a contemporary literary context. Wister's audience had been prepared to accept the basic situation of the wild Virginian "tamed" by Molly's tutorial presence; indeed, once the contact between the wild westerner and his mild partner had been established, what followed was in some senses inevitable. In presenting *The Virginian* to a modern audience, it is necessary to reestablish that context, demonstrating the extent to which the two-stranded narrative was warranted by a tradition inherited by Wister from a preceding generation of western writers.

III.

As he began to work a number of short stories in which the Virginian figured into a novel, Wister planned to incorporate not one but two marriages, playing off the Virginian's courtship of Molly Wood with the amatory adventures of his cowboy friend, Lin McLean, a native of Boston, who appears at the start of the story as the Virginian's partner in the baby-switching escapade—clearly a bachelor gesture of defiance against the rapid encroachments of marriage on their domain. Wister soon decided that the plan was unwieldy, and relegated Lin's adventures to a separate novel, *Lin McLean* (1898), a highly episodic narrative in which the young cowboy becomes infatuated with a "biscuit shooter" (a waitress in a railroad hotel) and marries her, only to find out that she already has a husband. Having by then spent Lin's money, the woman returns to her ne'er-do-well husband, and Lin eventually meets and marries a much more suitable woman, a pretty and spunky telegraph operator from Kentucky, but only after the tragic suicide of the "biscuit shooter" has relieved him of a dubious moral burden. Had the two stories been combined, Lin and his two courtships would have provided a counterpart to the story of the Virginian and Molly Wood, who occupy a "higher" level of society and are designed for a far greater destiny than are Lin and his little telegraph operator. As one complex action, the double plot would have given the novel a deeper social lamination, while increasing the geopolitical mix.*

Unlike his novels, Wister's short stories about western life invariably stress its maleness and violence, conflicts seldom resolved (and at times exacerbated) by a feminine presence. Thus an alternative hero to the Virginian and Lin is Specimen Jones, a typical self-reliant loner, who appears in a number of Wister's western stories. Like the Virginian, Jones is a natural-born leader, who can handle any situation, whether fighting (or fooling) Indians or managing recalcitrant frontier legislators. Unlike Lin and the Virginian, however, Jones never marries—but then Wister never shaped his collective adventures into a novel. This definitive difference between genres is slyly alluded to in *The Virginian*, by means of references to the events in an earlier story,

*Cf. Cooper's *The Prairie*, in which the marriage of Duncan Uncas Middleton and Doña Inez de Certavallos is given a lower-class counterpart in the union of Paul Hover, a Kentuckian bee-hunter, and Ellen Wade.

"Hank's Woman," which spells out a tragic episode of frontier matrimony doomed to violence and death. The tragedy is triggered by a conflict between European values (including Christian morality) and Western mores (including wife abuse) that provides a sharp contrast to the happy merging of similar contrasts in the union between the Virginian and Molly Wood.

Since we are accustomed to regard such stark realism as "true," it is easy (with Frederic Remington) to accuse Wister of perverting his earlier, "honest" view of the West by working his short fiction into commercially acceptable novels with the addition of sentimental elements stressing successful courtship and happy marriage. Thus "Hank's Woman" is a "true" account of what happens when a rough cowboy marries a Christian woman, while *The Virginian* is not, being essentially "dishonest" to the "real" western experience, with its heritage of male bonding and misogyny. Much as Wister set aside the Mexican heritage of the American cowboy—which Remington insisted upon in his letters to him—in his popular essay on the cowboy's origins, mandating a purely Anglo-Saxon and chivalric genesis, so in his western novels he set aside inconvenient facts for a commercially profitable formula.

In *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, G. Edward White detects a dominant pattern in the lives and writings of Roosevelt, Remington, and Wister. All three, according to White, had uneasy or tragic experiences with their mothers or wives (or both), and all three continued in their mature years to maintain a preference or at least a compartmentalized place for exclusively male companionship. The social (men's) clubs of New York City, White demonstrates, were at the far eastern end of a conduit that provided an underground (smoking car) railroad of white male companionship terminating in the hunting grounds and cattle country of the Far West—where men's clubs also flourished. Thus Wister's short stories can be seen as true to his misogynous pattern, while in *The Virginian* he essentially betrayed it.

Moreover, Wister's betrayal of the "honest" vision of his short stories produced a detectable dichotomy in the novel that resulted. The events witnessed by the male narrator have the characteristics of Wister's short stories (having earlier appeared as such), and deal with exclusively male concerns. By contrast, the "novelistic" additions, mostly matters which the narrator learns about from Molly, are distinctly in the sentimental vein. Aesthetic uniformity could have been

achieved only by recasting the earlier short stories about the Virginian, but Wister seems to have been unwilling (or too lazy) to rework the earlier episodes into a uniform (and presumably omniscient) point of view. A similar problem characterizes *Lin McLean*, where many of the chapters are narrated by the same Tenderfoot witness used in *The Virginian*, while others (much of the courtship material) are simply, without explanation, given in a limited-omniscient voice. In his second and subsequent novel, Wister attempted to justify the split viewpoint by having the narrator explain that Molly Wood was the source of his information, an awkward and not very satisfactory apologia.

It should be noted that the bifurcated action, however flawed as narrative art, does accurately reflect the social and cultural discontinuity pointed to by White. That is, the two “lives” of the Virginian have counterparts in the biographies of Wister, Roosevelt, and Remington, all of whom seem to have arrived at relatively comfortable compartmentalizations of their domestic and male-dominated roles. More important, perhaps, the double-agency of the narrator—as a participatory and as a hearsay witness—allows for a much more complex resolution of the courtship sequence. That is, a case might be made that the novel contains *two* courtships, the one resulting in the union between the Virginian and Molly, the other in a bond between the Tenderfoot narrator and the Virginian. At the very start of the action, when the Tenderfoot first catches sight of the handsome but dusty cowboy, in his interview with the nattily attired intended bridegroom, Uncle Hughey, he confides to the reader, “Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all.” “Had I been a woman,” he notes at a much later point in the story, the Virginian’s smile was such “it would have made me his to do what he pleased with on the spot.” Such touches as these bracket the growing relationship between the Tenderfoot and the Virginian, in which the effete eastern snob is first held at arm’s length by the cowboy, then gradually welcomed into his confidence until, finally, he is admitted to a confessional intimacy. This development suggests that Wister had his reasons for not abandoning his narrator for an omniscient point of view. It is time therefore that we consider at length and in detail the function of the Tenderfoot storyteller.

The Virginian is a *bildungsroman* that develops several lines of maturation. There is, first of all, the Tenderfoot’s initiation into the Way of the West, a progress that is accompanied by the Virginian’s personal growth and acceptance of increasing responsibilities. This