

Wagner, Wister, and Westerns

by Daniel Orsen

The Western is arguably America's most important myth and cultural export. From Italian opera to Japanese movies, the Western has been inspired and taken up by artists all over the world. Germans particularly love Westerns, exceeding even the other Axis-power. Karl May, for instance, a German author of pulp fiction Westerns in the early 20th century, was common bedtime reading for Adolf Hitler and is better known to most Germans than Thomas Mann. Today there are societies in Germany dedicated to dressing up as "Cowboys and Indians," much like our Renaissance Fairs in America. And German tourism to the American West is big business; your author has personally enjoyed in-flight advertisements for Texas tourism on multiple Lufthansa flights.

The German love for the Western goes deeper than mere accident or exoticism. As will be shown, there are cultural and intellectual parallels between these seemingly disparate worlds. Intersecting those parallels, are Richard Wagner and the American author Owen Wister. Wister, who's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, established many of the tropes and mythos of the Western, was a proud Wagnerian, and many of those tropes and themes were ripped straight from the music dramas of Richard Wagner. In what follows we will explore several of these shared traits and how they found their way from Wagner to Wister to the Western genre writ large.

The Man with No Name/Lohengrin

The name of the titular cow-puncher of *The Virginian* is never revealed to the reader. He is referred to only as “the Virginian” or “the Southerner.” The direct Wagnerian inspiration is Lohengrin, the mysterious Swan Knight who defends Elsa from accusations of murder, marries her, and saves the Duchy of Brabant from Count Telramund and his pagan-witch wife Ortrud. The Knight’s only condition is that no one asks him his name. So, *naturlich*, Elsa does. The Knight reveals himself to be Lohengrin, a Knight of the Holy Grail at Monsalvat, sent to protect an unjustly accused maiden. But the Laws of the Grail stipulate that Knights of the Grail must remain anonymous, and now that his identity is revealed Lohengrin must return to Montsalvat.

Elsa’s analog in *The Virginian* is Molly Stark Wood. Elsa had dreams of the Swan Knight coming to her aid before he arrived. In Molly’s case, her first encounter with the Virginian is when he saves her from a drunken stagecoach driver careening into a river, but the Virginian disappears before she has a chance to thank him. In the following chapter the villain of the novel, Trampas, falsely insinuates that Molly is a loose woman. The Virginian will have none of it and defends her honor, just as Lohengrin defends Elsa from the accusation of murder. The Lohengrin-ian overtones return towards the end of the novel, but are answered with a sweetly deceptive cadence. In a tender moment we are told that Molly “said his name,” although it is not revealed to the reader. But unlike *Lohengrin*, knowing the Virginian’s name does not doom the relationship, and the book ends with a happily married couple.

The nameless hero, mysterious and taciturn, became an iconic Western trope, most memorably brought to life in Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns; first with Clint Eastwood as “The Man with No Name” in *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; and then Charles Bronson as “Harmonica” in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Leone credited the idea for a nameless hero to the samurai films of Akira Kurosawa, which were inspired by John Wayne’s Westerns, which were inspired by the *The Virginian*, which was inspired by Wagner. As a

Tarantino fan, I can not resist mentioning *Kill Bill*, which cleverly combines the Western and samurai epic. The Bride's real name, Beatrix, is not revealed until the end of the second movie, signaling the completion of her quest for revenge.

Warrior Maiden/Brünnhilde

Molly Stark Wood actually owes more to Brünnhilde, the Valkyrie from *Das Ring der Nibelungen*, than Elsa from *Lohengrin*. It all starts with the name. "Stark" is German for strong. And both Brünnhilde and Molly share a distinguished military ancestry. Brünnhilde is the daughter of Erda, the Earth goddess, and Wotan, the king of the gods and god of battle. As for Molly:

"She could have been enrolled in the Boston Tea Party, the Ethan Allen Ticonderogas, the Green Mountain Daughters, the Saratoga Sacred Circle, and the Confederated Colonial Chatelaines. She traced descent from the historic lady whose name she bore, that Molly Stark who was to a widow after the battle where her lord, her Captain John, battled so bravely as to send his name thrilling down through the blood of generations of schoolboys."

But Molly joins none of those societies and instead leaves her home and gentle bourgeois life to avoid marriage and because of "a spirit craving the unknown."

The Virginian and Molly's courtship bears two resemblances to that of Siegfried and Brünnhilde. First, Molly refines the Virginian's ability to read and write and exposes him to great literature, just as Brünnhilde teaches Siegfried the magic power of the runes. Second, Molly is extremely resistant to marrying the Virginian on account of his humble birth, his Western ways, and above all, because of fear of sacrificing her "spirit that craves the unknown."

In the case of Brünnhilde, she is initially overjoyed at being awakened by Siegfried - she knows exactly who he is and is partly responsible for him coming to be. But she is nonetheless sorrowful when she realizes she has lost her divinity and warrior prowess.

BRUNNHILDE:
(with increasingly intense moroseness)

I see the shining metal
of the coat of mail:
a sharp sword
cut it apart;
from my young woman's body
all armored clothing is gone!
I am without protection and a guard
a doleful woman, without defense!

Later Westerns actually do not have many clear cut Molly/Brünnhilde analogs. There are plenty of "strong women," and plenty of women who attempt to nurture and civilize "Siegfrieds," such as Jill in *Once Upon a Time in the West* and Laura in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, but they follow an arc of becoming rougher and tougher, unlike Molly and Brünnhilde who have to sacrifice some of their warrior spirit. But the real limit to the analogy is that the men in Westerns are rarely pursuing and persuading women to settle down and marry. Siegfried and the Virginian make a concerted effort to win over their brides, but in most Westerns the men have the women chasing after them. And in the end the men do not settle down - they have "got to be goin' on" - a pattern which will come up again when addressing the pre-civilized and the civilized.

Again, I can not proceed without mentioning Tarantino since the main female character in *Django Unchained* (a Western set in the Antebellum South) is actually a slave named Brynhild - a name given by her original German owners. Django's quest to

save her from an evil slave owner is the Antebellum South's equivalent of Siegfried defeating the god Wotan (the slave owner), and passing through the ring of fire (both gun fire and literal fire, à la Tarantino) to save the maiden. But other than her name, Brynhild has little in common with Brünnhilde. Nonetheless, it is another example of the reach Wagner and Norse legends have into Westerns.

Siegfried/*Übermensch*

Both the Virginian and Siegfried are raised outside of the mass morality of religion and civilization. In the Virginian's case he leaves home at the age of fourteen, fending for himself on the American frontier, which results in his "Western ways." Siegfried is orphaned and raised in a forest by the dwarf Mime, which results in a wild man who "knows no fear" and operates by his own moral code. If this calls into mind Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, good. Wister's Virginian and Wagner's Siegfried are actually in a dialogue of sorts with Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Invoking the *Übermensch* necessitates a digression into Nietzsche's philosophy, and one does not venture in the abyss lightly, but I hope it will be salutary for what it illuminates about Siegfried, the Virginian, and the heroes and anti-heroes of the Western.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* traces back to Wagner's 1851 draft for *Siegfried's Tod*, which eventually grew into the Ring Cycle. During the Ring's gestation, Nietzsche was at his closest with Wagner and enamored with the idea of Siegfried, an exceptional hero knowing no fear who redeems humanity and leads it into its next age, free from the shackles of religion and aristocracy. Siegfried changed in the minds of both Wagner and Nietzsche over the next three decades. Nietzsche became increasingly disenchanted with the character of Siegfried, the Ring as a whole, and Wagner himself. By the 1876 premier of the Ring, Wotan had become the tragic center of the drama and Brünnhilde's

agape-love, Christ-like sacrifice was absolute anathema to the *Übermensch* philosophy articulated in Nietzsche's 1883 *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* philosophy starts with the proposition that God is dead. To avoid the abyss of nihilism, humanity must find purpose in life by striving towards the *Übermensch* or the "Over-man" - the next stage of man. Just as we advanced from primates, we should create or become *Übermenschen*. For Nietzsche, this was the goal, or telos, of humanity.

The qualities of the *Übermensch* are:

1. **A focus on this life and this reality**, not on God or another reality or life beyond this one.
2. **The will to power.** This is contrasted with the will to truth, or to will what God's will, since there is no truth and no God. Instead, man ought to increase his power and assert it in order to...
3. **Create his own morality.** Rising above the morality of the masses set by religion or society, but rather that which comes from his life and lived experience.

So, how do the *Virginian* and Siegfried match up with the *Übermensch* criteria?

Starting with the foundational principle that God is dead, in the Ring Cycle, yes, "God is dead." By the time Siegfried bursts onto the scene, Wotan has experienced the civilization he created turn against him - corresponding with the rejection of Christianity Wagner and Nietzsche witnessed in Europe. Wotan then wills the end, is defeated in battle by Siegfried, and his spear and all the contracts and laws written thereon are shattered. In *The Virginian* the matter is more complicated. The *Virginian* himself believes in God, but he is not religious and his focus is solely on this life. But the

first-person narrator of the novel, presumably Wister's own voice, has a more ambivalent tone about God. Western movies vary on this matter but I find that the desolate and indifferent landscapes typically found in Westerns bring the existence/proximity to God into question.

As for the matter of teleology, there is nothing in the Ring Cycle or *The Virginian* to suggest that Siegfried or the Virginian are objectively the telos of humanity, or that any other characters subjectively see them as such. Sieglinde and Brünnhilde express that Siegfried makes their lives worth living, but this is the sentiment of a mother and wife, and does not extend to other characters.

Proceeding to the actual qualities of the *Übermensch*:

1. A focus on this life and this reality

The Virginian - Yes. Wister dedicates lengthy passages to articulating the Virginian's thoughts on God, religion, and morality. The Virginian does believe in God, but he is not religious and his focus is solely on this life.

Siegfried - Yes. Siegfried's focus is solely on this life. He is narrow-minded and self-absorbed, and apparently only has the mental capacity to focus on the here-and-now, let alone this life and reality.

2. The will to power

The Virginian - No. The only behavior resembling the "will to power" that the Virginian displays is his confident assertions that he will win over Molly. The Virginian's way is never to assert his power, but rather prove his competence.

Siegfried - Maybe. There are lines scattered here and there in the Ring Cycle that could be interpreted as the Nietzschean "will to power," but it is a tenuous

connection. Siegfried “wills” many things, and uses force to get them, but his goals are particular things such as knowledge about his parents, slaying Fafnir, getting revenge on Mime, and finding Brünnhilde - his goal is never power itself. Power is not something Siegfried “wills.” This is further emphasized when Siegfried comes into possession of the Ring. It was never Siegfried’s intention to get the Ring, and once he has it he has no idea what to do with it or desire to use it.

3. **Creating his own morality.** Rising above the morality of the masses set by religion or society, but rather this life and lived experience.

The Virginian - No. While it is true that the Virginian is raised outside of the mass morality of religion and civilization, having left home at the age of fourteen to fend for himself on the American frontier, and also true that he uses power without the sanction of the Law to punish immorality, it is not his own personal moral code he is imprinting on the world but rather objective morality grounded in a belief in God.

Siegfried - Maybe. On the one hand, Siegfried is too busy thinking about being a hero and killing things to contemplate his lived experience and create his own moral code. On the other hand, his actions, even if unwittingly, do bring about an epochal moral change in the world; shattering Wotan’s spear shatters the moral code of the gods, leaving a free-for-all for humanity.

The setting apart of the protagonist from the mass morality of religion and civilization, whether it be by a mysterious background (“The Man with No Name”), slavery (*Django Unchained*), or trauma and suffering (*Tombstone*, *True Grit*, *There Will be Blood*) is the Siegfried/Übermensch/Siegfried quality that eventually grew into a fully fledged Western trope. Villains, however, also exhibit the will to power. They are usually

motivated by greed rather than a desire to impose their moral code, but both are forms of selfishness.

The Pre-Civilized and the Civilized

The conflict at the heart of both *The Ring Cycle* and the Western genre is that the men who establish and protect civilization are not the same men who nourish and grow it. Those who establish and protect civilization I will refer to as the Pre-civilized. Those who nourish and grow it, the Civilized. The Pre-civilized have two characteristics that are necessary for creating a civilized society. The first is a pessimistic view of human nature - that there are incorrigibly bad men who can only be stopped by force. The second is a capacity and willingness to use violence to stop those bad men from hurting innocent people. The Civilized on the other hand, have an optimistic view of human nature - that people can change and as such we should strive for mercy, patience, forgiveness, and rehabilitation; and an aversion to violence, backed by the rational that descending down that path would risk the loss of our civilized society.

Civilization could not exist without the Pre-Civilized, because that element is necessary to establish and maintain rule by Law rather than rule by the most ruthless and powerful. But civilization also could not flourish, and indeed, would be pointless, if the Civilized were not striving for a more empathetic, cooperative, and peaceable society. As a society progresses and becomes ever more Civilized, the Pre-civilized find the Laws, domestic bonds, and peacefulness of the society they helped create constricting or pushing them out. Conversely, the Civilized are increasingly unable to tolerate those Pre-civilized elements within it or which helped establish it. A historical example of this dynamic is George Washington's use of corporal and capital punishment in the Continental Army, which was necessary for building an army from scratch, necessary for winning the Revolutionary War, and was the norm in his time - but such a policy would be unconscionable to us now.

In *The Virginian*, the Pre-civilized is symbolized by the Virginian and the Civilized by Molly. Not only does Molly travel out West (Pre-civilized) from the East (Civilized), she comes to be the first school teacher in Beer Creek, Wyoming - the school being a symbol of families, community, and civic institutions. The cow-punchers react to the new school house with grief for a quickly vanishing way of life:

“[The schoolhouse] symbolized the dawn of a neighborhood, and it brought a change into the wilderness air. The feel of it struck cold upon the free spirits of the cow-punchers, and they told each other that, what with women and children and wire fences, this country would not one be long for men.”

Before Molly can marry the Virginian, her “New England conscience” has to come to terms with the Virginian’s capacity to kill men, which he uses judiciously. As the Virginian wrote to Molly’s great-aunt, “I have never killed for pleasure or profit and am not of that kind, always preferring peace.”

The first killing is the hanging of two cattle thieves. The Virginian finds no pleasure in this task and carries it out stoically. He wants to keep it hidden from Molly, but rumor moves faster than horses in the West, and before the Virginian makes it back home she knows of his part in the hanging. Only a conversation with Judge Henry, a retired federal judge and the Virginian’s employer, can somewhat assuage Molly and explain the morality of frontier justice and the pessimistic worldview of the pre-civilized:

“It is all so terrible to me,” she said.

“Yes; and so is capital punishment terrible. And so is war. And perhaps some day we shall do without them. But they are none of them so terrible as unchecked theft and murder would be.”

Molly eventually accepts the hanging, but the Virginian’s inevitable shoot-out with Trampas is more difficult for her “New England conscious” to take. The afternoon

before the Virginian's wedding, he and Trampas meet in a bar and the drunken Trampas challenges the Virginian to a shoot-out. The Virginian is upfront with Molly about the impending duel, but she can not understand and thinks they should leave:

“No, no, no. There's something else. There's something better than shedding blood in cold blood. Only think what it means. Only think of having to remember such a thing! Why, it's what they hang people for! It's murder!”

He dropped her hands. “Don't call it that name,” he said sternly.

“When there was the choice!” she exclaimed, half to herself, like a person stunned and speaking to the air. “To get ready for it when you have the choice!”

He did the choosing,” answered the Virginian.

The Virginian is right. He made the line very clear, and Trampas crossed it. He did his best to deter Trampas, who progressed from dishonest poker, to libel, to cattle theft, to murder. Now, in public, Trampas has threatened the Virginian and challenged him to a duel. The Virginian has no choice but to fight. Should he walk away because of cowardice, the unpleasantness of killing another man, or Molly's wishes, Trampas will hold the Virginian in contempt, his threats will no longer be credible, and it will embolden Trampas and other cattle thieves like him.

The Virginian kills Trampas, and whether or not Molly can understand his actions, she accepts them and acknowledges her need for the Virginian. For his part, the Virginian also compromises and is changed by his relationship to Molly - the nice suit he buys to visit her family, his efforts to follow tradition and formality in getting the proper birthstone for her engagement ring, and a change visible to Molly on their honeymoon:

“She had seen destruction like sharp steel glittering in his eyes. Were these the same eyes? Was this youth with his black head of hair in her lap the creature with whom men did not trifle, whose hand knew how to deal death? Where had the man melted away to in this boy?”

This happy ending is realistic, but it feels wrong because our myths and literature and history overwhelmingly show us that the Pre-civilized and the Civilized do not live happily ever after. Look to the Wagnerian character's previously mentioned: Lohengrin is an outsider who saves the Duchy of Brabant, but he must leave when his identity is revealed; Brünnhilde acts ethically by protecting Siegmund in battle, but thereby breaks the Law which Wotan must uphold, so she is punished with the loss of her powers and immortality; Siegfried is a mighty hero who could have done much good for the Gibichungs, but their leaders are envious and afraid of him so he is murdered.

The Wagnerian character who embodies the conflict of the Pre-civilized and the Civilized more than any other is Wotan, the king of the Gods and creator of Law and Contracts. Wotan makes two deals which establish civilization and - along with Albericht's theft of the Rhinegold - set into motion all the action of the Ring Cycle. The first deal is Wotan's sacrifice of his eye (his natural, Pre-civilized state) for the knowledge of the runes (writing - needed for contracts and civilization) and a shaft of wood from Yggdrasil, the World Ash Tree. With that shaft of wood he makes his spear, upon which he carves his contracts with all things using the runes. It is these contracts which make civilization possible. They bind everyone and everything, including Wotan himself. It takes an act of violence, the sacrifice of an eye, to make those contracts possible.

Wotan's second civilization-founding deal is with the giants Fafnir and Fasolt. They will build Valhalla, the palace of the Gods and a symbol of civilization and domesticity. But the price is Freya, the goddess of love and youth (natural, pre-civilized). It is a steep price, one which Wotan never intends to pay. So he steals the hoard of the Nibelungs (which includes the Ring) from Albericht and offers it as an alternative payment to the giants, which they accept. Again, this deal is made possible by prior violence. Not only did Wotan steal the Ring from Albericht, but Albericht first stole the Rhinegold (which he made into the Ring) from the Rhinemaidens after failing in his attempt to rape them.

There is more violence as a consequence of the Valhalla deal as well. Upon receipt of the treasure, Fafnir kills his brother to get the Ring for himself. Valhalla, and

the civilization it represents, are truly good things, but Wagner makes it clear that it was built upon a painful sequence of theft, rape, and murder.

In *Die Walküre*, Wotan wants to get the Ring back from Fafnir and above all keep it out of the hands of Albericht, who would use it to destroy Valhalla and the gods. But Wotan finds himself constrained by his contracts at every turn and helpless to do anything to regain the Ring or help his children. The apotheosis of this conflict is his final words to Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*:

“Only one is destined to wed the bride,
one freer than I, the god!”

In *Siegfried* we encounter Wotan as the Wanderer. It is not merely a disguise, but an ontological change. Wotan has considered all the possible outcomes and seen no way out of his dilemma, so he absconds Valhalla and wills the end. When Siegfried breaks the Wanderer’s spear, thereby shattering all of the laws and contrasts written on its shaft, it is the victory of the Pre-civilized over the Civilized - illustrating exactly why the Civilized has good cause to be afraid and intolerant of the Pre-civilized.

Wotan is the dramatic embodiment of the conflict between the Pre-Civilized and the Civilized because he sacrifices his pre-civilized nature and commits the necessary acts of violence to make civilization possible, but then finds himself constrained by that civilization and unable to take the very actions needed to protect it and those he loves. In Western movies, rather than a happy ending as in *The Virginian* or Wotan being constricted by the civilization he created in the Ring Cycle, the pre-civilized gun-slinger who saves the town recognizes that “it won’t long be a country for men” so they have “got to be going on.”

Once Upon A Time in the West - Shane -

Jill: Hey, you're sort of a handsome man.
Cheyenne: But I'm not the right man.
And neither is he.
Jill: Maybe not. But it doesn't matter.
Cheyenne: You don't understand, Jill.
People like that have something inside...
something to do with death. If that fellow
lives, he'll come in through that door, pick
up his gear and say adios. It would be nice
to see this town grow.
Harmonica: Now I got to go. Going to be
a beautiful town, Sweetwater.
Jill: I hope you'll come back someday.
Harmonica: Someday.
Cheyenne: Yeah, I got to go, too.

Joey: I'm sorry, Shane.
Shane: You don't have to be. You better
run back.
Joey: Can't I ride home with you?
Shane: Afraid not, Joey.
Joey: Please? Why not?
Shane: I got to be goin' on.
Joey: Why, Shane?
Shane: A man has to be what he is. He
can't break the mold. I tried it, and it
didn't work for me.
Joey: We want you, Shane.
Shane: Joey, there's no living with...with a
killing. There's no going back. Right or
wrong, it's a brand, and a brand that
sticks. There's no going back. Now, you
run on home to your mother, and tell her
everything's all right, and there aren't any
more guns in the valley.

German Unification and American Reconstruction

This leads us back to Germans' affinity for Westerns. I think the crucial link is that Wagner's operas - particularly the Ring Cycle - and the Western genre are stories about civilization itself. Men Without Names, Warrior Maidens, *Übermenschen*, and the Pre-civilized all have their part to play, but the focus is civilization itself - how it

comes to be, how it best flourishes, how it falls apart, and the roles we play in that grand story.

The Ring Cycle is a single story which is a distillation of several German myths and sagas (as well as Judeo-Christian and Greek contributions), whereas the Western is a genre consisting of many different stories without one particular creator. Both, however, were created by and for nations which had yet to be and which seriously needed to grapple with the same civilizational questions.

Throughout his life and work Wagner was concerned with the creation of a German nation-state and the artistic and cultural life of that future nation. He and many other German intellectuals saw it as a chance to start fresh and get it right: German nationalism was a utopian project. For Wagner, the Ring Cycle was his opera(s) addressed specifically to that future nation. As such he set the Ring in the mythic pagan north, the Germanic peoples' *in illo tempore*, their time before time. And, in Wagner's view, the time before Germanic culture was sullied by Christianity.

Wagner began work on the Ring Cycle in 1851 and it was premiered in-full in 1876, only five years after Bismarck had created a unified German nation-state in 1871. Initially, Wagner hoped *Siegfried's Tod* - what grew into the Ring Cycle - would inspire a utopian German nation into existence: "When everything was in order, I would arrange, under these conditions, three performances of *Siegfried* in one week. After the third, the theater would be torn down and my score burnt. To those who had enjoyed the thing I would then say: 'Now go do the same!'" - letter from Wagner to Theodor Uhlig in 1850. But when that idealism had waned he merely wanted it to have a central place in the new nation's ceremonial public life.

The Western arose from similar conditions in America. After the Civil War and with half a continent yet to be settled, America was just beginning to become itself. This, I think, is why the Western has taken preeminence in the American mythos and become the nation's preeminent *in illo tempore*, rather than a Revolutionary War or Colonial setting. Even though the Western did not reach its heyday until the 20th century, it was always looking back to that era of Reconstruction and Western expansion. Still today, after many critics have declared the Western dead, it has proved indefatigable

because it is America's *in illo tempore*, the natural setting for this nation's myths and legends.

This is the deeper reason why Germans love Westerns so much. It is possible to look at the genealogy of culture and say "Wagner was German. And Wagner begat Wister, and Wister begat Westerns - therefore Germans love Westerns." This is true, but Wagner had such immense cultural purchase only because the conditions of American Reconstruction and German unification were so similar. Both nations were becoming themselves, and both needed a national mythos and *in illo tempore* to wrestle with questions about civilization. Although their wrappings are different, Wagner's operas and Westerns were both responding to that same need, hence their synchronicity and cross-cultural resonance.

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