

DEMOCRATIC SHOOT-OUTS: NOTES ON THE DUEL IN AMERICAN WESTERN NARRATIVES

DI STEFANO ROSSO

This essay is part of a broader study on how the Western became a worldwide recognizable genre during the 20th century. Here the focus is on the Western duel approached from a historical perspective, starting with the birth of the genre with James Fenimore Cooper, moving on to the spread of the Western myths in the 19th century and to the establishment of a literary canon with Owen Wister and Zane Grey in the early 20th, and of classic Hollywood movies from the 1930s to 1950s. The essay underlines the role of some unconventional works and the revisionary aspects of the duel in the fiction of Elmore Leonard and Charles Portis, which foreshadow the radical crisis of the Western in the 1970s. The last part of the essay is devoted to the 'Post-Western' and particularly to the contribution of Larry McMurtry (Lonesome Dove, 1985) and Cormac McCarthy (Blood Meridian, 1985), who reject the 'regeneration through violence' pattern which dominated American culture from its inception, by radically re-reading the duel and the Western.

The Western gunfighter was the New World's counterpart of the knights in armor and the Robin Hood of the Old. His sword was a Colt .45, and his armor the ability to outdraw and outshoot any rival.

—Joseph G. Rosa, *The Gunfighter: Man or Myth?*, 1969

It is common knowledge that the duel occupies a central position in the narratives of the Western world, both in high and in popular culture, from the times of the Ancient Greeks to re-readings proposed during the 20th century, including the Western and science-fiction. This paper is part of a broader work on how the Western has become a "sub-genre" recognizable throughout the world and especially in Europe, with a particular interest in the construction of identities –male and female– that the Western has generated and with which it has interacted¹ For this paper, I have chosen a historical perspective, including some examples from significant texts. One of my goals, as I hope will be evident in the last part of the paper, is to deal with the so-called "post" or "new-Western" fiction².

Scholars who have studied the history and the peculiar features of the duel –be it the "barbaric duel", the "courtly duel" or the "duel of honor"– have generally proposed a national perspective. This is the case of the authoritative works by Ute Frevert (1991) and Victor G. Kiernan (1988), two works founded on thorough archival research and an excellent knowledge of the relevant bibliographies³. Their goal is not a comparative and transnational study and we cannot criticize them for this. Even in the recent *Il sangue d'onore* (2005), by Marco Cavina, an excellently researched book (including the very ambiguous attitudes of Nazism and Fascism to the duel and does not forget the Italian rural duel practiced in Southern Italy), which moves with great agility among various European cultures, the goal is not comparative⁴. Cavina's discourse remains within the disciplinary realm of history: he does not mention the existence of the kind of duel that dominated the 20th century, the Western duel. But, of



[« HOME](#)

[ARCHIVIO](#)

[EVENTI](#)

[INFORMAZIONI](#)

[NEWSLETTER](#)

[PERCORSI TEMATICI](#)

[REDAZIONE](#)

[RISORSE ONLINE](#)

[RUBRICHE](#)

Nessuna categoria

[FEEDS RSS](#)

[Tutti gli articoli](#)

IPERSTORIA

© 2020 Iperstoria

[Informazioni tecniche](#)

Powered by [WordPress](#)

Compliant: [XHTML](#) & [CSS](#)

[Collegati](#)

SEARCH

course, all these three historians draw a very clear line separating the "historical duel" from the "imaginary" one.

In the perspective of the three works I have just mentioned, the duel is described, rightly enough, as a privilege of the pre-bourgeois master class, the only class that was considered capable of passing on a sense of honor reminiscent of the values of the classical times; only the "noble" and "upper" classes were capable of recognizing and appreciating the ancient traditions to which the duel belongs; traditions and times in which the "fullness of meaning" and the "authenticity of existence", whatever these syntagms might mean, still existed. With the crisis of the pre-bourgeois classes, the duel almost disappears from everyday life.

Among the duels in (pre-Western) modern world literature one of the most popular –besides the case of the double in "William Wilson" by Edgar Allan Poe– is undoubtedly that of Joseph Conrad's short story "The Duel" (1908), later adapted by Ridley Scott in 1977 with the title *The Duellists*. In the borderline case told by Conrad, the cult of the "single combat" founded on the virtue of the warrior, which is practiced by the two opponents, is described from its inception as an obsessive form and is treated as an almost Freudian clinical case charged with cultural overtones that go back into the ancient past. It is not accidental that the "analyst" of the officer suffering from "duellistic monomania" is himself an officer soon to become a colonel, that is, an "upper-class" soldier who knows from the inside the particulars of military insanity: he is grazed by it, but not "possessed" by it. When an aberration which is rooted in tradition (the duel) is overtly considered a psycho-pathological syndrome, this means that it is close to its historical extinction, though we know it went on being practiced even in the 20th century, but less frequently (not that rarely, however, since even Mussolini was involved in duels at least ten times!).

Anyway, at the very moment the duel is removed by the force of law from the post-aristocratic scene, it reappears with an indisputable central role in the world of the imaginary, in a new genre which was to dominate several decades of the 20th century and it does appear in a nation which is post or anti-aristocratic from its very foundation.

Before introducing the motif of the duel in Western fiction and culture it is necessary to remember that, as the New Western Historians have taught us, the West of documented history is quite different from the Western narrated through the Myth of the Frontier. I will skip the details of the numerous historical falsifications and I will limit myself to listing a few related to the duel: 1) in the second half of the 19th century the violence in the West, a very serious problem, was not as serious as the violence in some cities on the East Coast; 2) the people living in the West were not using their guns as often as portrayed in literature and later on in the cinema; 3) people using guns in the West usually carried one gun and not two as in most novels and movies; 4) the ethnicity of the gunfighters (sometimes called gunmen or shootists) or of the cowboys was very diverse: not only white people, but also blacks, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, Asians, and of course Native Americans; 5) killings with firearms in the West were rarely the outcome of a duel: marshals' records and post-mortem examinations demonstrated that the victims had one or more bullet entries in the back of the body⁵.

It is well known that the Western was born within American culture as a popular and pervasive articulation of the Myth of the Frontier, that is, as a place far from the civil world, a place on which the laws and the practices of the East Coast cannot be imposed. But exactly when the Frontier is declared "closed" with the controversial formulation by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, the myth becomes increasingly powerful and is broadly disseminated, and more and more so throughout the 20th century, "colonizing" even the European imaginary⁶.

With the spread of the Western both in the US and in Europe, the "single fight" comes back to the center of the narratives: it is not a fight with cold steel, but is very reminiscent of the sword-and-shield duels of classical times or the Middle Ages. Such a resemblance does not depend so much on the fact that only two people are at the center of the stage just like Hector and Achilles, (there could be more than two as it happens at the Ok Corral...), but because it imitates the formal perfection of its movements, its almost hieratic ritualism, celebrating a masculine cult of death⁷. The winner in a Western duel is not necessarily the sturdiest and the most athletic contender. Winning depends on individual characteristics such as courage, cold-bloodness, readiness, phenomenal reflexes, tactical shrewdness and on possessing technical abilities such as having a steady aim, being able to choose the right weapon and to keep it in perfect working order; in other words he combines the ancient warrior and the hero who emerged after the introduction of firearms in 15th century Europe. Muscle strength keeps being important when the duel is preceded by exhausting vicissitudes and only the gunfighter with outstanding determination and psycho-physical resistance can face a final duel with the clear-headedness required to prevail over his opponent.

Besides, the fact that the duel is positioned close to the end of the plot, creates a certain amount of suspense built up by other non-lethal conflicts such as the well-known fist-fight.

According to critics, Western fiction starts with the *Leatherstocking Tales* by James Fenimore Cooper, the first Western stories to be admitted to the Canon of the newborn American Literature. Critics acknowledged Cooper the credit for having found in the Frontier new themes for the cultural independence of America, significantly contributing to that cronotope that would mark the diversity between Europe and the US.

Hawk-eye (one of *Leatherstocking's* many names) is a very skillful hunter and, if need be, a good killer of "evil Indians", but at the same time he has a very strong bond with the Mohican Chingachgook. His heroic deeds, however, do not reach the mythic quality expressed by Uncas, the "Last of the Mohicans" of the title of his most successful novel. In the last pages of this novel (1826), the duel with cold steel on a rock spur, stages the "bad" Indian Magua and the "good" Indian Uncas, while Hawk-eye becomes a secondary character. This may mean that the aristocratic tradition of the duel is still "reserved" for the nobility of the vanishing Indians (and Cooper wasn't all that ready for democracy...).

During the second half of the 19th century the formulaic construction of the Western hero that Cooper had just sketched was extended thanks to the heroes of written and oral popular culture such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and Kit Carson. The major instrument of popularization of the new clichés were the dime novels, the first series of which appeared on the market in 1860. Soon they opened the way to pulp magazines.

The 1890s, as Giorgio Mariani and other scholars have pointed out⁸, are characterized by a concentration of cultural phenomena which may have had the strategic function of containing the mounting social unrest: the dissemination of a new martial spirit, the increasing popularity of male sporting activities as the place for the construction of a new identity and the explosion of the Western myth. The ground for the success of the Western had been prepared not only by the mythic heroes of the Frontier and by the dime novels, but by *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* and by landscape and genre painting: Durand, Otter, Melrose, Palmer, Tojetti, Gast, the famous Remington, Russell e Schreyvogel, differently from those dominated by a sense of loss (Crawford, Stanley e Fraser), to whom can be added the photographer Edward S. Curtis).

An important contribution comes from historical essays such as Fredrick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) and especially from the four-volume *The*

Winning of the West (1889-96) by the future President Theodore Roosevelt, which had transformed the invasion of the Indian territories and the Indian genocide into an epic, triumphal and attractive enterprise. It is not accidental that the Western duel, which had already become formulaic at the beginning of the 20th century, blends elements of military ritual, of competitiveness at work in sport and focuses the narration on male issues and male bonds. Critics agree on the idea that the Western becomes very codified, acquires precise formulaic features after Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) and Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), features related to the claim of the subordinate status of female characters. It is generally the assertion of female subordination following a conflict between a woman and a man. And this ideological formula will be applied until the 1940s and early 1950s, up to *Shane* by Jack Schaefer (1949, the movie by George Stevens was released in 1953) and *High Noon* by Fred Zinneman (1952), in which the reasonable female non-violent point of view is consistently defeated.

In Richard Slotkin's brilliant and articulated essay *Regeneration through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, the American cultural historian claims that a country's mythology is the key to approaching its national character⁹. He believes the early colonists saw in North America a way to regenerate themselves economically, spiritually and nationally, but that the means to regeneration came to include violence (violence against the natives, against nature, against the motherland, against other immigrants, etc.). Actually, the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. By examining relevant literature, Slotkin shows how this myth evolved and how it gained credence and power, and traces his thesis over two and a half centuries, focusing on many works of early American literature concerned with the Indians and the Frontier.

If Slotkin and his followers are right in stressing the pervasive role of violence in American and US culture, his thesis runs the risk of erasing from the stage novels, short stories, movies, TV series, etc. which have given space to dissenting voices, to ambiguities and contradictions within the "classical" Western. On this point I will limit myself to a very few examples, briefly treating them in chronological order, always focusing on the thematization of the duel, however anti-traditional it might be.

The first example is King Vidor's scandalous movie *Duel in the Sun* (1946). The overt eccentricity of this film largely depends on the presence of sexuality, a taboo in the Western tradition. In this case violence and sexuality, present in other movies only between the lines, are stressed by acting directions that move from an extreme expressionism to the melodramatic and the grotesque. The duel of the title is there right from the beginning and refers to the love-hate relationship between the two protagonists, the "half-breed" Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) and the violent and wild "Lewt" McCanles (Gregory Peck). However the duel is marked in a very explicit and unusual way in the final sequence where the two "lovers" slowly kill each other in an overexposed desert landscape, turning to an orange Technicolor hue after they are rejoined in a mortal and very sensual final kiss: a spectacular scene playing with the melodramatic and the kitsch. In this case the traditional duel is partly undermined because it puts on the stage a heterosexual couple of fighters.

A similar point can be made by referring to the final scene in *Johnny Guitar* (both the novel by Roy Chanslor and the movie by Nicholas Ray, 1953), in which the protagonists of the duel are two women, while the male hero of the title has the function of a Greek chorus (however laconic).

I have two other examples perhaps not so provoking, but perhaps richer in consequences for the history of the genre. The first is the case of Elmore Leonard's Western short stories and novels¹⁰.

Leonard revisits all the clichés of the classical Western, well summarized by John G. Cawelti¹¹ and alters them in various ways: he expands the narrative space occupied by the female characters and by the ethnic groups present in the Southwest setting, introduces African-Americans, expands the formulaic role of the Natives and the outlaws, cuts down the action and extends the space given to the dialogues, proposes a realistic representation of violence that is not spectacular and is far from any notion of regeneration. In his thirty short-stories and eight novels one is struck by the programmatic absence or displacement of the duel.

In most cases Leonard's narrative voice, which is always extra-diegetic, creates the expectation of a necessary final duel, decisive for assigning an unmistakable meaning to the plot. But the duel keeps being deferred and does not take place even in the very last pages, leaving the reader of Western fiction quite baffled. This is the case of several short-stories but acquires the qualities of a manifesto of "anti-duellistic poetics" in *Valdez is Coming* (1970), a novel soon adapted for the cinema by Edwin Sherin (1971).

Valdez is a Mexican deputy living near the Mexican border. Having witnessed a tragic abuse of power by a "cattle baron" he strives for peaceful compensation with strenuous patience, but he is defeated over and over again, every time with increasing violence: eventually the men working for the "evil" cattle baron tie an enormous cross on his back and force him to move away with unbearable pain. Relieved of the cross by pure chance, Valdez organizes his return (hence the title "Valdez is Coming") with an excellent strategy and in one hundred pages succeeds in killing twelve cowboys paid by the cattle baron to get him. Eventually he has the opportunity to face the cruel cattleman in a duel. But with a disconcerting move, he refuses to obtain "justice" and leaves.

Obviously when Leonard wrote *Valdez is Coming* the times were ready for an "emptying" or a "weakening" (in Gianni Vattimo's terms) of the duel. Many clichés were challenged by Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah and by their irony¹². But Leonard's narrative choice is not very spectacular: it is in fact the de-spectacularization of the duel and of other Western motives.

My second example, a different case, but similarly rich in consequences for the transformation of the Western, is *True Grit* (1968), famous novel by Charles Portis, then the extremely successful movie by Henry Hathaway (1970: the only Academy Award ever won by John Wayne), recently re-adapted by the Coen Brothers (2011). In this case what is striking is the fact that the narrative voice belongs to Mattie Ross, a 14 year old girl, one of the two main characters of the novel. She is, as one critic put it, "the best smart-aleck kid performance since Huck Finn stepped off his raft"¹³. Mattie Ross hires Rooster Cogburn (the Grit), a federal marshal who's not so young, one-eyed, uneducated, and a drunkard, to find the man who killed her father. After a young Texas Ranger called LaBoeuf joins the two pursuers, they move into the Indian territory and eventually reach the killer who has joined a gang. But, because of a weird twist, the little girl is captured by the "evil guys".

She is eventually freed by the young Texas Ranger, while the fat marshal decides to face the gang. All the odds are against him: he is one-eyed and isn't that much of a good shot. Nevertheless, he spurs his horse into a gallop, gripping the reins between his teeth, in a scene which is dramatic and at the same time so excessive as to appear comic, particularly in Hathaway's film adaptation. The four enemies, baffled by Cogburn's unexpected behavior, do not act in a strategic coherent way: two of them are killed, one runs away, and the gang leader is wounded. But during the duel the marshal's gigantic horse falls onto his heavy rider, and while the wounded gang's leader is ready to finish him off, the Texas Ranger, in a scene full of suspense, succeeds in killing his opponent with a rifle shot from 600 yards away. The reader (and the viewer) has the impression of being once more in a traditional duel situation.

But this duel is just a parenthesis, however spectacular and unrealistic, which is soon forgotten because of the incredible, dramatic and exciting ending, which involves a snake bite, a desperate ride against time, the amputation of one of Mattie's arms and eventually, many years later, Marshal Cogburn's death.

In this case, although there is a duel, it lacks any regenerative meaning not only for its hyperbolic mode, but because it is placed far from the conclusion, preventing a teleological reading of it as William V. Spanos would have put it. It is clear that at the end of the 1960s (True Grit is published in 1968 and Valdez is Coming in 1970) the writers aware of the 1960s "revolution"¹⁴ cannot use the clichés of the duel which had been hypnotizing readers and audiences for several decades: the meaning of violence has become more and more controversial and the Vietnam War is on the TV screens.

Between the crisis of the Western at the end of the 1960s and the Reagan years, full of revanchist post-Vietnam rhetoric, Westerns are less frequent and the duel disappears or is displaced. An interesting case is *The Missouri Breaks*, the script Thomas McGuane wrote in 1976 for a movie directed by Arthur Penn, in which the duel keeps being deferred and eventually is substituted by a gruesome scene, very far from the extreme and almost sacral composure of the duel: Jack Nicholson, in cold blood, cuts the throat of a dozing Marlon Brando and during this gory scene he gently explains to his victim what he is doing: "You know what woke you up? You just had your throat cut"((Three years later, in another movie, the task was given to Martin Sheen: the movie is *Apocalypse Now* and the victim is once again Marlon Brando...)).

In 1980 the commercial disaster of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* meant that United Artists went bankrupt and this was read as a symbolic sign of the end of the Western. There were some timid efforts to revitalize the genre by Clint Eastwood, Walter Hill, Lawrence Kasdan, and a tottering parody by John Landis. As for literature, the crisis had started much earlier.

I will focus now on just two novels both published in 1985, that have proposed a view of the duel and of violence that have had profound consequences on literature, and also on cinema and television. The first one, *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry was well received both by critics and the public, and won the Pulitzer prize, a very rare case for a Western novel¹⁵. Its success persuaded its author to write two prequels and one sequel, all of which became TV series or miniseries. The second novel, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness of the West* by Cormac McCarthy, was well-received by critics, but became moderately popular only during the 1990s, because of the great success of his later works¹⁶.

McMurtry's long novel (over 900 pages) is an encyclopedia of the American West in the form of fiction. The narrative voice follows the vicissitudes of Gus and Call, two ex-Texas Rangers who undertake an epic journey of over 3,000 miles in order to herd cattle from Texas to Montana. During this daring journey the two main characters have to face a wide range of calamities, travelling through all kinds of landscape and introducing the reader to the "non-mythical" aspects of the Frontier. The dramatic predicaments are numerous: four characters, two of them protagonists, die during the journey; an ex-prostitute, who is travelling with the group, is abducted by a cruel Indian, raped by some outlaws and saved in extremis by Gus; the herd is stricken by sand and hailstorms and by an apocalyptic swarm of locusts; poisonous snakes lurk in a river; native Americans often appear, not always hostile though; there are even gigantic grizzly bears and cold-blooded criminals. On several occasions suspense is triggered and the reader expects a duel or a final solution to come. But in these cases the solution does not depend so much on heroism, on honor or on the ritual traits of the duel, but rather on randomness, on the twists of fate.

As we have learned from classical epic texts, and as confirmed by Cooper, a hero deserves an antagonist as "noble" as himself. But the outlaws and the Indians Gus and Call come across represent dangers similar to those faced every day. There is no space for a duel to death.

This does not mean that traditional notions of heroism are totally absent in McMurtry's novel; however, when they surface they are generally put into question and viewed from several perspectives. Even the "heroic moment", in which Gus refuses to have his second leg amputated and points his gun at Call, who is trying to convince him to let the sawbones do his job, takes a very ironic stance.

There are countless typical Western themes and motives critically revisited by *Lonesome Dove*, but there is no space to list them here. I just want to mention the traditional laconicism of the Western male hero which is contradicted by Gus' relentless talkativeness: the gunfighter is silent and impassive, and he can prevail in duels thanks to his cold-bloodedness and the inscrutability of his facial expression. This is not the case with Gus.

Blood Meridian differs from most great classics of Western fiction for its use of extreme violence, a violence so hyperbolic that it even exceeds the baroque violence of Sam Peckinpah's movies (and even of *The Wild Bunch*, the movie which symbolically started a new era). The plot refers to historical facts, reconstructed by McCarthy through careful research based on Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue*, a memoir published posthumously (1956). It describes the outrageous deeds of about twenty scalp-hunters, hunting Native Americans, and occasionally anybody they meet, led by the ferocious Captain Glanton.

What is bewildering in this story is that the long journey of this "bloody bunch" is apparently unjustified. Whereas a parallel bunch in the US Army is driven by the introjection of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, Glanton's gang has no ideological motives (their group is actually multiethnic): they seem to belong to a primordial state of mankind. If they fit in with the Manifest Destiny ideology, they seem absolutely unaware of it.

Two characters rise above the lethal bunch: the Kid (he has no name) and Judge Holden. The Kid, who is 14 years old at the beginning of the story, does not give any reason for his violent deeds. His behavior is simply staged. As for the gigantic and hairless judge, his demonic attitudes are mysterious: he has an encyclopedic knowledge, he is a great polyglot, encyclopedic, botanist, mineralogist, strategist, an excellent dancer despite his huge frame, a virtuoso violinist and brutal killer and pedophile.

Throughout the journey, violence is equally distributed between collective and individual acts. Incidentally, the behavior of the Indians is not very different from that of Glanton's gang, be they Comanche, Apache or Yuma. In this respect, *Blood Meridian* rejects a naïve historical revisionism by which the racist view is substituted by the romanticized myth of the "noble savage" (as it happened at the end of the 1960s). There are countless collective acts of violence (including the sodomizing of dying enemies) which made it somewhat difficult for Harold Bloom to read...

Collective violence, however unjustifiable, is reminiscent of war violence which is traditionally considered an unavoidable misery. Even in the classic Westerns, collective brutal acts are often considered less condemnable than those accomplished by individuals.

As for individual violence, one is spoilt for choice (and some of the best pages of the novel are devoted to "absolute violence"). It involves both minor and main characters. It is expressed against anybody (in the sense of "any body"), including helpless animals or even children. Let's see an example. In a "quiet" scene, after Glanton has found a "longbarreled sixshot Colt's patent revolver" (sic!, BM: 82), he looks around:

In that courtyard other than merchants and buyers were a number of living things. The first that Glanton drew sight upon was a cat that at that precise moment appeared upon the high wall from the other side as silently as a bird alighting. It turned to pick its way among the cusps of broken glass set upright in the mud masonry. Glanton leveled the huge pistol in one hand and thumbed back the hammer. The explosion in that dead silence was enormous. The cat simply disappeared. There was no blood or cry, it just vanished. [...] Glanton thumbed back the hammer again and swung the pistol. A group of fowl in the corner of the courtyard that had been pecking in the dry dust stood nervously, their heads at varied angles. The pistol roared and one of the birds exploded in a cloud of feathers. He fired again. A second bird spun and lay kicking. The others flared, piping thinly, and Glanton turned with the pistol and shot a small goat that was standing with its throat pressed to the wall in terror and it fell stone dead in the dust [...]

(BM: 82-83)

Cruelty to animals is frequent in the novel. In one instance the Judge buys two puppies and immediately throws them into the river, bullying one of his companions to use them as target practice: and the fellow performs the vile act impeccably (chapter 14). And, to conclude, there is also violence on kids. In two different situations, without conceding anything to voyeurism, the Judge sodomizes and then kills two children just after having cuddled them (chapters 9 and 12).

The closer we get to the epilogue the more we believe that the antagonism between the Kid and the Judge will be settled once and for all. But the duel keeps being deferred and it is not staged even in the very last enigmatic pages. At the end the Kid (now quite grown-up) is hugged by the enormous and naked Judge sitting in a lavatory. The horror of the other characters who open the lavatory door makes the reader think that the Kid has been killed, or both raped and killed, or whatever. The reader has no final look. In any case, we are very far from the stylized rituals of the Western duel.

Critics have spent many pages in analysing this and other violent scenes, proposing every kind of interpretation, including a gnostic one.

But *Blood Meridian* acquires a different meaning if instead of reading it as an "anti-western", as several critics have done, we consider it a "post-Western post-Vietnam novel". The fiction and cinema of the Vietnam War have accustomed us to images of cruelty and brutality untraceable in the tradition of the Western and of War fiction. Senseless killings accomplished by wild or drugged soldiers, massacres and burning down of villages, collective rapes, carpet bombings on humble shacks, gratuitous violence on children, old people, poultry or quiet water buffaloes.

Although in the 20th century war literature often distanced itself from the myths of classical heroism, providing works that exhibited war predicaments without hypocrisy, in most cases it tried to save something from the moral disaster, highlighting the generosity and the pietas of the soldier in combat. Then came the Vietnam War, the first American conflict in which the participants admitted not only their own brutality but even the obscene fascination that seduced those who had been inflicting death or simply witnessing it. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the literature of the Vietnam War has only rarely succeeded in dealing with violence or with what has been called "the truth of war"¹⁷; this task is accomplished by McCarthy, but at the reader's expense.

Violence is still quite present in McCarthy's novels following *Blood Meridian*. In *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first volume of the *Border Trilogy*, there are several violent scenes but there is also space for a romantic idyll and for moments of serenity. When

violence explodes, it does so by means of a duel. However, though it mimes the ritualism of the classical duel it does not depend on any straight hand-to-hand fighting. In the scene where the protagonist, John Grady, succeeds in killing his devious fellow prisoner, there is a movement from the almost mystic proximity of death to the materiality of the knives entering the flesh, something unconceivable in the traditional Western. In the second volume, *The Crossing* (1994), the duel is once more revisited, substituting the male coded ceremony with the desperate fight of a pregnant wolf against some dogs trained for fighting. The sad fate of the wolf and of the cubs that she carries in her womb induces a shocking denaturalization of an anachronistic ritual, besides denouncing the sadism of the people watching the fight and betting. In the last volume, *Cities of the Plain* (1998), the duel appears to be back in its central and authoritative position. It is placed at the end of the novel and is fought between John Grady and the owner of the brothel who has killed the young prostitute that John "loved desperately". But the visionary, oneiric, baroque character of this duel, in slow motion, does not lead to any regenerative effects: the two contenders drop to the ground with their tortured bodies as if they were moved by a mysterious fate. Even in *No Country for Old Men* (2005), where the Western gets mixed up with the noir and the gangster genres, the duel is not presented as a competition among peers, but as the accomplishment of an aberration, by means of the unpredictability of the sinister killer Chigurh. He actually kills his victims with an instrument extremely alien to the sacredness and phallic fetishism of the six-gun. In the words of the unlucky deputy who believes it is sufficient to keep Chigurh handcuffed: "Sheriff he had some sort of thing on him like one of them oxygen tanks for emphysema or whatever. Then he had a hose that run down the inside of his sleeve and went to one of them stunguns like they use at the slaughterhouse. Yessir. Well that's what it looks like. You can see it when you get in. Yessir. I got it covered. Yessir" (p. 5).

In various ways King Vidor, Roy Chanslor, Elmore Leonard, Charles Portis, Thomas McGuane, Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy and others have contributed to a counter-narrative of the Western duel, and, more generally, of Western formulaic and regenerative violence; or to use Richard Slotkin terms, have tried to "rehistoricize myth"¹⁸. For those who consider this contribution too limited there is still the chance to take a further step and "plunge" into the three volumes of Annie Proulx' *Wyoming Stories*.

1. For a more extensive work see S. ROSSO, *Rapsodie della Frontiera. Sulla narrativa western contemporanea*, Genova, ECIG, 2012.[↗]
2. This paper is the revised version of a conference held at the "[OASIS-Orientale American Studies International School](#)" organized by Donatella Izzo and Giorgio Mariani on the Island of Procida in May 2012. I wish to thank the two organizers and the American colleagues who participated in the debate, Donald E. Pease, Alan M. Nadel, John Carlos Rowe and Jonathan Arac.[↗]
3. See U. FREVERT, *Men of Honour: A Social and Cultural History of the Duel* (1991), Polity, Cambridge, 1995 and V. KIERNAN, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.[↗]
4. M. CAVINA, *Il sangue dell'onore. Storia del duello*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2005.[↗]
5. See W. E. HOLLON, *Frontier Violence: Another Look*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, and J. G. ROSA, *The Gunfighter: Man or Myth?*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1969.[↗]
6. At least two cases of European Western novelists should be mentioned here: the German Karl May and the Italian Emilio Salgari.[↗]
7. On this point see J. P. TOMPKINS, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.[↗]
8. See G. MARIANI, *Spectacular Narratives: Representations of Class and War in Stephen Crane and the American 1890's*, New York, Peter Lang, 1992, see especially chapter 4, pp. 99-138[↗]
9. R. SLOTKIN, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1973.[↗]
10. On Elmore Leonard see S. ROSSO, "Dal western classico al post-western. Lo strano caso di Elmore Leonard" S. ROSSO (ed.), *L'invenzione del west(ern). Fortuna di un genere del Novecento*, Verona, ombre corte, 2010[↗]

11. J. G. CAWELTI, *The Six- Gun Mystique Sequel*, Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999[↵]
12. And before them by Bruno Bozzetto's *West and Soda* (1965), by Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Jerry Lewis, Mel Brooks, etc.[↵]
13. R. A. SOKOLOV, "The Young Novelists", *Newsweek*, July 22, 1968, pp. 80, 82[↵]
14. The "long 1960s" as Bruno Cartosio has called them in his *I lunghi anni sessanta*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2012[↵]
15. L. MCMURTRY, *Lonesome Dove*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1985.[↵]
16. C. MCCARTHY, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, New York, Random, 1985, BM in future references.[↵]
17. See S. ROSSO, *Musi gialli e berretti verdi. Narrazioni USA sulla Guerra del Vietnam*, Bergamo, Bergamo University Press, 2003[↵]
18. See R. SLOTKIN, "Myth and the Production of History", in S. BERCOVITCH and M. JEHLEN (eds.), *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 73[↵]

30 Ottobre 2012

« [THE ENGLISH-ONLY MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES](#)

[EL VERDE Y EL ROJO: "LOS DERROTADOS" DE PABLO MONTOYA](#) »

© 2006 Iperstoria