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**A Man is Being Beaten:
Constructing Masculinity
in the American Western**



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The original cowboy Western, Owen Wister's The Virginian, is narrated by a curious figure: a tourist on his first trip West who finds everything in Wyoming an object of delight. The novel opens with the unnamed narrator caught in a gaze of wonder at another man, overwhelmed by the sight of the stranger's 'drop-dead good looks':

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone 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.

As it happens, the narrator himself will later be "taken" by the "slim young giant" on the long trip to Judge Henry's ranch. Before they set out, however, he finds himself staring at the Virginian: "But in his eye, in his face, in his step, in the whole man, there dominated a something potent to be felt, I should think, by man or woman." The narrator tries to avoid making too frequent glances: "But the eye came back to him-- drawn by that inexpressible something . . ." Indeed, the very syntax with which the narrator describes his scopophilic delight is enough to give him away, marked as it is by the recurrent

conjunction "but" ("But in his eye," "But the eye")--as if it were futile to resist the gazing slide into homoerotic desire. Later, his slack-jawed wonder at the Virginian's ability to win a bed for the night--by accepting an invitation to share the bed with another man--confirms what we have suspected right off.

Wister's novel of 1902 established numerous possibilities for the cowboy Western, which quickly became the most popular formula in American literary and cinematic history. But perhaps the most important (and least-discussed) of these features is the male body itself, which is repeatedly presented as a desirable object, worthy of sexual interest. Western films most obviously focus our attention on attractive men, and we might compose a catalogue aria to these male delights. Start with eyes: the inarticulate blue gaze of Gary Cooper, high-lighted in thirty years of cowboy roles. The steel-blue eyes of Henry Fonda, or the quizzical blue eyes of Jimmy Stewart, both showcased in dozens of Westerns over twenty-odd years. Turn to the lower half of the face: the strong-chins of Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea, or Robert Mitchum and Robert Taylor, both of whom had easy smiles and resonant, even seductive voices. Or lower yet, consider bodies themselves: Jack Beutel as Billy the Kid in The Outlaw--according to André Bazin, "one of the most erotic films ever made"--and as much so because of Beutel's muscles as because of Jane Russell's décolletage (whether he is pushed into water to be revealed in a tight, wet shirt, or is later "saved" by having the shirt taken off). A mere list of more notable names brings to

mind equally attractive physiques and physiognomies: Gregory Peck, Alan Ladd, Paul Newman, Rock Hudson, Jeff Chandler, Robert Redford, Clint Eastwood (all of whose careers were strongly linked with Westerns).

From the beginning, Western stars have been celebrated for their physical attractiveness--for handsome faces and virile bodies over which the camera can linger. Indeed, not only is the Western a genre that **allows** us to gaze at men, this gaze forms such an essential aspect of the Western that the genre seems covertly about just that: looking at men. To state the issue so starkly, however, already suggests how problematic looking at men has always been. And it's no surprise that the hesitations, distortions, and evasions that accompany this male-centered "look" are customarily interpreted as a deep-seated nervousness over homoeroticism. But that is only part of the story (and the simplest part, at that).

I'd like to suggest instead that this concentration on male physiques is part of a broader cultural longing for **renewal**, one that occurs in a special landscape (the American West) because that landscape is associated with personal transformation. Becoming a man (which is conventionally expressed as doing "what a man's gotta do") has been such a tired cliché of the Western that it hardly warrants comment. Yet this banal tag line of gender identity is tied up in the Western's focus of our gaze on the male body--a body that must, as I shall argue, be distorted, beaten, and pressed out of shape, so that it can paradoxically

become what it already is. The association of the American West with radical transformations to an untransformed body--as if the West, and only the West, were a place in which manhood might emerge, yet remain what it always was--forms the subject of my paper today. Yet given the nervous contortions aroused by the male body in any genre, how can we first understand the way our "look" is solicited by the Western--directed so often, so pointedly at **bodies** that critics assume are not worth comment (unlike the narrator of Wister's Virginian). In short, why is the Western so invested in this bizarre, "look-but-don't-look" experience?

I. Let's Get Physical; or, Just Looking?

One way to begin to answer this question is (as usual) by asking another one: why do film theorists so persistently ignore this particular "look"? Most in fact agree that the so-called "classic Hollywood cinema" operates patriarchally, ever putting the **female body** on display for the male **spectator**. Laura Mulvey opened the discussion in 1975, in her extremely influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she described the pleasure of film as one of a persistent sexual imbalance, between "woman as image, man as bearer of the look." And that distinction is true not only of men and women in the film (as characters) but of men and women in the audience (where women have learned to see like men). By contrast, films cannot

linger over men, because their bodies, as Mulvey explains, "cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like." In short, both men and women viewers identify with the male hero in always attending to the **heroine's** image. Or so Mulvey asserts, and her position has shaped all discussion since.

Given this general agreement about the "male gaze" and the "female body," it may seem odd that the Western so obviously celebrates the **male** body, as if that tall, handsome, bright-eyed, broad-shouldered figure who rides through our national dream represented some radical inversion of the stereotype. Film Westerns are, of course, descendents of literary Westerns, whose equally "shocking" celebration of the male body seems copied straight from Wister. The vision of the handsome man returns as if an obsession. Zane Grey opens Riders of the Purple Sage (1912) with the description of Venters, who "stood tall and straight, his wide shoulders flung back, with the muscles of his bound arms rippling and a blue flame of defiance in [his] gaze." Two pages later, the heroine's own "strained gaze" **literally** conjures up the novel's second hero out of the landscape--a leather-clad Lassiter, who dismounts from his horse with a "lithe forward slipping action" that matches the Virginian's first movements a decade before, "climb[ing] down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin." Later, Lassiter is described as "looking like a man in a dream"--a motif sustained by countless other writers in the

decades since. Literary Westerns invented the dream-man--a tiger in high-heeled boots and chaps--and then placed him as the target of all eyes.

All of this raises large questions about our choice of cultural heroes, and more particularly about what we see in cowboys as objects of desire. Why, in fact, have our heroes so often been packaged in terms of a myth that has had so little to do with our actual history? Given the delight which the formula Western takes in celebrating the male body, why should the cowboy have been chosen (rather than the rancher, say, or explorer, or mountain man)? The answers are diverse, but for our purposes, the salient feature of the cowboy has to do with the way he looked, something that observers have delighted in from the beginning. Richard Harding Davis (who was himself notorious as a flamboyant journalist) exclaimed in the early 1890s:

The cowboy cannot be overestimated as a picturesque figure; all that has been written about him and all the illustrations that have been made of him fail to familiarize him, and to spoil the picture he makes when one sees him for the first time racing across a range outlined against the sky, with his handkerchief flying out behind, his sombrero bent back by the wind, and his gauntlets and broad leather leggings showing above and at the side of his galloping pony.

Moreover, as the most famous painter of cowboys, Charles M.

Russell, observed, that image was hardly unintended:

Cowpunchers were mighty particular about their rig, an' in all the camps you'd find a **fashion leader**. From a cowpuncher's idea, these fellers was sure good to look at, an' I tell you right now, there ain't no prettier sight for my eyes than one of those good-lookin', long-backed cowpunchers, sittin' up on a high-forked, full-stamped California saddle with a live hoss between his legs.

Fully equal to Russell's visual delight is the cowboy's preening

self-regard, the "fashion leader" consciousness of himself as an object "good to look at."

Such vanity seems remarkably out of place in the open spaces of the Far West, and only in part because fashion is presumed to be an urban, courtly affair rather than a pastoral one. Yet it may well be that one of the reasons the cowboy attracts so much notice is precisely **because** of this sensitivity to the power of the gaze, of **looking** itself. He draws our attention, that is, by positioning himself as an object **worth** gazing upon. And he does it, as both Russell and Davis attest, through a close attention to costume, a belief that clothing properly worn conveys a personal, highly gendered meaning.

It has often been observed that the working cowboy depends far more on a specialized garb than almost any other modern worker--so much so that his dress has become a kind of language, signalling in fiction the kind of moral, emotional being he is (the excess of two guns versus the restraint of one, for example, or the contrasting claims made by fringe, silk, leather, and silver). As well, however, the cowboy's elaborate, sign-laden costume permits the eye to roam across the male body, without seeming to focus on that body as flesh. In Western novels as much as film, the eye is trapped and held up by fetish items associated with parts of the body, as our gaze is directed from eyes, chins, chests, legs, and various muscle groups to articles instead that either cover or exaggerate them. Hats of assorted shapes and tilts; handkerchiefs knotted round the neck; ornate

buckles, gun belts worn low, and of course, an array of holsters and six-shooters; pearl-buttoned shirts, fringed jackets; gloves carefully fitted and as carefully stripped off; leggings, chaps, leather pants; pointed, high-heeled boots and spurs: all the way up and down, the cowboy's costume seems to invite yet deflect our gaze, doing so in a characteristic moment of nervous distortion, of oscillation, that seems ever attached to the scandal of looking at men.

II. Tall in the Saddle

Costuming surreptitiously satisfies expectations in a genre that ever denies it is doing what it does: gazing at the male body. Indeed, the formula Western's central moment of unleashed violence is also a moment of displaced sexuality, as the prose description or camera angle turns to focus on a hand hovering over a gun. Yet this splitting up of the body into parts with typical "gear" offers far more than a displacement of homoerotic desires. And this is my central point: the "oscillation" (of looking/not looking) upon which costuming is based also indicates a potential for disrupting the body into costumed parts, and anticipates the ways that manhood will be emblematically stretched, distorted, and slowly rehabilitated.

The ground against which this figure of bodily disruption emerges is, of course, the unfractured, undistorted, fully coherent male body, which the Western celebrates most obviously in the

phallic image of man on horseback, sitting high above the ground, upright and superior, gazing down at a world whose gaze he solicits. The power of this image lies, I think, in the contradictory gesture of sitting yet moving, of remaining motionless on display even as one traverses the landscape, of registering supreme self-control in the nonetheless energetic process of crossing (and re-crossing) our field of vision, fixed at the center of the frame. Sitting astride a horse is so central to the Western, in fact, that it serves as the formula's necessary condition for manhood (necessary, if hardly sufficient). And as if to confirm that image's meaning is its counter-image, considered the most severe of "western" humiliations: of a man pulled down from the heights to be dragged in the dust by a horse clearly out of control.

Indeed, the Western can be reduced to a series of oppositions between those who stand and those who fall down--between upright men on horseback and those whose supposedly "natural" position is prone. The prone are, of course, revealed in the end to be non-men (a category that generously embraces Indians, preachers, Mexicans, small children, Easterners, and women). And the central **narrative** conflict therefore involves those who try to act like men, with villains distinguished from heroes by being compelled to stretch out on the ground. Thus, against the strong **narrative** pressure for men to remain erect and upright, astride their horses, the Western imagines them brought low, tripped by their own inadequate masculine skills into lying down, either for

the moment or for good. Even the predictable barroom brawl works toward this scenic end, as a means of knocking men down so that they can rise again. And it is invariably that process of rising either before or after the final punch that is given a scenic space in which we can observe once again the male body in ascent. The inevitable final shootout organizes space in similar terms, with the stakes involved in standing or lying down by this point having risen dramatically. It is as if the narrative energy of a genre primarily about men on horseback was invested in showing how easily they could be reduced to prone inactivity.

Yet the **descriptive** energy of the Western also rests on a curious opposition: between exhibitionism and restraint, self-preening and self-effacement. For despite the flamboyant self-consciousness of the cowboy hero--his calculated attention to costume, his upright concentration of our gaze--he nonetheless strives to maintain a reserved, taciturn, inexpressive persona. The visual "busyness" of his demeanor is balanced by vocal inactivity, a sonic stillness that offers a nearly physical pause in the narrative line (think of the narrative clefts registered by the mask-like faces of Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, or Clint Eastwood). So entirely self-contained is the Western hero that he seems to exist beyond the everyday commonplaces of talk and explanation, of persuasion, argument, indeed beyond conversation altogether. Valuing action over words, marking silence itself as the most vivid of actions, the cowboy hero once again throws us back onto the male physique, shifting attention from ear to eye

in the drama of masculinity.

Just as the Western gives us disruptions of the tiger-body as a ground against which its regained perfection stands forth, so it gives us failed men whose lack of restraint provides a foil to the true man's coherence. Indeed, this recurrent emotional excess offers a curious parallel to the recurrent visual disruptions practiced on male bodies. For the uncontrolled passion of "failed" men likewise offers a silhouette that constructs its shadow image. Talking too much, or laughing too easily, are more than mere signs of bad form, revealing a failure to maintain a self against larger social pressures. The frequency with which the town drunk stumbles through the Western hints at the terms by which masculinity is to be measured, and the stakes seem significantly higher when the drunkard is, as so often, a figure of education or expertise--a doctor, say, or newspaper editor, or even a former sheriff. It is as if the dramatic rationale behind such figures of complex talents and skills is that, unlike the hero, they fail to control their desires. The most notable of these professional derelicts are Doc Boone in John Ford's Stagecoach and Sheriff Wash Dimsdale in George Marshall's Destry Rides Again. Driven downward by oral compulsions into ever more drunk-only reclining postures, they offer a contrast to the countless scenes in which the hero drinks sodapop or milk. Withstanding the censure of a saloon full of drinkers, the hero confirms a claim on our attentions as a figure of restraint, set against the chaos of non-men.

III. Getting Knocked Down

In an important essay on the Western, Robert Warshow has observed that the formula "offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere else in our culture," and that in "acknowledg[ing] the value of violence," the Western helps us to understand possible moral terms by which violence might ever be exercised. Yet in an equally provocative claim, he then goes on to argue:

it is not violence at all which is the "point" of the Western movie, but a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence. Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what most interests him is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero.

Violence in the Western, in other words, is less a means than an end in itself--less a matter of violating another than of constituting one's physical self as a male. The end, in other words, is less damage or defeat than (once again) display. Indeed, among various reasons for the Western's celebration of violence is not only that violence is presumed to be a masculine emotional prerogative (hormonal imbalances, and so on), but because such moments tend to put the male body so distinctively on exhibit. The shoot-outs, brawls, and scenes of horse taming, the shots of "riding herd" as well as assorted Indian chases: each compel men to exhibit broad shoulders and narrow waists, allowing us again to gaze at masculinity in action.

Given the genre's celebration of the male physique, we need now to ask why violence so often destroys that body, especially since it is one of the Western's chief reasons for being? What, in other words, can we make of the almost obsessive recurrence of scenes of men being beaten--or knifed and whipped, propped up and knocked down, kicked in the side, punched in the face, or otherwise lacerated, clubbed, battered, and tortured into unconsciousness. Listen to this representative passage from Zane Grey:

But was that Cal? She saw an unrecognizable face or what had been a face, but now scarcely human, beaten and swollen out of shape, purple in spots, raw like beef in others. Nose and mouth were bleeding. His hair was matted with blood, and his shirt, that appeared torn to shreds, was black with stains.

Through seven pages of Grey's Code of the West (1923), we read how the hero's hands were "bruised, swollen, skinned raw in places," how "he was breathing heavily, almost gasping, and a bloody froth showed on his swollen lips," how he "turned his disfigured face to the wall," and then "lifted his bleeding, bruised face, and it touched Georgiana's hands, burning her with its heat."

This powerful image of a face so damaged that it becomes itself a "burning" actant, an agent in the world, looks forward to many similar moments in film. But it also looks backward, rewriting a central moment in Wister's The Virginian two decades before, when Molly discovers the Virginian's "motionless figure" after he has been left for dead by Indians: "One of his arms hung up to its elbow in a pool, the other was crooked beside his head, but the face was sunk downward and the man's whole strong

body lay slack and pitifully helpless." Molly succeeds in rousing him, but at first only hears the "clear impersonality sounding in his slowly uttered words." Soon, however, "She began to feel a greater awe in this living presence than when it had been his body with an ice-cold hand." And when home at last, "she undressed him. He was cold, and she covered him to the face"--then to spend the next thirty pages nursing him back to health.

The repetition of this scene over the next ninety years in countless novels and films attests to a streak of apparent sadism in the Western. Of course, other features are also characteristic of the formula, confirming the strongly intertextual demands of this (as of any) popular genre--demands that compel authors to repeat conventional gestures in order to woo an audience predisposed to the genre. Yet it is not readily apparent why authors of the formula Western appear to take such **pleasure in punishment**, offering up a vast panorama of elaborate beating scenes that lead invariably to even more protracted scenes of the hero's convalescence and recovery. Consider only three: Jack Beutel in The Outlaw, critically wounded, feverish, and unconscious, attended to by Jane Russell in the notorious sequence when she cuts off his shirt. To raise his body heat, she jumps into bed with him, even though that only raises his fever over the next few days and contributes to his delirium.

More vivid is the Rojo gang's prolonged beating of Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leoné's A Fistful of Dollars--as blood trickles down his cheek, his eyes swell shut, and his ribs are repeat-

edly kicked. The film later tracks his painful escape, crawling under a long boardwalk, climbing into an unfinished coffin that then is carried out of town. Slowly, in an abandoned mine, his wounds heal, he rebuilds his strength and recovers his shooting skills. Or more vividly still, the beautiful Jaime Sanchez in Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch is towed in the dust by General Mapachi's car (in a "modern" variant of the humiliating fate of being dragged by a horse). His face badly beaten and bruised, his torso and arms dreadfully lacerated, finally, in a mortal stroke, his throat is cut, full face to the camera.

Western films of the past thirty years have reinforced the violence practiced on the male body through cinematic style itself (though this, of course, is not unique to the Western). Increasingly, the "face" of the film has been distorted, as the standard film image is broken up through a complicated series of telephoto closeups, zoom shots, flash-cuts, deep-focus long shots, and a host of other fragmenting techniques. Peckinpah's Wild Bunch offers the most intense such assault on the viewer, with an extraordinary number of cinematic "edits" breaking up the narrative sequence (some 3,642 individual cuts, as compared with six hundred for the average film). With similar effect, Sergio Leoné made the extreme close-up his signature style, turning his "spaghetti Westerns" into a catalogue of body parts, with the camera tightly focused on parts of the face, or the eyes alone, or offering intense close-ups of hands, guns, legs, and torsos. As if intentionally complementing this cinematic technique,

moreover, Clint Eastwood performed in an extremely impassive, inexpressive style, giving the impression of being completely deadened before the movie had begun.

Indeed, masculine restraint itself has by now become little more than a sign of absence. In a world lacking any larger vision of progress or a coherent past, where rules no longer seem to apply, all that distinguishes the hero from anyone else is mere emotional detachment--a style that comes to seem like nothing so much as death itself. Leone's "reign of violence" strips character down in scenes of walking-dead, where individuals only come alive once they've been shot (and either cry out, or are seen to twitch). But more generally, Leone's parodies reveal how the Western has always relied on the living dead, a theme best expressed in A Fistful of Dollars, when Clint Eastwood explains why he is propping up dead soldiers as a ruse:

The dead can be very useful sometimes. They've helped me out of tough spots more than once. First they don't talk. Second, they can be made to look alive if I manage it right. And third, well third, if you shot 'em there's no worry because they're dead already.

Of course, the Western also works in these terms, as a genre that resuscitates caricatures into seemingly fuller characters, taking figures who "don't talk" and making them "look alive if you manage it right." Driven by a certain necrological impulse, the Western verges ever on the edges of death, invoking violence only to show how the restrained, fetish-laden body is **not** to be deprived of life but made to stand as a desirable emblem of masculinity, as a self-contained, animated (if finally inanimate)

object. The process of beating the Western hero can thus be thought of as a kind of artificial respiration, raising his temperature and attempting to bring a bloom to his cheek--even if that "bloom" represents blood on the surface rather than just beneath. And what occurs as convalescence in earlier formula Westerns now appears more ambiguously, as the hero "convalesces" back into the frozen-faced, white-cheeked, inexpressive image of death itself.

The point of all this violence, however, is less of matter of sadism than it may seem on the surface. In fact, the reason Western heroes are invariably knocked down and so variously tortured is precisely so that they can recover from their wounds. Or rather, the process of beating occurs so that we can **see** men recover, regaining their strength and resources in the slow process of once again making themselves into men. The paradox lies in the fact that we watch men become what they supposedly already are, as we exult in the **culturally** encoded confirmation of a man once again becoming a **biological** man. This, by the way, helps explain the frequency with which, as in no other genre, the Western seems to require scenes with baths and barbers. All that hot water, all that soap, does not simply register the transition from barbaric behavior to civilized tone (cleanliness being next to godliness in the period when Westerns are set). Rather, baths require the man to disrobe, to put his body on display--and then to slowly soak himself back into a refreshed condition.

Moreover, the pendant to the bathing motif is the barbershop

scene, which likewise allows us to gaze at stubble being shaved, hair being trimmed, mustaches being waxed, as faces are reconstituted before our eyes. Indeed, these scenes serve as miniature, muted convalescence sequences, in which the Western hero is once again reduced to a prone position as the camera watches him recover himself. In short, the Western is committed to showing how men are always already there, biologically fixed by the accident of genitals, and therefore historically "found" rather than culturally "made." Yet formula narratives depend intriguingly upon means that their ends negate, relying on plots that demand instead that manhood be created, and then re-created once again. It is that ongoing process that encourages "our" continuing delight in the male body--although now, we need to define the question of who this "our" may mean.

IV. Who's Getting Whipped into Shape?

Feminist film critics have, as if in choir, interpreted the Western's celebration of the male body as a disguised, displaced homosexual pleasure, and that the beatings so often sustained by the hero are a punishment of the audience for what it cannot allow itself to enjoy. As Steve Neale asserts, of Anthony Mann's Westerns, "The mutilation and sadism so often involved in Mann's films are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified, so to speak, as an object of erotic contemplation and desire." In other words, the

attractions of the male physique can only be embellished when suppressed--a suppression regularly achieved through the administration of pain. The director, according to this reading, is in effect said to be beating the reader for what critics presume must have been socially naughty behavior. Yet it may be less director than critic who is in a punishing mood, warning off viewers by pointing out how the film's pleasures can only be taken as pain. This kind of argument, for all of its evident political correctness (liberal, feminist, anti-homophobic), quickly comes to seem indistinguishable from the position it condemns: the viewer is once more reminded of reasons for **not** enjoying the film. Thus, scenes of violence become didactic instruments in the hands of a critic turned schoolmarm, who slaps the wrists of the viewer. Indeed, so hard has the critic labored to convince us there is "punishment for transgression" that, despite disapproving of the **ends** to which violent scenes are supposedly elaborated (the suppression of homoeroticism), he seems to sanction the suppression, affirming that those who "don't look now" will escape being reproved by pain.

Yet violence against the body is a persistent theme of the popular arts, elaborated with so much imaginative vitality that one can only wonder whether it is fascination rather than fear that inspires such scenes of torture. If we reject the argument that male bodies are tortured to punish us for desiring them (whether we are men or women), the question then worth asking is why it should so often be men--and not women, children, or other

"non-men"--who are made the visible victims of violence? The answer to that question has been adumbrated all along, but to understand it we need to see what happens **after** the beating, when the body convalesces.

The fiction of the most influential Western author, Zane Grey, can in fact be described as a series of "convalescence narratives," with plots invariably tracing the recuperation of heroes from a wounding that inhibits their true manhood. Dozens of his books would imitate his first success, Heritage of the Desert (1910), in which the invalid John Hare travels for the first time to Arizona in order to recover from the debilitating life he has led in the East. It is the West's very "isolation from the world" that ensures it can properly serve as the scene of self-repossession, and in a series of body-building, mind-expanding, consciousness-raising scenes, John Hare is transformed. In subsequent novels, the "wound" of modern life is compounded by more predictable Western-style shootings, but always a process of slow recovery leads to renewed strength.

In his thematic obsessions, at least, Zane Grey might be thought of as the Thomas Mann of American literature, persistently offering scenes of recuperation, compulsively depicting a process by which the body develops not only firmer muscle tone, but a firmer emotional tone as well. The Lone Star Ranger (1914) depicts Buck Duane's near-fatal wound very early, then his two-month recovery nursed by a woman, followed by a prolong scene of wounding and pursuit that keeps him for days in torture--plagued

by heat, mosquitos, a festering wound, and deprived of food-- until he escapes and once again "in a couple of weeks he was himself again." Finally, losing a shootout, consciousness begins to fade:

Light shone before Duane's eyes--thick, strange light that came and went. For a long time dull and booming sounds rushed by, filling all. It was a dream in which there was nothing, a drifting under a burden; darkness, light, sound, movement; and vague, obscure sense of time--time that was very long. There was fire--creeping, consuming fire. A dark cloud of flame enveloped him, rolled him away.

Later, recovering consciousness, he feels "all his bound body racked in slow, dull-beating agony"--an agony unabated by the novel's conclusion. Throughout, here as elsewhere, Grey is probing the borders of pain, narratively testing the limits of sentience as a means of investigating male sensibility reduced to a bare minimum. And Grey's successors repeat the pattern, whether Max Brand, Luke Short, or Louis L'Amour. In L'Amour's Hondo (1953), for instance, Apaches torture the hero with hot coals ("he felt the pain shoot through him, smelled the burning of his own flesh"), before his spent body is delivered to a woman to be nursed back to health.

Yet in film pre-eminently, the convalescent narrative is visually displayed, and its implications are thereby clarified. The simplest forms of convalescence are most often predicated by a fistfight or brawl, usually in settings where the primary energy of male violence can be dramatically inflated. By stepping up the sound track, adding strong (often excessive), non-diegetic music, and by relying upon self-consciously elaborate

camera angles, films transform even fistfights into apocalyptic events, as if the process of assaulting bodies were being somehow transposed, recast into realms (of sound, vision, music) having nothing to do with them. In Fred Zinnemann's High Noon (1952), for instance, Will Kane is assaulted in the town's stable by his deputy, Harvey Pell. According to Carl Foreman's screenplay:

They punish each other mercilessly, nothing barred. The horses, becoming nervous, rear and whinny in their stalls. . . Once, [Kane] is knocked down under a horse, and narrowly escapes being trampled. As the fight reaches a climax, the horses go completely wild. . . [Kane] stands over him, panting and dazed . . . his breath whistling through his bruised lips.

What Foreman's screenplay cannot suggest is how disproportionately loud the horses' whinnying becomes, or how aggressively the sequence of camera angles shifts from under horses to high corner angles and back again. Nor can it capture the bruised, anguished countenance of Gary Cooper, on which the camera lingers as he trudges off to the barber to be washed and brushed. His haggard expression (prompted, as we otherwise know, by chronic back problems, a recent hernia operation, and a painful ulcer) is at once cause and effect of his beaten state--part of the Oedipal reason why Harvey Pell feels the need to assault him (thereby, destroying the father-figure), and yet as well the direct physical consequences of that assault. The filming of such beating and recovery scenes, moreover, makes us strangely aware of the makeup artist--breaking us out of film consciousness at the very moment Cooper sits down in the barber chair, prompting us to think, "Ah, now, he's sitting in the makeup chair, waiting to be

reconstructed." It is as if we were made aware of how well the wounds have been created, how easily their erasure can be effected, and thereby realized once again how fully manhood is always already there, underneath the makeup.

A more spectacular cinematic instance of abuse to the male body occurs in Marlon Brando's One-Eyed Jacks (1960), that strangely psychological Western which traces (once again) an Oedipal conflict between Brando and his former partner, "Dad" Longworth. Longworth punishes Brando in the film's central scene by lashing him to the town's hitching post, then brutally bullwhipping him and smashing a rifle down on his gunhand. Throughout, Brando is expressionless, and even as he slips to his knees his body retains its dignity, while the camera pauses on the smooth face and unblinking eyes that remain characteristically untransformed. The rest of the film traces his slow recovery, the healing of his lacerated back and the fitting of a leather thong to his gunhand that allows him to practice shooting for long, aimless hours. The film, however, swerves away from its own formulaic demands by emphasizing the **change** in Brando's brooding commitment to revenge. As he recovers, his love for Longworth's step-daughter changes him, and he now decides to forego revenge. But it is almost as if his rejuvenated body betrays his new intention, as if he could not stop himself from the revenge his body has so long demanded, despite a change in emotions that has committed him to a peaceful life.

V. Who Was That Masked Man?

Is a man's face and body little more than a gendered mask, in need of being destroyed and reshaped to confirm that manhood exists beneath? The Western, at least, seems to think so, requiring that masculine identity be pressed out of shape, initially deformed so as to make "man" all but unrecognizable. Or more accurately (given the way in which masculinity itself has been constituted **through** the body), Westerns treat the hero like a rubber doll, as something to be wrenched and contorted, precisely so that we can then watch him magically recover his shape. The convalescence of the Western hero reassures us, in the re-achievement of a form we had presumed to be static and somehow inorganic--in the process revealing how the cherished image of masculinity we had dismissed as simply **learned** behavior is in fact a supple, vital, biological process. Stretching of the body proves the body's **natural** essence, and all the leather, spurs, chaps, pistols, handkerchiefs, and hats may now be excused as dead talismans. In this, they are a kind of fetish to the highest power, since they "hide" a male body that has proved itself coherent. The compensatory satisfaction they offer is no longer really necessary, since the physique they disguise has revealed itself as unmistakably male.

Yet the contradiction of masculinity in the Western is that it is always more than physical--that in depending on an ideal of restraint well beyond bodily considerations, it is indeed as much

learned as found. Violence against a physical **body** therefore exists always in tension with the restraint of an emotional "**self**," and this mutual pressure defines the terrain on which masculinity is contested. Thus, despite its lingering over tableaux, its emphasis on costumed bodies pictured against empty landscapes, the Western's most intense investigations of the problematic of manhood take place out-of-sight in terms of precise moments and choices, of self-restraint maintained against the imminent threat of the body's dissolution.

Part of the meaning of the beating scenario, which helps explain its centrality to the Western, lies in the startling recognition it offers to those being tortured--of "what atrocities one's **own** body, muscle, and bone structure can inflict on **oneself**." Elaine Scarry goes on to describe this uncanny experience of dissociation in her book, The Body in Pain, as a feeling of body split off from self, in which strict borders between public and private, inner and outer experience are elided. And ironically, that split in the tortured Western hero corresponds to the split **we** feel in the threat posed to his masculinity. For our fascination with the Western is over those supposedly "masculine" forms we **want** to recognize as biologically fixed--forms which the Western nonetheless presents through scenes that can only be read, on the contrary, as bringing the "biological" into question. The paradox is always expressed, once again, in the amount of effort it takes to **remain** a man, whether Shane or Hondo or even a Man with No Name--the amount of work invested in re-

learning the skills, honing the image, mastering once again the terms of restraint. That is the reason for the recurrent narrative pattern of imperilling the body--a body that must always then convalesce--since it reinforces our ambivalent sense that masculinity has as much in common with physical therapy, say, or body-building as it does with breathing or giving birth--is as much, that is, a distinct cultural **effect** as it is a natural **cause** or a biological imperative.

Whenever a man is being beaten in the formula Western, it is less to punish us for our delight in the male body, than to prepare us for the process by which he becomes what he already is. We find ourselves, male and female, identifying with the subject of suffering, and in that moment also identifying with the masculinizing process itself as one of our culture's most powerful (and powerfully confused) imaginative constructions. For it is the Western cowboy hero--unlike the leading men in any other genre--who is placed before us precisely to be looked at. And in that long, oscillating look, we watch men still at work in the unfinished process of making themselves, even as we are encouraged to believe that manhood doesn't need to be made. That is the continuing, powerful vacillation that rests at the heart of the formula Western, where the cowboy hero waits to be beaten, then waits again to convalesce.