

“To Mark the Sparrow’s Fall”: The Judeo-Christian Roots of Imagination

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I

In an essay on Wallace Stegner, biographer Jackson J. Benson notes that when Stegner turned to the first person viewpoint in his later fiction, “it allowed him to dramatize his beliefs.” Yet, Benson adds, Stegner “was afraid it might lead him to be windy and he was afraid—as a very private man—of inadvertently revealing too much of himself” (*Wallace* 21). Stegner *was* a private man, and one of the things he was most private about were his beliefs, particularly religious beliefs, or the impact that religious tradition had on him and his work.¹ Another critic, John Daniel, says, “Wallace Stegner didn’t refer to God very often. I don’t know what God meant to him, whether sky or wind or stars, biological life, all those, or something transcending them” (39). Stegner himself says little about religious influences in his life. Referring to his childhood in Saskatchewan, he notes: “we had mothers, most of us, who became all the more aware of the proprieties as the proprieties suffered slippage; and we were Sunday Schooled, reprov-

¹For additional perspectives, see Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson’s *Wallace Stegner* and Benson’s “Writing as the Expression of Belief.”

jawed, and licked almost as much as if we had grown up in Eton jackets" ("Epilogue" 292–93). Yet this—and similar references to religion or lack of it in his childhood—bring one a step closer to a sense of the depth, breadth, or endurance of Stegner's religious thought.

In the brief, stocktaking prose piece from 1952, "This I Believe," Stegner says: "Passionate faith I am suspicious of, because it hangs and burns witches and heretics" (3). A paragraph later he admits: "It is impossible to claim that I am even a sound Christian, though the code of conduct to which I subscribe was preached more eloquently by Jesus Christ than by any other. About God I simply do not know; I don't think I can know." This short essay represents an agnostic, secular "humanist" world view and ethic. It acknowledges the moral model of Christ, some "Christian and classical virtues," but little else (4). Without more evidence, one might be tempted to conclude that the strength of religious tradition in Stegner's work is likely to be pretty shallow stuff indeed.

In 1953, however, the year after "This I Believe" was published, Stegner, at age 44, returned to East End, Saskatchewan, where he had spent six years of his childhood. The following year he traveled to Norway in search of family roots. It is provocative to think of these two trips as turning points, constituting a departure from the simple secular humanism of "This I Believe." For, when, some six years later, he wrote his "Wilderness Letter," and two years after that published *Wolf Willow* (1962), something new had come into Stegner's work, something in addition to an emergent ecological consciousness. At the very least it is that autobiographical element to which Benson refers. But along with that came a depth and breadth of philosophical and "spiritual" reflection not found earlier, which only grow in importance and prominence in the last three decades of Stegner's life and career.

In tracing "spiritual" reflection in Stegner, two questions arise: How does the critic assess the issue of Stegner's later relation to Judeo-Christian tradition, and how does Stegner manifest or transmit a tradition? Stegner answers the first this way: "Any work of art is the product of a total human being commenting with his total

understanding on experiences that, with luck, may become symbolically representative of larger experience, even of all experience" ("One Way" 14). People transmit a tradition by narrating, interpreting, and responding to their own lives and experiences, out of the felt and reflectively considered sense of what tradition has made them. Stegner suggests that art may help to "spell man" but then revises this idea saying, "Perhaps [art] is a way of greeting [the person], an act of presentation and *recognition*" (16, emphasis added). It is this sort of representation, enabling acknowledgment, and recognition in art that George Steiner refers to in *Real Presences* (1989):

I sense that we shall not come home to the facts of our unhousedness, of our eviction from a central humanity in the face of the tidal provocations of political barbarism and technocratic servitude, if we do not redefine, if we do not re-experience, the life of meaning in the text, in music, in art. We must come to recognize, and the stress is on *re-cognition*, a meaningfulness which is that of a freedom of giving and of reception beyond the constraints of immanence. (50)

Elsewhere, Steiner makes clear that such re-cognition and meaningfulness, "the wager on the meaning of meaning[,] . . . is a wager on transcendence" (4).

Stegner claims that what education—religious or otherwise—he received on the Saskatchewan prairie was minimal and that little, other than the memory of poetry and some Presbyterian hymns, stuck. Yet, as T. S. Eliot said of Shakespeare, one can "get" one's tradition from very little ("Tradition" 52). Perhaps Stegner was just humbler, or more demanding of what "getting" one's tradition might mean, or perhaps he claimed so little because he came to reflect on it so late. In the end, it is what Stegner did with his sense of tradition when he did come to reflect on it that counts. As the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell song put it: "Hey, don't it always go to show, that you don't know what you've got till it's gone" ("Big"). Stegner realized, at least in one sense, "what you've got" both before *and* after it was gone—hence the nostalgic, almost elegiac

quality of much of his later writing.

Reflecting on his own life and experience made him respond to them in new and creative ways. His return to Saskatchewan began a reflective process that in time yielded not only *Wolf Willow* but the essays and fiction of his late maturity. In these works his responses to his own earlier life, to the West, and to a series of specific life experiences become the mode by which he transmits a sense of tradition as well as his own version of the Judeo-Christian tradition he first questions and then “passes on.” For example, bringing to mind his childhood, he says, “I can sing an old Presbyterian Sunday-school hymn, ‘The Fight Is On, Oh Christian Soldiers,’ and instantly I am seven or eight years old, it is a June day on the old Saskatchewan homestead” (*Marking* 15).

Given what critics say about Stegner’s prodigious memory, statements like the one above are not hard to believe. Yet not the memory but what he remembers may be key to the spiritual roots of his imagination. For example, in “Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood,” Stegner retells the story of his years on the Saskatchewan frontier, the essentials of which he had treated from different perspectives in both *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) and *Wolf Willow*. At the conclusion of a passage recalling one of his earliest short stories, “Buglesong,” Stegner acknowledges, “I knew well enough who, or *what* I was, even if I didn’t matter. As surely as any pullet in the yard, I was a target, and I had better respect what had me in its sights” (“Finding” 10). That description corresponds to part of Stegner’s concept of God. Finally, in the highly personal “Letter: Much Too Late” to his mother, Stegner talks about writer Frank O’Connor and his relationship with his mother:

He expected to meet her in heaven, garbed in glory. From what he told me, she was much like you [Stegner’s mother]: she was incomparably herself, and yet she always thought of herself last. I can’t believe that he is with her now in heaven, though I wish I could. I can’t believe either that eventually, pretty soon in fact, I will meet you there. But what a reunion that would be! It would be worth conversion to assure it. (26)

The pathos of this passage, with its doubt, its longing, and its oddly ambiguous mixing of disbelief and certitude intimates a very private man's struggles.

II

Hailed as one of the first modern statements of ecocriticism, "Wilderness Letter" might be seen as Stegner's making peace with and simultaneously appropriating elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition for a contemporary purpose. From the outset, the letter (written in 1960) is replete with terms, concepts, and attitudes that assume some religious or at least spiritual reality: "What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness *idea*, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical-minded" (111-12). Despite anticipating the objections of the "practical-minded," there is no irony here in the words "spiritual" or "mystical." A bit later Stegner observes that the wilderness has no more to do with recreation than churches have to do with recreation" (112).² For Stegner the function of the wilderness is more like the function of churches, and that function is to afford some sort of worship. Here Stegner chooses not to avoid but to reappropriate ideas, concepts, and words which assume some relation to transcendent reality.

In one of the first instances of what I call his "indefinite negative theology," Stegner then asserts: "*Something* will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed" (112, emphasis added). Though he appears unwilling to name that "something," he is not bashful—in this essay or in other, later works—about referring to soul, spirit, or faith. Without wilderness, "never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical, and individual in the world" (112). Referring to the challenge that wilderness offered to the formation of the American character, he adverts to

²Stegner overlooks the connection that Johan Huizanga makes between the "ludic" (reactional) and the religious in *Homo Ludens* (1949).

a quasi-religious perspective: “The reminder and the reassurance that [the wilderness] is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it” (112). Later, he analyzes the mixed “blessing” of progress, observing that “just as surely as it has brought us increased comfort and more material goods, it has brought us spiritual losses” (113). When he turns to the state of the nation as hinted at in its cultural life, he observes: “our literature . . . is sick, embittered, losing its mind, losing its faith” (113). Linking faith to the natural and the sane, Stegner quotes a letter Sherwood Anderson wrote to Waldo Frank:

Is it not likely that when the country was new and men were often alone in the fields and the forest they got a sense of bigness outside themselves that has now in some way been lost[?] (qtd. in “Wilderness” 114)

Anderson subsequently refers to “Mystery” and his “belief in a deep semi-religious influence that was formerly at work among our people” and ends his reflection by saying that the “old fellows” whom he knew “had learned the trick of quiet” (qtd. in “Wilderness” 114), to which Stegner appends:

We could learn [“the trick of quiet”] too, even yet; even our children and grandchildren could learn it. But only if we save, for just such absolutely nonrecreational, impractical, and mystical uses as this, all the wild that still remains to us. (114)

Much of Stegner’s most important subsequent work is intended to foster and reflect on the mysterious, semireligious, and mystical influence that place and lived and remembered experience can have on spiritual health and sanity. Human belonging to the natural world, the exposure, isolation, and individualization of the human person—these are central to Stegner’s thinking. But undergirding them is the assumption of a “something” in that world to which “spirit” responds, and by which “souls” can be “renewed,” “nourished,” “refreshed,” and “consoled.” When he describes the wilderness of southern Utah, his

references become explicitly religious, if only historically so. He speaks of these deserts as “open, beautiful, waiting, close to whatever God you want to see in them” (116). And later he says, “It is a lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into” (116). The result of spending time in such a place, Stegner concludes, is that individuals “can also look as deeply into themselves as anywhere I know” (116). However much or little one sees it as founded on Christian tradition, “Wilderness Letter” thus articulates Stegner’s belief.

Stegner’s notion of “dramatized beliefs” fits well not only with his fiction but also his nonfiction. In the fiction are characters who, if they do not express Stegner’s deepest, most private beliefs, do reflect an author who is testing and questioning those ideas and beliefs through them. In *All the Little Live Things* (1967), Marian Catlin expresses ideas with which the narrator, Joe Allston, vigorously disagrees. Marian is a romantic, an idealistic free spirit, but she is also pregnant and has cancer. Joe is an insulated, alienated former literary agent who cannot understand Marian’s acceptance of her impending death, an acceptance premised on the ideas of the Catholic priest and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work Stegner himself was reading when he wrote this novel. Yet when Allston delivers a sermon on evolution, Marian responds:

“We’re not so far apart as you seem to think, only you’re gloomy about what you think, and I’m not. . . . Order is the basis of everything. John [her husband] and I sort of believe Teilhard de Chardin that all evolution is only a perfecting of consciousness.”
(168)

Later, when she is close to death, Marian says, “I swear we never know half what life means, not even what it feels like. Birth and death are the greatest experiences we ever know, and we smother them in drugs and twilight sleep” (286).

That the novel concludes with the deaths of Marian and her child would seem to belie Marian’s faith. Ironically recalling an Arab leper’s

muttered “*Allah kareem*”—“God is kind”—referring to Marian’s last moments, Allston asks, “Why that crucifixion death, with John hanging to one of her hands and a nurse to another and the room full of her mindless screaming?” Allston continues: “Think of how random and indiscriminate it is, think how helplessly we must submit, think how impossible it is to control or to direct it” (344). In the end Allston emerges from beneath the smashed “bell jar” that had insulated him from life and asks himself if he would “go back to my own formula, which was twilight sleep, to evade the pain she brought with her.” His answer: “Not for a moment. And so even in the gnashing of my teeth, I acknowledge my conversion. . . . I shall be richer all my life for this sorrow” (345). Thus the novel celebrates an austere conversion which braves the acknowledgment of death as one of the many mysteries which inform life.

A few years after *All the Little Live Things* Stegner published *The Sound of Mountain Waters* (1969), a collection of nonfiction, the opening of which, “Overture: The Sound of Mountain Water,” Daniel calls “as lyrical as any Wallace Stegner wrote” (33). This description of a mountain river offers an example of Stegner’s appropriation of tradition:

By such a river it is impossible to believe that one will ever be tired or old. Every sense applauds it. Taste it, feel its chill on the teeth: it is purity absolute. Watch its racing current, its steady renewal of force: it is transient and eternal. (42)

As this passage engages tradition, in the sense of “eternity,” so the final essay of the collection makes that tradition more explicit, as Stegner praises the construction of a library in an age decreasingly interested in books:

Formed as we have been by the book, believing with Milton that “a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life,” we find ourselves living through a period which seems to value very

little either traditional knowledge, wisdom, and eloquence, or the printed book which has been their carrier. ("Book" 276)

Even a phrase such as "the book" conjures up *the Book*, the Bible, and certainly the expression "life beyond life" suggests the "traditional knowledge" of the Christian tradition. Then, contrasting the renunciatory drive of Eastern religion and philosophy, Stegner specifically evokes Christian heritage: "Our own tradition pushes us toward the more dynamic solution of an organized and indoctrinated social interdependence, St. Paul's 'charity'" (283). He then refers to the counter-culture and individuals who espouse it like Jim Peck, a character he had criticized in *All the Little Live Things*. With a degree of irony he recognizes the typical hippie's pedigree, observing that "except for a few minor matters such as Christian faith and chastity, he is a dim copy of St. Francis of Assisi" ("Book" 283). Stegner's commentaries on both St. Paul and St. Francis are neither unambiguous nor particularly deep, yet they do suggest that his later relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition remains constant, if cautious, often ironic, and always subtly allusive rather than direct.

In *The Spectator Bird* (1976) Joe Allston returns, further chastened by more changes in his life: the loss of a son and the missed opportunity of a relationship with a distant relative, Astrid Rødding. At one point he ponders how a "reasonably well-intentioned man can walk through the world's great kitchen from end to end and arrive at the back door hungry" (69). Joe's hunger is both existential and spiritual. Ironically referring to his continued non-involvement in life, he calls himself "Marcus Aurelius Allston, the spectator bird" (196). Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher-emperor near the beginning of the Christian era, also figures in some of Stegner's nonfiction. At the end of the novel the bird motif returns, but now it is a bird from a rather explicitly Christian context. "The truest vision of life I know," says Allston, "is that bird [the Soul] in the Venerable Bede that flutters from the dark into a lighted hall, and after a while flutters out again into the dark" (213). Allston appropriates this homiletic image for himself and his wife Ruth:

It is something—it can be everything—to have found a fellow bird

with whom you can sit among the rafters while the drinking and boasting and reciting and fighting go on below; a fellow bird whom you can look after and find bugs and seeds for; one who will patch your bruises and straighten your ruffled feathers and mourn over your hurts when you accidentally fly into something you can't handle. (213)

This slightly whimsical passage, together with the allusion to Marcus Aurelius, shows Stegner in dialogue with the Judeo-Christian tradition as it emerged from late Roman antiquity. Unwilling to conjecture on whence and whither human life is bound, he nevertheless takes the mystery of it seriously.

Some of the essays in Stegner's 1981 collection, *American Places*, both continue this dialogue with religious tradition and add a more complex religious dimension to Stegner's thinking. "Last Exit to America," which meditates upon the "examined life," ends with a reflection on the pace of American life, invoking the themes of "spirit," freedom, and "sanctuary" (60). Driving across Colorado, Stegner stops short of the lodging chains in Grand Junction, opting instead for a humble motel along the freeway outside of town. After a walk with his wife in the evening, "to touch the earth" after the long day's drive, Stegner observes:

As I drifted toward sleep I was thinking that so long as our efforts to produce a world less and less fit to live in, our roads will be as they are now—routes of flight that arrive nowhere, Kafka roads that recede forever into Siberian wastes of the spirit, without rest and without end, and with only comforts in place of satisfactions. (60)

The piece concludes with Stegner recalling an Anasazi wall painting of a "man standing stiffly, his arm outstretched, and from his hand a growing tree, and in the tree a hummingbird" (60). Like the cliff paintings in "The Book and the Great Community" by which, Stegner speculates, "primitive men and women" asserted their identities (285), this painting confirms the attitude of reverence that Stegner is

urging: “there was a man who never had to *learn* how to give himself to his land of living” (“Last” 60). Stegner continues:

I saw [the man in the painting] in the shade of a cliff, by a water-seep green with maidenhair and redbud, examining his simple, enviable life. I know he examined it: that tree growing from the protective hand, that hummingbird vivid in the tree, proved it. (60)

The essay “Crow Country” in the same collection is also paradigmatic of the kind of reverence Stegner calls for. It is also an answer to critics like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn who criticize Stegner for ignoring Native Americans or misrepresenting the settlement of the frontier.³ “Crow Country” revolves around Crow chief Rotten Belly’s reflections on what was once his tribe’s before white Americans had taken much of it away. The essay is replete with personal references and has the spiritual tone of *Wolf Willow* as well as the praise of quiet of “Wilderness Letter.” It also anticipates the themes and images of Stegner’s last novel, *Crossing to Safety* (1987). Describing the scene from a picnic held on a Montana ranch in the foothills of the Beartooth mountains, Stegner states that the whole place gives him a sense of “who I am” (“Crow” 111). The passage also suggests that the scene is one that will merge the personal with the factual, the communal present with the individual past. Stegner then describes the “Crow Country” of west and central Montana:

Rotten Belly was right: there is no country like (the old) Crow country. In this magnificent foothill region folding down to the plains from its backdrop of wilderness, it is hard to feel anything but gratitude to the earth, just for being as it is. (111)

Further reflection leads him to a contemporary conclusion: “The modern Crows can grow rich, if they choose to adopt white styles of exploita-

³See Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, pp. 29–40. Stegner probably knew as much about Native American tribes as many Native Americans know about themselves, and

tion and destroy their traditional way of life and forget their mystical reverence for the earth” (111). Stegner clearly approves of the Crows’ “mystical reverence for the earth,” but a significant question emerges about what such “mystical reverence” amounts to, and from whence it derives. The piece ends with a glance fifteen years into the future when the children of current ranchers “will perhaps be running this ranch, exercising the same stewardship and working as their parents have worked to keep this island of sanity and naturalness in a far, loved corner of what was once an incomparable continent” (116). Stegner’s praise of the “island of sanity” and security dramatizes belief in the reverence for the land that permeates *American Places*.

The 1987 novel *Crossing to Safety* also involves serious play with belief, transcendence, and central images which interrogate and appropriate aspects of Christian tradition. While living overseas, Larry Morgan, his wife, and their long-time friends, the Langs, visit Arezzo, Italy, to see paintings by Piero della Francesca. Larry describes the effect of the paintings:

Until then there had been a good deal of frivolity in us, a spring-time response to the blossoms and the mild, clear air. But Piero’s Christ knocked it out of us like an elbow in the solar plexus. That gloomy, stricken face permitted no forgetful high spirits. It was not the face of a god reclaiming his suspended immortality, but the face of a man who until a moment ago had been thoroughly and horribly dead, and still had the smell of death in his clothes and the terror of death in his mind. If resurrection had taken place, it had not yet been comprehended. (274–75)

Charity Lang objects that such presentation lacks the “uplift” one expects in depictions of the Resurrection. But although the narrator and Stegner himself are critical of Charity, her view and Larry’s anticipate all the postmodern complexity that surrounds current discussions of Christ and his bodily resurrection. Against this context,

⁴It also suggests the death of Elsa Mason, a figure who represents Stegner’s mother in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*.

Charity's death parallels as it counterpoints Marian Catlin's in *All the Little Live Things* in important ways.⁴ Both characters become resigned to, even accepting of, death. Both speak in biological (and arguably Teilhardian) terms of being reunited with the elements of nature. Charity's description employs somewhat sentimental and worldly eucharistic imagery:

“To think that we'll become part of the grass and trees and animals, that we'll stay right here where we loved it while we were alive. People will drink us with their morning milk and pour us as maple syrup over their breakfast pancakes.” (292-93)

Though the narration opens itself to an ironic interpretation, and though Stegner has given a clear sense of Charity's flaws, her acceptance, perhaps even submission, remains part of what makes her the powerful character she is.

III

In a Stegner obituary in the journal *Wilderness*, T. H. Watkins speaks of Stegner's “unerring eye” and “an often incomparable grace of language,” citing a description of the high plains in *Wolf Willow*:

Across its empty miles pours the pushing and shouldering wind, a thing you tighten into as a trout tightens into fast water. It is a grassy, clean, exciting wind, with the smell of distance in it, and in its search for whatever it is looking for it turns over every wheat blade and head, every pale primrose, even the ground-hugging grass. (8)

Perhaps “grace of language” here suggests a far richer, more comprehensive idea than Watkins possibly intended, for surely Stegner's “grace of language” comes not only from his ability to perceive but also to reflect, contemplate, and remain attuned to what he often referred to as the “spirit” or the “soul” of the western experience. Deprived of a

solid religious grounding, Stegner can scarcely be expected to articulate his religious sensibility—for that is what it is—in traditional or orthodox Christian terms. He is at best what T. S. Eliot would call “unconsciously religious” (“Religion” 348). But his has not the pagan “religiosity” of a Robinson Jeffers, and he has little affinity with Brother Antoninus, the chthonic Christian William Everson had been before he renounced the priesthood in 1969. Yet his attentiveness to that “something bigger” represents Stegner’s own participation in and articulation of a tradition which is both religious at the root and apparently Christian.

The passage from *Wolf Willow* that Watkins quoted shows Stegner intent on the immanent, the tangible world: a wind blowing across the prairie. It is no coincidence that in much of his nature writing Stegner invokes, combines, and transmutes the four mythical elements and that here, three of them coalesce. Yet wind, or air, predominates. And when he personifies the wind, that rhetorical figure seems apt, perhaps even inspired. The wind arises as a kind of spirit to enhance the author’s perceptive understanding of interplay among the forces of nature. But Stegner is neither pagan Greek nor uncomplex stoic Roman; he rejects both the transcendental optimism and self-reliance of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the fashionable nihilism of the postmodern era. Yet he is still too much a product of his time to be able to express his beliefs directly. Stegner’s religious tradition, then, seems to be a form of Christianity with the sectarian edges eroded away and the alkalai of damnation leached out. Or, to change the metaphor, Stegner’s sense of the Judeo-Christian tradition is like a lasso whose kinks have been stretched to limberness with use and age. Asked late in life about what he attempted to leave, he commented: “Oh boy! You’re now looking for a philosophical residue, the sludge in the bottom of the cup. All right, I’ll try. To some extent, Hemingway’s intention—to say how it was.” Yet he also referred to “a sort of hangover from Presbyterian Sunday School” and “a moralistic view of writing.” Then he boils it down to “the obligation somehow to have some kind of concern for the species, for the culture, for the larger thing outside ourselves” (Stegner and Etulain 196–97). Even so late in life, he is reticent about naming

that “larger thing.” But from another perspective Stegner’s morality and aesthetics are unthinkable, unimaginable without the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, though perhaps the same could be said of almost any American writer of note who, like Stegner, grew up in the early part of the twentieth century. Is not Stegner just a further, though earlier, step along the road to a post-Christian American culture as represented, for instance, by Bret Easton Ellis, or even former Stegner student Larry McMurtry?

Again, “Crow Country” is a paradigm. For Stegner, the Montana countryside where the picnic takes place represents “neither exposure,” nor “temptation,” nor “longing” in an “indifferent universe.” He praises, instead, “what the country does to my way of seeing.” Yet his qualification is significant:

But only when I have submitted to a place totally. Any earth I have shoved around with a bulldozer will be impotent to stir me. The more power I have and use, the less likely I am to submit to something natural, and the less spiritual power natural things will have over me.

For that reason I bless the poverty and powerlessness of my family in my youth. . . . [I]f I were to give my grandchildren my patriarchal blessing, in the Mormon manner, I would tell them, Be as powerless as possible. Submit whenever you can. Don’t try to control the earth beyond the absolute minimum. Work with the earth, not against it. For the earth does not belong to you. You belong to the earth. (110)⁵

Not only do the themes of powerlessness, submission, and reverence for space, place, and land elaborate on his idea of “sanctuary,” they also recall themes in *All the Little Live Things* and even *The Spectator Bird*.

⁵In comments made at the Spiritual Frontiers Conference in Provo, Utah, on March 30, 2000, Forrest Robinson, joint author of the first book-length study of Stegner, suggests that the rootlessness and suffering of Stegner’s early life left him bitter and without a firm sense of roots. He further intimates that Stegner

Listened to as a taped reading, such passages give ample opportunity for imagination, recollection, and contemplation. Stegner's voice, which James R. Hepworth describes as "richly endowed: smooth, pleasant, and mellow, like a musical instrument—or a good bourbon" (1), is at least part of his charm. But in the end the words themselves convey the spirit of Stegner's work. As Gretchen Schoff observes, "That was his great art, the control of a sentence that lesser writers would kill for and the genius to take dailiness and turn it into transcendence" (41). Western poet and writer Kathleen Norris provides a description of what Stegner's words achieve. "Prayer," she says,

is not doing, but being. It is not words but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself. It is an invitation to recognize holiness, and to utter simple words . . . in response. Attentiveness is all. (350)

Stegner has certainly brought readers "into the presence of something much greater" than themselves; his words are "an invitation to recognize holiness." As for many writers, for Stegner belief ultimately depends on language. A perhaps somewhat unfashionable perspective holds that attentive perception is a form of contemplation, and that contemplation, expressed in language, is a form of transcendence. But language, as Stegner would say of the land, fails one if one seeks to control it. One must believe, with Karl Kraus, that "language is the mother of thought, not its handmaid" (228). Stegner learned both the love of language and the love of nature from his mother. Writing, as Stegner practices it, is contemplative. Writing for him, as for Denise Levertov, grows out of attentive perception, reflective contemplation, and disciplined revision. The result is something like "living contemplation."

A passage from the opening chapter of *Wolf Willow* may still be the strongest evidence of Stegner's essentially spiritual view. Stegner's critics like to quote from this chapter because it embodies what was then for Stegner a new-found voice, that of autobiographical reflection:

It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones. At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dwellers who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel here, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall. (8).

The passage is a classic locus for discussion of individualism, for a world view borne of frontier experience. But in the way it reinterprets as it reflects on the familiar Biblical passage (Matt. 10:29), it also intimates an engagement with both the mystery of existence and a deep, personal sense of being encompassed by that mystery. As such, it bears "the unmistakable mark of transcendence."⁶

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⁶Dr. Joseph M. Schwartz of Marquette University originally coined this phrase.

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