

**"ON THE COWBOY'S GOLDEN SHORE":
THE COWBOY AS PRESENTED IN COWBOY POETRY**

by
Andrew Elkins

Modern cowboy poetry has become increasingly popular of late but continues to have few admirers in the academic community, perhaps because the cowboy poet consciously avoids all those traits the academic literary critic has been trained to associate with quality modern poetry—experimentation or at least boldness in style and formal matters, indifference to the traditions (of rhyme, meter, and stanzaic pattern), ambiguity, sentiment without sentimentality, complexity, allusiveness, and irony. To a true cowboy poet, these traits smack of the sort of Eastern elitism and pin-headed intellectualism one must avoid. The genre demands that all its participants toe several lines, one of which is the portrayal of the cowboy poet as a down-to-earth, practical, straight-talking hombre who would have nothing to do with the indirection and who would associate most of the other rhetorical flourishes of modern poetry with sissy stuff. The poet whose worst fear, right next to losing his favorite horse to a prairie dog hole, is to be embraced by the academy can hardly expect (nor does he) more serious attention from critics. To give the poetry its due, however, I believe that it does merit discussion, especially in its role as a body of work with a central and culturally important generic purpose: to champion the virtues of laboring on the land, especially as those virtues are embodied in America's last mythic figure, the cowboy. The cowboy identity itself—the lone, courageous individual, living a life of labor under the wide open sky—is well-known

Andrew Elkins is a professor of English at Chadron State College in Nebraska. He has a Ph.D. in English from Northwestern University. He is the author of *The Poetry of James Wright* and *The Great Poem of the Earth: A Study of the Poetry of Thomas Hornsby Ferril*. He is currently working on a book about Western American poets and their relationship to place.

from stories and film. The poetry adds little new to the general outlines of that mythic identity. What is interesting is the poetry's consistent description of the method by which the cowboy character in the verse acquires his identity, the means by which he reaches self-knowledge. As in so much western literature, the determining factor in one's sense of self is one's understanding of one's relationship to the land.

All readers of the poetry acknowledge that "nature," broadly defined, or more often, not defined at all, has some role in the verse. As critic Rebeeca Carnes phrases it, "the cowboy's emotional ties to nature are clearly shown through loving description."¹ One of the acknowledged consistent themes of poetry is, in critic Anne Heath's words, "the love between man and land."² Heath goes on to claim that "There is something about the big sky and living close to the elements of sun and wind that invites the mystical, a contemplation of nature."³ I would like to suggest, a bit more specifically, that the cowboy in cowboy poetry, with whom, I think, in most instances the poet claims identity or empathy, defines himself and comes to know who he is specifically through his role as laborer on the land. The poet suggests that the cowboy has a special knowledge of the land and his connection to it based on his working relationship to his place. The cowboy in this formulation has much more in common with the cow than with the cow's owner—he is on the range, in the mud, in all weather, trying to survive, right there with his "bees" and his faithful horse. This special knowledge (the "something" occasionally referred to in cowboy poetry) ennoble the cowboy and creates his sense of self-worth, despite his lowly position in society. For Thoreau's "I am determined to know beans," we may substitute, "I am determined to know cows," for just as Thoreau worked in the soil as the medium of his knowledge in his attempt to "know" beans and from them himself, so the cowboy works in the mud as the medium of his knowledge in order to "know" cows and from them himself. Thoreau extends the formula by saying, after a long day hoeing his beans, "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans." In other words, it is not the cows or beans themselves that are important but the manner in which the selfless physical labor returns the cowboy to himself (the self

that presumably exists under the layer of cultural accretions that is sweated off on the prairies) and paradoxically takes him out of himself, away from the ego-centered world of concerns in which we modern humans reside most of the time. The cowboy, then, although he does not truly possess the land—cowboys are not landowners—does claim to be its spiritual owner and in turn to be possessed spiritually by the land, as an earned result of his labor and sweat fertilizing the prairie.

True, the cowboy does what he does because of his love for the activity and the place where the activity occurs, but we should never be tempted to conclude that the vocational nature of the cowboy's labor is accidental or incidental. "A *cowboy*," historian Blake Allmendinger reminds us in his important study of the cowboy's various forms of self-expression, "is defined by the work he does," and the cowboy's forms of expression, his poetry as well as his other constructed artifacts, "all reveal cowboy to be men who are culturally unified by engaging in labor routines that they think of as cowboy work."⁴ The cowboy's reward for his labor, his personal insight, is "no easy gold at the hand of fay or elf," as Frost says in "Mowing," nor "gift of idle hours," but is specifically the result of his physical activity as employed ranch hand. The cowboy claims his role on the land as one of essential labor, as God's work, deriving its validity from the same source that makes the land sacred. The cowboy's attitude about his special place on the land explains the odd observation that the enemies one would expect the cowboy poet to castigate—bad or unpredictable weather, hostile Indians, mangy coyotes and other predators—he tolerates with respect as other rightful inhabitants of the land. They are obstacles but not obstacles he curses, because they share his relationship to the land and essential features of the land with which he claims kinship. He deals with them as one deals with a respected and worthy adversary or even partner, without rancor and without bitterness. For example, while riding home on old Punch after a day in Butte Valley, the speaker in Erie Sprado's "Our Range"⁵ comes unexpectedly upon old Three Toes, "Daddy of all coyotes that had ever/Eaten one of my lambs." While pausing before making good on his vow to "put a hole in him/For every lamb he ate," the speaker thinks:

Somehow, in those seconds, I came to understand
 How he and I, both renegades,
 Belong to the very same land.

The title acquires a new meaning with Sprado's realization: "our range" had initially meant the cowboys' range, but by the poem's conclusion it means the range of all validated residents of the plains and prairies. With that in mind, of course, the speaker can never shoot Three Toes because "We both belong here, you and I," the coyote "by birthright," because he and his kind have been born for millennia to the land, and the cowboy "by a strangely human rite," something typically inexplicable but based on the fact that he has worked the land respectfully and reverently.

Nor can one rage against the weather, no matter how bad it gets, because the weather, like the coyote, belongs to the plains naturally and plays a central role in the cowboy's vocational relation to his place. Despite the fact that a hailstorm wipes out the family's harvest and brings his father to tears, the speaker in Colen Sweeten's "Hailstorm" feels only pain and not bitterness:

Soon the hurt was healing.
 There was no bitterness.
 There was no blame.

Sweeten shares Red Steagall's attitude toward the weather when Steagall writes:

Wouldn't change things if I had the chance.
 The weather don't matter, I ain't goin' nowhere.
 There's no place I'd trade for this ranch.
 "The Weather"

By contrast, the cowboy is no lover of the farmer or the miner, for, from his perspective, they both see the land as a piece of property from which to extract riches (or at least profit) through slow or not-so-slow

destruction. Novelist Larry McMurtry remembers his cowboying ancestors this way: "To the McMurtrys, the plow and the cotton patch symbolized not only tasks they loathed but an orientation toward the earth and, by extension, a quality of soul which most of them not-so-covertly despised."⁶ And John Lomax, the granddaddy of cowboy poetry collectors, reveals a common attitude when he sneers at the fact that "The trails are becoming dust covered or grass grown or lost underneath the farmers' furrow...."⁷ It should not be surprising, then, to discover that cowboy poets' references to farmers and miners are usually pejorative. An interesting example is "The Pistol," by Rod McQueary, in which the poet focuses his attention on a .44 abandoned on the untilled prairie by a nineteenth century rider killed by an Indian hunting party, probably "Out for deer, beyond the butte." The rider makes a valiant defense but still succumbs. Even so, the Indian attackers are never vilified, and the wording suggests that the poet understand their attack as a matter of natural course. About a hundred years later, however, in the summer of 1987, "some worried, weary farmer," who has turned the land into an alfalfa field and is now out on his "old swather," runs over the rusty pistol. The farmer's response illustrates the cowboy poet's attitude—Indians are preferable to weary farmers:

He grabs and throws that evil junk.
It makes the swather slap.
He says, "Damn those darned old-timers!
Why couldn't they pick up this crap?"

The old-timers were busy leading real lives, one step ahead of Indians, while the farmer is simply putting in his time, one step ahead of the bank. The contrast between a worthy partner (a Native American hunting party) in pursuit of the true life and a degrading ally (the banker) in pursuit of the land's degradation is clear. The Indian hunting party and cowboy were doing what came naturally to them on the open plains, and the frontier rider dies without rancor. The farmer, by contrast, cannot even appreciate the land and seems to hate every pass he makes on his old

swather.

In addition, although the cowboy loves and respects the land, he disdains non-cowboy nature lovers, even when they share some of his ecological concerns, because the nature lovers have only a distant, theoretical, or aesthetic relationship to the land. Therefore, their attitudes toward it must be false or, when that is impossible to claim because the attitudes parallel the cowboy's, then the nature lovers themselves must be denounced as fakes. The cowboy poet's hostility toward outsiders is not, therefore, primarily the result of different attitudes about how to use the land or how to respect the land's value. That is, the hostility is not a matter of differences of opinion about land policy, but is instead based on the cowboy poet's suspicion that the beliefs of politicians, environmentalists, and others are based on theory, rather than sweat, and in that way devalue the cowboy by devaluing his special knowledge based on experience and labor. It is not the philosophical position one reaches, the cowboy poet suggests, but the road one takes to reach it that matters. And the only valid road to reaching a position from which one can honestly speak for and from the land is the road of toil, which teaches one love and identification.

II.

One of the clearest illustrations of the cowboy's self-image and its origins is "Anthem," a well-known poem by Buck Ramsey. The poem begins in the morning with the speaker on horseback. He feels himself blend with the elements of the landscape:

I lived in time with horse hoof falling;
 I listened well and heard the calling
 The earth, my mother, bade to me,
 Though I would still ride wild and free.
 And as I flew out on the morning
 Before the bird, before the dawn,
 I was the poem, I was the song.

"Bade" may be a bit unusual for a cowboy character, but the rest of the stanza is a perfect example of cowboy transcendentalism. The speaker does not walk through the woods and feel himself a transparent eyeball, as Emerson does, but he rides over the plains and in the press of the motion ("as I flew"), a motion connected to horse and vocation, his psyche becomes indistinguishable from the spirit of the earth, and he, in his action, becomes the cowboy poem. Sitting and meditating would produce different results, as would riding for pleasure. In the act of vocational labor out on the prairie the cowboy discovers his identity, and that identity is not separate from his activity or the activity's location but is fused with both. This state he achieves is a pure and ethical state of being, a state whose purity cannot be understood by those unfamiliar with the activity and, furthermore, a state that is only achievable in the midst of the activity: "Those horsemen now rode all with me,/And we were good and we were free." As one rides, one is good and one is free. When one stops, one is something else, and Ramsey suggests, something less.

Another clear example of a cowboy poet's claim to special knowledge based on his labor in the open is Darrell Arnold's poem, "There's Somethin' That a Cowboy Knows." The burden of the poem is explaining what the "somethin'" is and the source of that knowledge. Cowboy poets assume a rhetorical stance of close identification with the audience that allows them to eschew explanation, especially of abstract terms (such as "somethin'"), assuming the audience knows already what the "somethin'" is. Arnold participates in this stance to some extent ("a need he can't explain") but is more helpful than most of his colleagues. For example, the "somethin'" seems to be first a matter of particular experience of particular sensory phenomena:

There's somethin' that a cowboy knows,
A scent born on the air
Of sage, and sweat, and leather,
And of smoke and burnin' hair.

Other phenomena the cowboy learns from his laboring life include "the

pain of choking dust" and the "pledge of springtime" as it is manifested in "tiny, shiny wobbly calves/A-dryin' on the ground." The experiences are not always pleasant ("He knows the blast of winter storms/When cold cuts like a knife"), but suffering, as a part of doing one's job with integrity, is an important component of the cowboy's self-image. If range life were easy, one suspects the cowboy would look elsewhere for work. In other words, whatever the cowboy possesses that makes him feel special and that is central to his sense of self and his self-knowledge comes from his meaningful (that is, vocational) participation in the outdoor life of the prairie. His work produces experiences that, after appreciation and reflection, he understands as the basis of his unique self. Humility and elitism exist comfortably side-by-side in the formulation. The cowboy suggests he is special (the "somethin'" is what "the cowboy" knows and you do not), while also suggesting that he is sublimely satisfied with simple pleasures phrased in homey images.

Despite Arnold's distrust of abstraction, however, a distrust that is typical of the genre, the poet claims more than a simple acquaintance with particular phenomena. What he knows makes him who he is, and one who has not worked the range as he has and gained the special knowledge there that he has gained cannot be the same type of person:

There's somethin' that a cowboy knows
That poorer men will not-
Like ridin' circles all day in
A fast, ground-eatin' trot.

The knowledge in fact threatens to make the cowboy a solitary, living apart from all others:

There's somethin' that a cowboy knows,
A kinship with the wind
That causes him to live alone,
His horse his closest friend.

McMurtry, again remembering his days growing up with cowboys, corroborates Arnold when he remarks, "...I do not find it possible to doubt that I have ever known a cowboy who liked women as well as he liked horses...",⁸ and Max Brand knew enough about cowboys and the popular taste to know that, in a good (or bad) B-Western, "there has to be a woman, but not much of one. A good horse is much more important."⁹

Not all poets go so far as to suggest that the only being with whom the cowboy can be psychologically intimate is his horse, but the tendency, which Arnold takes to the limit, is clear. Cowboys learn the land in a way that no one else can, and that knowledge becomes such an essential part of the cowboy's psyche that he cannot share his life with anyone who does not possess the same knowledge and the resulting sense of self and place in the world. When one does meet a kindred soul, however, as in "A Rare Find," by Randall Rieman, the recognition is immediate and joyful:

It's a wonderful thing,
 Though it's hard to explain,
 When you meet a new friend on your way,
 And you know, in no time,
 There's a reason behind
 The ease that your friendship's obtained...

The "reason" is simple: the new cowboy

Shares your same love for the land,
 For horses and cattle,
 For life in the saddle
 And nights underneath a clear sky.

The imprint of working the land is on both, and the result is a "sameness in spirit that goes beyond words." The new cowboy friend, then, is recognized, as Sprado recognized the coyote Three Toes, as a compatriot, one with whom one shares "somethin'" special. Always there is that

suggestion that if you need "words" to understand the vague "sameness," then you do not have it.

John Dofflemeyer, the editor of *Dry Creek Review*, as close to an official journal of cowboy poetry as exists, makes the same claim for a sort of elitism of working stiffs in "'Til I Depart":

Few men feel these hillsides breathe
or hear the heartbeat underneath,
'cept those that live here day to day
and nature's beasts can hardly say
a thing....

The person who does not work the land can never hope to understand it, and nature cannot be expected to explain herself. Cowboy poets are not as unskilled as they pretend or their critics assume. Dofflemeyer, in a technique typical of the genre, employs his vaguest word ("thing") in the most important spot in the line to indicate precisely his point: if you have to have the "thing" explained to you, then you do not know what it is. Furthermore, the poet is reluctant to tell you what the "thing" is, because your ignorance suggests your unsuitableness for the knowledge. If you really want to know the "thing" that nature can tell you, then you would go out and punch cows. If you simply want to be told by the poet or hear it on weekend trips to nature, then you are a cultural exploiter and the cowboy poet is reluctant to talk to you. Dofflemeyer is like the shaman who refuses to let the outsiders get at the community's secrets or ritual words. The ironic connection here to Indians protecting their tribe's secrets from marauding culture-hounds from white universities or suburbs is perhaps not so ironic. Most cowboy poets, as mentioned earlier, do not reveal resentment in their verse for the Indian residents of the land but accept them as people who, like cowboys, belong on the plains and people who would easily understand the "thing" to which Dofflemeyer refers.

There is probably no way to, or no desire to, reform or educate city residents. Transplanting them to the country will not necessarily

transform them, although our literary tradition, going back at least as far as the Puritans' diaries and Crèvecoeur's famous letters, suggests that transplantation to a new climate will make new men of old. Dofflemeyer does suggest that city slickers can at least appreciate the outdoors when they are shown it by a good guide, such as himself. In "Blackrock Pass," he describes a mighty thunderstorm that catches himself and a group of dudes unawares:

we pulled our slickers on
and baled off the western slope
and at the second switchback
zeus tossed his yellow rope

not too far from where we paused
and roared in the canyon walls,
then tossed another to the other side
and loose rocks began to fall.

The classical allusion and the eccentric capitalization (or lack thereof) are about as "fancy" or idiosyncratic as cowboy poetry allows itself to get. The sentiments themselves, however, are strictly generic. After weathering the storm and reaching their destination, the men pause and the poet concludes:

we finally make pinto lake
to dry beneath the fly,
and i'll wager these successful men
would like to return as much as i.

The cowboy exposes the "successful" (ironically so) men to the world's true elements, which are not the clear skies and sunny days of travel brochures, but something only the real cowboy can guide one to, the beautiful harshness that makes the West so nurturing of individualism and all the other well-known components of the cowboy myth. The

cowboy will never be "successful"—he will never have money or power—but the cowboy will have what no "successful" man can have: his secure self-knowledge, based on his labor and the various deprivations associated with that labor. The cowboy does not go to the city in order to get in touch with something real. The city vacationers come to the cowboy's range and there get a glimpse of the "thing" that cowboys know as part of their daily lives.

III.

This conception of how cowboys form their self-image and reach self-knowledge forces the poet into two dilemmas. First, the poet finds himself forced to turn a blind eye occasionally to the profession of his persona, because it would be difficult, even for one dedicated to keeping alive the myth of the cowboy, to pretend that running cattle on formerly open land was anything except an intrusion of the human and a subjugation of nature, just the sorts of things "they" are accused of wanting to do to "our" land. Wallace McRae, in "Things of Intrinsic Worth," a classic of the genre, wants to set up a dichotomy between the way "we" formerly treated the land, understanding its intrinsic worth, and the way "they" now treat it. While remembering the past, McRae paints an idyllic picture of a time when folks lived in harmony with nature, contrasted with the present when different people abuse the same loved locales:

Remember that sandrock on Emmells Crick
 Where Dad carved his name in 'thirteen?
 It's been blasted down into rubble
 And interred by the dragline machine.
 Where Fadhls lived, at the old Milar Place,
 Where us kids stole melons at night?
 They 'dozed it up in a funeral pyre
 They torched it. It's gone alright.

Our little pranks (carving initials, stealing melons) are acts of love or playfulness; their conscious despoilings are acts of exploitation and greed. We ignore the cattle we introduced to the land, as if its presence did not profoundly change the area's ecosystem. Why does McRae turn a blind eye to cows? Because the theme here is that the land is a phenomenon of "intrinsic worth," a fact "we" can understand because we have sweated on it but "they" cannot comprehend because all they ever do is extract profit with the use of technology (dynamite and bulldozers):

When folks up and ask, "How's things goin' down there?"
 I grin like a fool and say, "Great!"
 Great God, how we're doin'! We're rollin' in dough,
 As they tear and they ravage The Earth.
 And nobody knows...or nobody cares...
 About things of intrinsic worth.

No attempt is made to correct or even protest the abuse of the land. We dissemble and say "Great!" But we also claim special knowledge of the true worth of "The Earth" because of our relationship to it. The reasonable conclusion, one might say, is that if the earth is of intrinsic worth, one would simply live on it and enjoy it. Where cows fit into that formula is not immediately clear, but the cowboy would lose a lot (including his name) without the cattle industry, so that industry's effect on the earth is ignored when convenient or necessary. The attitude is easily labeled selfish, suggesting as it does that everyone except us vacate the land or never come to it to begin with. We will have our things of intrinsic worth, but no one else can have a piece of the action. But then, in this formulation, no one else has earned that right. The education that is a prerequisite for any claim to a right to belong is garnered on horseback behind a herd of cattle. No bureaucrat or professor or environmentalist can appreciate what only the cowboy can understand. It is no accident, then, that one of the dubious benefits of the new use of the land in McRae's poems is "this new school/That's envied across the whole state." Who needs that school? Not the cowboy, who learns his

lessons outside, and who, by implication, is the only one who deserves to be here anyway.

The knowledge of self as part of place pushes the poet into a second ethical tight spot, as Buck Ramsey, in "Anthem," a poem mentioned earlier, notes. If place is more than a simple brother or sister and is an integral part of one's own identity, then is it not true that disturbing the land is tantamount to self-mutilation? Wouldn't it be better, Ramsey asks, "To let the grass keep at its growing/And let the streams keep at their flowing?" Ramsey goes one step further and suggests, in a statement that seems highly ironic from a cowboy who works for someone who owns land,

We knew the land would not be ours
 That no one has the awful powers
 To claim the vast and common nesting,
 To own the life that gave him birth,
 Much less to rape his Mother Earth,
 And ask her for a mother's blessing,
 And ever live in peace with her,
 And, dying, come to rest with her.

"Peace" now or eternally cannot be yours if you pretend to own what gave you your identity, much less if you "rape" that same fecund source of your life. Ramsey, to his credit, at least asks the question his verse suggests. If the land cannot be owned because it is our life-source, then are we not guilty for working it so that its owners can profit?

It was the old ones with me riding
 Out through the fog fall of the dawn,
 And they would press me to deciding
 If we were right or we were wrong.
 For time came we were punching cattle
 For men who knew not spur nor saddle,
 Who came with locusts in their purse

To scatter loose upon the earth.

Notice that the greedy owners are explicitly described as those who do not know how to ride. Their greed is one indictment, but their lack of knowledge of spur and saddle, where one learns who one is and how to treat one's "Mother," is the crowning charge. The problem is that, despite Ramsey's statement that the "old ones," the wise old men of so many myths, "would press me to deciding" if what they were doing was right or wrong, the poet reaches no conclusion. He does not press himself to decide. Instead, he feels remorse (or perhaps self-pity), and changes the subject:

The old ones wept, and so did I.

Do you remember? We'd come jogging
To town with jingle in our jeans....

And then he recounts younger, wilder days: when faced with a real dilemma that admits of no easy solution, short of challenging the economic base upon which the cowboy myth and lifestyle rest, nostalgia is the dodge most often chosen by the poet. The cowboy is the last repository of true knowledge and true values, the owners having become consumed by "raw greed," but the cowboy cannot repudiate the owner, or he will lose his job, which is much more than a job, it is his source of identity. Perhaps one reason the poet is given to "nostalgic views of the past and to melancholy feelings that things will never be the same"¹⁰ is that the double-bind of modern capitalism has even the cowboy in its grip. The cowboy cannot quit the range any more than the factory worker can leave the mill or the professor renounce his tenure. Even when he attempts to face the dilemma, as Ramsey does here, to his credit, the inescapable conclusion, that one cannot remain pure in the present tense while working in the service of "raw greed," has to be escaped. So it is:

Some cowboys even shunned the ways

Of eowboys in the trail-herd days,
 (But wherc's the gift not turned to plunder?)....

The parenthetical justification reveals its weakness. Ramsey cannot even give this logic a good look but hast to hide it inside parentheses. Well, everything gets sullied, he says, and then he hopes that we, too, will blink at the moral self-deception included in that sentence.

IV.

And blink we do, in greater and greater numbers. Despite the fact that for a decade or more, historians, cultural scholars, and literary critics have been trying to kill the cowboy, or at least to do damage to the familiar cowboy myth, it is difficult to kill a myth, especially those myths whose explanations of the world flatter us or make us feel good about ourselves. The reality of history cannot touch a good self-congratulatory myth whose theme is our self-sufficiency, potency, freedom, and harmony with the earth, especially in times when a nation is suffering from cultural anxiety. The verse that promulgates the myth has experienced a resurgence of popularity in the last decade, just as revisionist historians and literary critics have been waging an intellectual range war against the popular picture of the cowboy. The first Cowboy Poetry gathering at Elko, Nevada, in 1985, attracted forty-two poets and four hundred listeners. *People* magazine and *Newsweek* both covered the event. The titles of *Newsweek's* article, "Get Along, Little Doggerels," and of *People's*, "120 Rhyme-Stoned Cowboys Show How the West Was Spun," suggest that the popular press took the gathering less than seriously. Since that first gathering, however, the event has become an annual one, complete with its own web page and now attracting several hundred poets each year and several thousand listeners and spectators. In his introduction to a recent anthology of cowboy poetry of the late twentieth century, Warren Miller writes that,

It may surprise the reader to learn that there are more cowboy

poets now than ever before. As I write there are annually more than one hundred public gatherings of cowboy poets around the West, each a festival presenting dozens of cowboy poets and reciters to eager audiences. Literally hundreds of cowboy poets have published books of their original poems, either as privately published chapbooks or through established publishing houses. Several periodicals exist solely to publish cowboy poetry, which is now heard regularly on radio and television, on recordings, and on the lecture circuit.¹¹

At precisely the time when cowboy poetry's ostensible subject matter—cowboys and horses—is less relevant to most readers than ever, and just when we, in the name of truth and responsibility, are being asked to reevaluate our attitude toward the cowboy myth, cowboy poetry is more popular than ever.

The preceding analysis, I think, offers some explanation. Cowboy poetry continues to grow in popularity because it now speaks to and for a new group, the mass of the disenchanting, those who feel themselves victims of big business, big government, and big technology, those who find themselves locked into an alienating and unrewarding job. Today it is no news to say that many Americans—regardless of where they live or what they do for a living—feel oppressed by outside forces they believe are running if not ruining their lives. To those Americans, a home-grown poetry built upon images of a nonhierarchical community life free from schedules and bureaucracies, and depicting a world where one's courage, skill, and virtue are acknowledged and rewarded, where a meaningful vocation that is not alienating is possible, and where people somehow seem nobler and more powerful than the darker forces surrounding them, is a welcome antidote to their own lives and to reports on the nightly news of people leading similarly disenchanting lives. It should be no surprise, then, that cowboy poets, like all things Western, from movies to mini-series to hats and boots, are doing very well. Poet and audience come together at the annual poetry gatherings to reinforce each other's

self-image, to assure each other that they still exist, and to lick the wounds of the late-twentieth-century American, usually the male, made small by bureaucrats, ignored or exploited by Washington, mocked by intellectuals, made to feel stupid and obsolete by technology, and dwarfed by big money. The poets allow the audience to enter and enjoy a mythical realm of time (a past when cowboys sang while they rode herd, a past when honesty and effort were all that mattered) and a mythical place (the land of the cowboy, an egalitarian, God-fearing realm where skill matters, where fate is character and character is fate). As we listen or read, we get to imagine that there really once was a place where the alienation at the root of our culture from all things big never existed, and we are allowed for the moment to overcome poetically our own alienation by entering the world of cowboy poetry where the only thing big is the sky.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Cames, "Cowboy Poetry: A Sentimental Journey," in Lew Ainsworth and Kenneth W. Davis, eds., *The Catch-Pen: A Selection of Essays from the First Two Years of the National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration* (Lubbock: Ranching Heritage Center, Texas Tech University, 1991), 47.
2. Anne Heath, "Cowboy Poetry," *Parabola* XVII 3 (August 1992): 46.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.
5. All poems quoted herein may be found in Hal Cannon, ed., *New Cowboy Poetry* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1990). Other useful collections of modern cowboy poetry are Hal Cannon, ed., *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985); John C. Dofflemeyer, ed., *Maverick Western Verse* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1996); and Warren Miller, ed., *Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass: Cowboy Poetry of the Late Twentieth Century* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1994).
6. Larry McMurtry, "Take My Saddle from the Wall," *Harper's* 237 (September 1968): 38.
7. John Lomax, ed., *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), xi.
8. McMurtry, 39.

9. Max Brand, quoted in Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey, eds., *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 18.
10. Mary Jane Hurst, "Connections Between Cowboy Poetry and Other Developments in American Literature and in American Culture," in Ainsworth and Davis, 32-3.
11. Miller, x.