

**The Compassionate Seer:
Wallace Stegner's Literary
Artist**

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Sid Jenson

The word "artist" is not a word I like. It has been adopted by crackpots and abused by pretenders and debased by people with talent but no humility. In its capital A form it is the hallmark of that peculiarly repulsive sin of arrogance by which some practitioners of the arts retaliate for public neglect or compensate for personal inadequacy. I use it here only because there is no other word for the serious "maker" in words or stone or sound or colors.

Wallace Stegner
"Fiction: A Lens on Life"

Paul Horgan speaking about the art and discipline of writing says:

We must go beyond the pencil boxes, as it were, and look beyond the page to consider the writer's vision of life, which all simple and habitual mechanics of writing exist to serve. Where many literary workers fall short of making significant works is just where spiritual values come into focus in a point of view.¹

Wallace Stegner, I am sure, would agree. I am also sure that Stegner would agree with Mr. Horgan when he says:

The spiritual life of the modern world becomes increasingly fragmented. Modern writers, like everybody else, long for a nourishing explanation of life; but all too many turn to recent and fugitive systems of imposing orderly but incomplete designs upon life's teeming and elusive variety, and in doing so, seem to lose the deepest well of their inspiration and their artistic intuition.²

Mr. Horgan concludes his comment about the source of man's creative powers with this comment:

When aesthetic perception approaches its fullest realization, it is akin to man's religious vision, whatever form this may take. Faith is a supernatural grace. The true artist is he who knows without learning. His own intuition is closer to the supernatural than it is to any prevailing temper of the pluralistic and pragmatic modern culture.³

Wallace Stegner may not agree with every letter and line quoted above, but I am sure he would agree with the tenor and tone, with the basic point of view Paul Horgan has toward the creative artist.

Wallace Stegner has been described as a non-religious humanist,⁴ but his theory of literary art is based on a belief in literature which is not unlike

the religious faith that Jonathan Edwards had in the “divine and supernatural light,” or the faith that Ralph Waldo Emerson had in “Reason,” or that the devout Mormon has in the “Holy Ghost.” Stegner’s literary beliefs center on the idea that the aesthetic experience is a private, subjective, mystical experience that is “never quite communicable,”⁵ and that the aesthetic experience is not subject to empirical verification. Art has its own peculiar sort of truth, the ancient and unverifiable “knowledge of things as experience,”⁶ and this truth is just as important as, and is complementary to, measurable, scientific truth. The artist, for Stegner, is the “man aware,”⁷ the man who can record the knowledge of things as experienced. But today we live in the age of the transistor and too often ignore or distrust the subjective, mystical experience; and says Stegner, this makes us like little children “trying to spell [the word] God with the wrong blocks.”⁸

Another contemporary problem with the creative artist is that he has quit. “From the Western writer’s square, naive point of view, the trouble with Modern Man, as he reads about him in fiction, is that Modern Man has quit.”⁹ The modern literary generation specializes in “despair, hostility, hypersexuality, and disgust.”¹⁰ Today’s artist too often gives himself the status of “Man as Victim.”¹¹ The artist by his own definition is “a victim, a martyr, a loser, a self-loather, a life-hater.”¹²

Wallace Stegner, who comes from the West and has “incorrigible hope,”¹³ wants none of this. He advises the western writer to keep his values, “to hang on to his basic hopefulness, instead of giving it up for a fashionable disgust.”¹⁴ Stegner advises, “The West’s own problems are likely to be more to the western writer’s purpose than any that he can borrow, especially when in borrowing he must deny his own gods.”¹⁵

Stegner’s literary theory and practice do not categorize nicely into any of the traditional groups, such as classicism, naturalism, or realism. If one must have such a handle, he might try soldering the word “archetypal” onto Stegner’s works, but don’t put too much pressure on the handle by overloading the pan or all your beans will be in the fire. Labeling Stegner’s fictional work with a term which describes literary technique or type is not the best approach. What is needed in Stegner’s case is a philosophical focus, an examination of Stegner’s life and his moral-ethical-philosophical beliefs.

In this short paper one cannot trace the life of Stegner. For our purpose, we need only say that he had an abnormally migrant childhood which gave him an acute sense of physical and moral dislocation. Because of this moral rootlessness, Stegner’s writing has taken on the purpose of bringing order to disorder, helping to make this earth a place where children will not have to experience all the disorder and early sorrow Stegner did. From the sorrows of the bleak life on a Saskatchewan farm, from the disorder of the sooty life in cities, Stegner has tried to find physical and moral order.

In *Wolf Willow* Stegner has said that he ranks fictional or poetic truth a little above that of historical truth.¹⁶ He felt he could get more truth in a fictionalized account of the cattle industry on the Saskatchewan plains than he could with any historical summary. The personal impetus for Stegner's study and writing of history was his search to find himself and to know his roots. In *Wolf Willow* he says, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from."¹⁷ Historical knowledge satisfied his question, "Where am I from?" but the more difficult question, "Who am I?" is better answered by poetic truth.

We read poetry (or literature), Stegner feels, primarily because we are searching for ourselves. "In all our wandering through . . . fictional worlds it is probably ourselves we seek."¹⁸ But we never find ourselves. What we do find is how the author, "another waif in a bewildering world, has made out to survive and perhaps be at peace."¹⁹

Out of this belief comes Stegner's principal literary theme, the search for individual identity. In an early work, *Fire and Ice*, Paul Condon unsuccessfully struggles to find himself: "It's pretty clear to me that I didn't know myself," and "The biggest wrong I did was not to know myself better."²⁰ At the end of the novel, he leaves Salt Lake City, walking straight east, heading back toward where his countrymen came from, with the resolve to answer the question, "who am I?" "I'm going to do nothing but work and read and think till I've got an answer to my own that suits me . . . Freshman Condon in search of the Grail."²¹

Lyman Ward, in Stegner's latest novel *Angle of Repose*, asks the same question, "Why then am I spending all this effort trying to understand my grandparents' lives?"²² Lyman Ward is trying to write a history of his grandparents in order to understand them. He hopes that if he understands them, he will understand himself. Lyman Ward's search is not eastward like Paul Condon's, but westward, all over the West. In the end their search must be inward, but both start their search as Galahads of the public library.²³

In the libraries these characters find literature, and literature for Stegner is a lens on life. "The work of art is not a gem, as some schools of criticism would insist, but truly a lens. We look through it for the purified and honestly offered spirit of the artist."²⁴ Literature is a tool by which man can enlighten himself about the human predicament. Reading literature "is precisely like the act of putting a smear of culture on a slide for inspection under the microscope."²⁵ Literature is not life; it is a way of seeing life; and for Stegner, it is the best way. As Ruth Liebowitz says in *Second Growth*, "But anybody with any sense can learn more from novels than he can from all the textbooks in your box. Novels give you an understanding of people."²⁶

Stegner recognizes that literature does have its limitations. A microscope, no matter how well it illuminates a particular problem, has a very

narrow range of vision. Its range is limited in proportion to its degree of magnification. The writer's vision is limited by his life, by his experience, his keenness of mind, and his ability of expression. But "the most inclusive vision is not necessarily his aim; it is the *clearest* vision he is after."²⁷ Limited though the microscope and literature may be, they both give a penetrating view of a small part of the world. "Certainly, no writer can see or know all or get all life into his fiction. His quality will be measured by the amount he does succeed in getting without blurring the edges of his simplifying frame."²⁸

Stegner realizes that, like the microscope, art distorts life. Unlike the microscope fiction need not always be absolutely true to fact. Discussing some factually inaccurate farming details in *On a Darkling Plain*, Stegner warns that the writer must convince, and he must continuously maintain his dramatic illusion.

For he *must* convince; he *must* drug his reader into complete acceptance of the premise of his story, and maintain his dramatic illusion by never slipping into inaccuracies of fact that may haul the reader up short.²⁹

Stegner warns that specific facts had better be accurate or the dramatic illusion may be broken for the informed reader. Stegner notes the exact date Mark Twain used in *The Connecticut Yankee*. That fact is central to the plot; Mr. Clemens would not want to be called on the point by some astrologer or astronomer.

But the greater literary truth of *The Connecticut Yankee* does not rely on an accurate date at all. An author can fake, and "fake shamelessly" the factual materials of a story as long as the dramatic illusion is maintained, and just so long as the work is true to human experience.

For here is the incontrovertible fact about fiction: that the details in scene after scene can be faked, spurious, or even absolutely false, and the validity of the novel's message be unimpeachable.³⁰

Stegner cites Keats' use of Cortez instead of Balboa to prove his point: "That passage, for all its spuriousness and in spite of its bald error, says so much, and so truly, about the essential human qualities of wonder and surprise that the details are overlooked."³¹

In contrast to a historical novelist like Vardis Fisher, Stegner makes this suggestion to the writer: "Look up your details when they are important and must be exact, but fake them where hunting them down would be tedious and unnecessary labor." You should "spend most of your time, most of your thought, on the people, the psychological rightness, the ultimate implications of your story. . . . Those are things that cannot be faked, skimmed, or rendered impressionistically. . . . Keep the attention focused on the people, where they belongs."³²

The essential truths of literature are not simply historical facts or ideas. Ideas, says Stegner, have an important place in fiction, “but ideas are not the best *subject matter* for fiction.”³³ Some writers, Stegner notes, begin with ideas and make them into flesh and blood as Nathaniel Hawthorne did. Other writers start with flesh and blood and let them work themselves out into ideas, as Mark Twain did.³⁴ Regardless of the method, the artist’s goal is “dramatized belief.”³⁵ No fiction should state its meaning flatly: “It does not state: it imitates or reflects, and is witnessed.”³⁶

For Stegner, human dramatization is the writer’s key tool. Chisel a great character and you have great literature Oedipus, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Ahab, Huckleberry Finn. The meaning of life lies in people. Literature must be drawn from “people, places, and things—especially people. If fiction isn’t people it is nothing, and so any fiction writer is obligated to be to some degree a lover of his fellowmen, though he may, like the Mormon preacher, love some of them a damn sight better than others.”³⁷

Even when writing history (which he considers a branch of literature), Stegner tries to focus on people. The spirits and bodies of William Clayton, Patience Loader, and Margaret Dalglish all come alive in *The Gathering of Zion*. Margaret Dalglish was one of those stout-hearted pioneers of the Mormon migration who journeyed with the ill-fated Willie-Martin Handcart Companies. Stegner describes her actions as she entered and over-looked for the first time the Great Salt Lake Valley:

Margaret Dalglish of the Martin Company, a gaunt image of Scottish fortitude, dragged her handful of belongings to the very rim of the valley, but when she looked down and saw the end of it she did something extraordinary. She tugged the cart to the edge of the road and gave it a push and watched it roll and crash and burst apart, scattering into Emigration Canyon the last things she owned on earth. Then she went on into Salt Lake to start the new life with nothing but her gaunt bones, her empty hands, her stout heart.³⁸

Quoting Joseph Conrad, Stegner says that the task of the artist is, “by the power of the written work to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.”³⁹ “Creative writing begins in the senses,” Stegner says. “Without senses the writer cannot create images, and images are his only means of making his reader hear and feel and see.”⁴⁰ Lyman Ward, the narrator of *Angle of Repose*, tries to help the listener of his tapes *see* the time and place. Susan and Oliver Ward are headed for Leadville, Colorado for the first time:

Tiny figures at the foot of a long rising saddle, snowpeaks north and south, another high range across the west. The road crawled toward the place where the saddle emptied into the sky. The wind came across into her face with the taste of snow in it, and not all the glittering brightness of the snow could disguise the cold that lurked in the air. In the whole bright half-created landscape they were the only creatures except for a toy ore wagon that was just starting down the dugway from the summit.⁴¹

If you have had mountain experience, if you have imagination and if you read carefully, you *see* what is happening.

Following in the tradition of T. E. Hulme's idea of the "image," Stegner believes that images (concrete things drawn from experience to symbolize the human truths of experience) are what make the reader *see*. For example, in *Second Growth* Stegner uses the image of a porcupine trapped in a flashlight beam to represent a trapped man: "The eyes reminded the old man of the eyes of a porcupine trapped in a flashlight beam, eyes that stared glassily and yet seemed constantly to swim in every direction at once, looking for an escape."⁴² But images have their limitations. For just as the reader who does not know how to fish misses the import of Eliot's Fisher King fishing after he crosses the Waste Land, the reader who has never seen a porcupine in a light will not *see* the effect.

Stegner recognizes this. "Literature is a game played between writer and reader, both of whom must be products of essentially similar cultures."⁴³ To be successful, the game of literature must be played by two sympathetic people. Just as the writer must be emotionally and intellectually linked with his materials, so must the reader.⁴⁴ "The proof of art," for Stegner, "is in the response, in the esthetic experience."⁴⁵ And that experience is subjective, even somewhat mystical. We attempt to analyze the aesthetic experience, but ultimately we cannot explain the reader's experience any more than we can explain the creative principle or act of the writer.⁴⁶

The writer's or the reader's aesthetic experience is not subject to empirical measurement. Art is cumulative, unlike science which is progressive. Ibsen does not replace Shakespeare, nor does Shakespeare replace Aeschylus. But Harvey does replace Galen, and Einstein does replace Newton. "Artistic insights tend to remain discrete; they do not necessarily make the building block of future insights; the [literary] tradition accumulates less by accrual than by deviation and rebellion."⁴⁷ For these reasons, "anyone who speaks for art must be prepared to assert the validity of non-scientific experience and the seriousness of non-verifiable insight."⁴⁸

Since all fiction begins from the artist's experience, Stegner feels that a serious artist needs a broad, deep experience with life. This experience, short of crippling, must have hurt him.⁴⁹ "Hurt" is not the only word proper here. "Annoyed" or "outraged" might also be used. But Stegner's idea is correct. A writer must have deeply felt his experiences. A writer's emotions as well as his intellect must be moved before he can move his readers.

In addition to feeling his experience, the artist must be a special kind of person. Stegner quotes Joseph Conrad to explain:

A novelist who would think himself of a superior essence to other men would miss . . . his calling. . . I would ask that in his dealings with mankind

he should be capable of giving a tender recognition to their [mankind's] obscure virtues. I would not have him impatient with their small failings and scornful of their errors. . . . I would wish him to look with a large forgiveness at men's ideas and prejudices. . . .⁵⁰

Stegner's ideal artist is a person of sensibility, intelligence, but most important of all, a person of artistic and personal control.⁵¹ The artist is essentially a common man, but a man who has uncommonly developed humility, patience, and impartiality. He forgives easily; and because he is compassionate, rebukes softly. The artist realizes, as Lyman Ward does in *Angle of Repose*, that it is love and sympathy which makes him capable of reconstructing the lives of his grandparents.⁵²

Lyman Ward is a good example of Wallace Stegner's idea of the creative artist. As he struggles with the problems of writing his grandparents' history, as he struggles with his dying, paralytic body, as he struggles to behave properly towards his unfaithful wife, we see that Lyman has come to realize, "that most lives are worth living even when they are lives of quiet desperation." Lyman has come to realize that "the point is to do the best one can in the circumstances, not the worst."⁵³

Lyman Ward, unhappy with his present, turns to the past, searching for an angle of repose. As he studies his grandparents' lives he slowly recognizes what caused the slow decay of their marriage. He slowly compiles the "cumulative grudges" which caused the decline and fall of their marriage. His grandmother, Susan Burling Ward, lived for the future all her married life, and "what she resisted was being the wife of a failure and a woman with no home."⁵⁴ She looked for her angle of repose in the future, but it was not there, just as it is not in Lyman Ward's past.

The term "angle of repose" is a geologic one which means the slope angle, about 30°, at which dirt and pebbles stop rolling. But Susan and Lyman Ward are too alert to the possible figurative, human possibilities of the phrase to allow it to be a mere descriptive term for detrital rest. They both apply it to themselves. Lyman says Susan never achieved her angle of repose, "as Grandmother's biographer, I'd have to guess she was never really happy after, say, her thirty-seventh year, the last year when she lived an idyll in Boise Canyon."⁵⁵ Susan Burling Ward was a proud, Victorian lady. Why wasn't she happy? Lyman thinks he knows.

Because she considered that she'd been unfaithful to my grandfather, in thought or act or both. Because she blamed herself for the drowning of her daughter. . . . Because she was responsible for the suicide of her lover—if he was her lover. Because she'd lost the trust of her husband and son.⁵⁶

Earlier Lyman had explained Susan Ward's failure to find repose in another way. She was:

a woman who was a perfect lady, and a lady who was feeling, eager, talented, proud, snobbish, an exiled woman. And fallible. And responsible, willing to accept the blame for her actions. . . . She held herself to account, and she was terribly punished.⁵⁷

But Lyman Ward could never figure out what the phrase “angle of repose” meant for his grandmother, except that he knew the phrase was too good for mere dirt. But he knew what it meant for him.

During a moment of depression, in a nightmare dream, he once said it meant “Horizontal. Permanently.”⁵⁸ Later he recanted this part of his dream and explained:

some cowardly, hopeful geometer in my brain tells me it is the angle at which two lines prop each other up, the leaning-together from the vertical which produces the false arch. For the lack of a keystone, the false arch may be as much as one can expect in this life.⁵⁹

Lyman begins to realize that those final years that Susan and Oliver Ward spent in Zodiac Cottage produced a “false arch” between them. In some quiet, non-spoken, non-touching, nonkissing way, Susan and Oliver Ward had made a kind of angle of repose, an accommodation of sorts. While this may not seem like much, maybe, thinks Lyman, maybe this was all these Victorian people needed. But a false arch is not enough for grandson Lyman. He still searches with his hopeful geometer for the keystone.

Lyman Ward, a product of the twentieth century, needs to speak, touch, to kiss. A silent accommodation will be no angle of repose for him. With the inherited pride of his grandmother and the stubbornness of his grandfather, he continues his search for repose. As a historian, Lyman Ward looks at the past and the present, seeing the sharp contrasts between his grandparents’ life and the present flower children like Shelly Rasmussen, his secretary-assistant. Lyman does not like the hippie cult with its utopian dreams “because their soft headedness irritates me. Because their beautiful thinking ignores both history and human nature.”⁶⁰ Also, Lyman thinks that his wife, Ellen, has become a victim of the casual fornicating of this generation.

Lyman notes the failure of previous utopian communities which the hippie generation unknowingly has copied. Brook Farm, New Harmony, Amana, the Shakers, the Icarians, the Oneida Colony, the United Order of Zion, all failed, and why? Depravity. Not that Lyman especially cares about utopian schemes or about reforming hippies; he just does not want to personally repeat failure.

Shelly Rasmussen will not accept Lyman’s historical argument: “You’re judging by past history.” “All history is past history,” Lyman replies. “All right. . . . But it doesn’t have to repeat itself,” Shelly says. “Doesn’t it?” Lyman replies, well knowing by this time that his own history is in the final

stages of repeating his grandparents'. Shelly is not convinced; she does not believe history can teach her generation much. Shelly's crowd quotes Whitman and Thoreau to support their beliefs on nature, free love, meditation, communion, and communal living. Lyman the scholar rebuts, "I never liked Whitman, I can't help remembering that good old wild Thoreau wound up a tame surveyor of Concord house lots." Shelly does not understand the significance of this, "What's that supposed to mean, that about Thoreau?" Lyman explains:

How would I know what it means? . . . I don't know what anything means. What it *suggests* to me is that the civilization he was contemptuous of—that civilization of men who lived lives of quiet desperation—was stronger than he was, and maybe righter. It out-voted him. It swallowed him, in fact, and used the nourishment he provided to alter a few cells in its corporate body. It grew richer by him, but it was bigger than he was. Civilizations grow by agreements and accommodations and accretions, not by repudiations. . . . Civilizations grow and change and decline—they aren't remade.⁶¹

Lyman Ward has expressed his own situation. He simply cannot reject his wife as young Thoreau and the hippie cult reject the establishment. "You can't retire to weakness," Lyman says, "you've got to learn to control strength."⁶² Lyman must control his strength, not retire to weakness. He must not let his grandmother's pride or his grandfather's stubbornness keep him from making an accommodation with his wife. Ellen has made a mistake; she may have been living a life of quiet desperation; she may have a chemical imbalance; she may have been influenced by the present loose sex standards; she may not have relished the idea of living with a paralyzed grotesque for the next forty years.

Lyman Ward, who has yet to figure out for sure why his wife ran off with his doctor, knows only this, he must not repeat his family's history. To stop the cycle, he will have to accept the false arch with its modified angle of repose and quit searching, quit hoping for the keystone. With this, the tape of the novel ends, but ends somewhat ambiguously with Lyman wondering, "I lie wondering if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather."⁶³

But the ambiguity is not true ambiguity at all. After watching Lyman Ward wrestle with his wheelchair and his marriage problem for almost six hundred pages, the reader knows whatever else Lyman Ward is, he is kind, considerate; he is a gentlemen. He will accommodate, he will accept a modified angle of repose, realizing that maybe this is "as much as one can expect in this life."⁶⁴

This accommodation, says Anatole Broyard in a review of *Angle of Repose*, is regrettable:

[When Lyman pardons] his bitchy wife, his brash son and his gang-banging secretary, not every reader is going to feel that he has risen above his distaste for our times. Whatever the author intended, we're more likely to see this last-minute reprieve as a perversion of character, a regrettable crumbling of a good, crusty character.⁶⁵

Mr. Broyard is wrong. Lyman Ward still strongly dislikes much of the 20th century life; his cultural tastes have not changed. But his dislike does not mean he should condemn those things or people he dislikes. Lyman knows what he dislikes, but he also knows what he ought to like. He ought to like whatever is honorable and proper. He ought to behave kindly. He ought to love the sinner (including himself) and hate the sin.

Earlier in his review Mr. Broyard states that in sifting through his grandmother's materials, Lyman Ward was "looking not only for a story but for the *standard of conduct* whose loss he feels as keenly as he does that of his leg."⁶⁶ This is quite right. Lyman is determined to behave properly. His grandmother, Susan Ward, had told him once, "I was never never *never* to behave *beneath* myself. She had known people who did, and the results were calamitous."⁶⁷ Lyman now understands because of his study that those people who behaved beneath themselves were his grandparents. But in spite of their calamity, Susan and Oliver Ward had set an example of civilized conduct. "They respected each other. They treated one another with a sort of grave infallible kindness."⁶⁸ Lyman Ward follows his grandmother's advice and example. This is the least he and his wife, Ellen, can do for each other—be kind.

Lyman Ward learns that even though he tries never to behave beneath himself, personal disaster and heartbreak will probably still be his lot, but that his grandmother's Victorian principles (what Mr. Broyard calls "standards of conduct") will guide and sustain him toward a life of muted joy.

Lyman Ward is a good example of Wallace Stegner's creative artist. He is a common man who lives in the world, among people. He is a man who matures "the strength of his imagination among the things of this earth."⁶⁹ He matures from a literary craftsman to an artist when he develops Pauline charity, when he becomes a compassionate seer.

The primary aim of literary art, Stegner believes, is to celebrate the human spirit. Literature today, he also believes, has assumed much of the spiritual responsibilities traditionally belonging to religion. "Literature has become for many of us . . . the source of wisdom and the receptacle of values."⁷⁰ Along with the wisdom and values, Stegner's theory of literature also includes an element of mysticism which traditionally belongs to religion. Neither the creative act nor the act of reading can ever be reduced to the laws of measurable science. The aesthetic experience is "an insight communicated by example from writer to reader,"⁷¹ and is never quite

explainable. The writer and the reader are men fishing in obscure depths; they are dealers in mystery. When the writer reveals to the reader the truth he has found, he is a seer; and Stegner quotes Conrad again, these revelations "bind men to each other, . . . bind together all humanity—the dead and the living and the living to the unborn."⁷² The creation and understanding of a piece of literature are mystical experiences. This experience is a kind of private insight by which man gets a "clear-eyed"⁷³ view of the ambiguities of human life.

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Dr. Jensen is professor of English at Church College of Hawaii.

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