READING WALLACE STEGNER'S ANGLE OF REPOSE

by Russell Burrows

Western Writers Series No. 147
Reading Wallace Stegner's
*Angle of Repose*

By Russell Burrows
Weber State University
Reading Wallace Stegner’s
*Angle of Repose*
Reading Wallace Stegner's
*Angle of Repose*

Wallace Stegner must have felt he was gambling as he settled on *Angle of Repose* (1971) as the title for his most important novel—the one that would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize (1972). "Angle of repose" happens to be a bit of technical jargon from mining, and Stegner meant to extend it to marriage. This unlikely metaphor begins with the practical understanding that mine debris will tumble downhill only so far, because as a slope levels out, the rocks and the gravels and the like will start to pile up at their respective "angles of repose." And so, too, will the married at some point reach a kind of *repose*—that is, if the married mean to stay that way.

Much can be said about this complicated novel, but at its moral heart there is an unglamorous certainty that marriage will always be hard but is still worth our while. As many seem loath to admit, there will come that time after the flush of romance and passion when we make fateful decisions. Will we continue to honor the child-rearing and the career-building into which our partners have admitted us? Or will we go in search of other romance, which experience and common sense ought to tell us betrays just as much of Cupid as did any other infatuation?

This theme of a conventional, rooted-in-the-home marriage is the most sustained one in *Repose*, with its characters illustrating all the strikes and stripes to be found in bad marriages. When Lyman Ward, the first-person narrator, speaks his opening line: "Now I believe they will leave me alone" (15), "they" refers to those
without much hope of repose. "They" turn out to be the sexual revolutionaries of what has been California's infamous "flower power." Stegner set the contemporary part of his story in northern California, where two of his more colorful characters play their prototypical parts from the Bay Area. These comic creations are Ward's grown son, Rodman, who professes pop-sociology on the strife-worn Berkeley campus, and also, Ward's facile secretary, Shelly, who, by "burning her bra," has made herself another victim of the college strife. Both of these aging and clumsy hippies are busy making a hash of their marriages, and with Ward's acerbic wit, and also within the safety of his hideout at his grandparents' old cottage, "the Zodiac," Ward does his best to enlist our sympathies against such modern antagonists.

At the same time, marriage in this sense of repose applies just as much to those from the Old West as to any from the dreamy Golden State. Stegner set another large part of his story back in the nineteenth century, and to turn there, he set his narrator to reminiscing over his grandmother's letters. These make Repose a modern epistolary novel—in that, when Ward's family and friends give him a minute's peace, he much prefers "to look back" for what he hopes was some real repose (17). The link here is that his grandparents, Oliver and Susan Ward, had come as pioneers to the mining of the early West, and Oliver, one of a handful with technical training, had gone on "talking shop" at home. But with some gift for poetry, Susan had been the one to linger over "repose," thinking it somehow too figurative for "mere dirt" (24). And almost a century later, her grandson, Lyman, begins rolling the phrase around, finding there the same rich possibilities.

The use that grandmother and grandson would make of "repose" is that excellent expression for peace and contentment in marriage. Susan had had to struggle long and hard in her marriage, and her grandson, Lyman, is having no easy time of it, himself.
Just months before the action opens, Lyman hit his own impasse with his wife, Ellen. That emotional blow is the premise for him finding himself with the same abiding interest in the repose that had always made his grandmother so wistful. For his part, Lyman has long suspected that his grandparents were not that well-married. But they had stayed married. That was the main thing, in Ward’s view of it. Whatever had been their angle of repose, at least they had found it. Why hadn’t Ward? Why had his wife left him with so little warning of what had been stirring her? He has no idea. And so he packs up, in effect, and leaves for the past, searching those letters for an integrity, a fidelity, and a settled domesticity that in our time have seemed everywhere in short supply.

It would have been a simple matter, and perhaps satisfying enough, to have described the nineteenth century with a lot more of this repose, and thereby have the story rebuke the chaotic present. But it does not take this easy turn. The repose with which Oliver and Susan apparently sustained their marriage was not all that meets the eye. Yes, they had stayed together. But as Lyman Ward gradually learns, their doing so must have been frightfully hard, because Oliver once had to suspect his wife of infidelity. And her adultery, if it happened, would have been with his best friend and business partner—the one to take his own life, Frank Sargent.

This thunderclap of a suicide—young Sargent probably the least likely to kill himself—seems a consequence of his having tampered with Oliver and Susan’s marriage. In some circles, this trespassing counts for hardly more than a misdemeanor. But Stegner was one to give a stern morality to his stories—in hopes, pretty clearly, of giving marriage more authority. Well-married himself, to Mary Page, Stegner had few compunctions about sounding off on the so-called “sexual revolution,” which in a book-length interview with Richard W. Etulain, Stegner called a “disaster”—unmitigated for
children (*Conversations* 94). In Stegner’s view of it, the cop-out of divorce neither was nor ever could be an “escape hatch,” and in *Repose* (as well as in his other fiction), he kept arguing that we have to accept once more “the necessity to bend [ourselves] to make some kind of reconciliation of the unreconcilable, which is what a marriage is always having to do, a real one, that is” (*Conversations* 94).

This stress that Stegner would lay on the “real” is key to understanding what we might think of as a geography of marriage. *Repose* starts off in its pursuit of marriage through two fantasy lands: the myths of the California Dream and of the dry-Old-dusty-West. Two more antithetical settings are hard to imagine, though both are more peculiar states of mind than they are places. And even though *Repose* begins and ends in the California of 1970, the story many times jumps back to the frontier West, where it ranges from Idaho to Old Mexico; and between times—giving in to the demands of marriage and family—the story darts back across to New England. Little wonder, then, that Stegner would tell the familiar joke: “I constantly painted myself into corners” (*Conversations* 88). His more serious claim was that he had actually thrown the opening chapter away “two or three times,” frustrated at not finding “any way of getting from here to there, any way of getting back” (84). But content to work by fits and starts, he found his way along—always back to the ordinary world, to what we often call, for lack of a better term, the “real” one. And here, with what the famous realist William Dean Howells said would be “truth to human experience” (243), we find the conventional morality by which *Repose* will go about resolving its marriages.

Stegner’s creating any sort of myth—whether of landscape or of marriage—would have obliged him to expose that myth. He would have had to do so, and do it with some verve, or he would not
have been Wallace Stegner. Despite the tranquil sound in the word *repose*, this novel is one of his more iconoclastic pieces. When it comes, therefore, to the free-and-easy youth culture of the West coast, *Repose* keeps saying—and quite delightfully—that the Californian and the comic are synonymous. Stegner’s vision of his adopted state was famously beset with its counterculture, whose hippies were promising to save us all from war and from crass materialism. But having been a Stanford professor, Stegner had had a belly full of that utopia, and *Repose* makes quick work of it. The peace-and-love that the young were to usher in proves just as silly and ignorant as the idle fantasies of youth have always been.

And then, on the questions of the Old West’s stereotypical resort to gunplay and its refusal of women and of marriage, Stegner could be just as iconoclastic. His attitude matched pretty closely the comedy in Stephen Crane’s “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1898), wherein that sunset color in the name of the town, and also the implied meaning in the “Weary Gentleman saloon” (763), betray that the Old West is gasping its last. The anonymous bride wins a leisurely victory over her enemy, the gunfighter, Scratchy Wilson, and Stegner seems always to have had the good sense to recognize that he came along, himself, under that kind of “yellow sky.” Having grown up in some of the toughest places of the West’s interior—Saskatchewan, Montana, Utah—Stegner could not abide the studied poses of the wanna-be cowpokes. He had long before dismissed those as “horse opera,” and the domestic element in *Repose* is flatly contemptuous of the popular shoot-’em-up. Twice only do the characters brandish guns—never to any heroic effect. For instance, there is one quick and splendid little joke about a Captain Jack Crawford, a two-bit actor in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. This Crawford once “brought down the curtain” with a gunpowder flourish that ended with him accidentally shooting himself in the leg (210). So much for the “gun play.”
There is also a serious scene in which Sargent levels a rifle against claim jumpers: “a Winchester is mighty comprehensive” (288). But, drifting off to legendary “Tombstone,” Sargent does not go out with “his boots on,” as Tombstone’s myth would have it. He dies in his bed, that ignominious lover’s suicide, after stuffing the muzzle of what was probably that same rifle, a “.30.30 saddle gun, in his mouth and pull[ing] its trigger with his thumb” (534). Lovelorn, he had been begging Susan for what she said would be some “sort of disgraceful elopement” (506). In responding, of course, he had to counter her: “Disgraceful? Is that what you’d call it?” And Susan’s conviction is that quite apart from whatever she might feel, the world would say disgrace.

Repose hits hard with Sargent’s suicide, but the story hits harder still in its second reminder of the sanctity of marriage. This is another death—a child’s—that comes out of Susan’s lapse. During those few stolen moments of her alleged passion, the Wards’ five-year-old, Agnes, gets out of sight and drowns in a ditch (534). This pushes Sargent past his breaking point, while at the same time it destroys the best in Susan, and it pounds Oliver into half-a-lifetime’s silence. After a two-year separation that does neither any good, Oliver and Susan return to living together, but without ever really speaking to one another. In Stegner’s incidental account of this edgy, respectful silence, he said that he got the idea for it from Sally Carrighar (author of One Day on Beetle Rock [1944] and of One Day at Teton Marsh [1947]). As Stegner recalled her telling it, Carrighar’s Quaker grandparents had evidently let that silence essential of their worship get the better of them after an argument (Conversations 93). Stegner was also influenced by the Quaker background of Mary Hallock Foote, the real-life model for Susan Ward. He drew Susan Ward with the “thee-and-thou” trappings of having come from a prim Quaker home back in New York State. But neither Susan’s religious stays, nor her many other
Victorian proprieties, buy her any repose. It is not a quality the novel discovers to have been of the past.

Neither is it of the present. But Lyman's painful struggle to forgive Ellen suggests that it just might be of the future. The lesson here, insofar as we should want to reduce this complex novel to a lesson, is that we have yet to avail ourselves of the saving grace in forgiveness. It is Ward who keeps trying out forgiveness—turning it every which way—on our behalf. Compelling on his many sides, Ward is a retired professor of history—one suffering from what seems to be bone cancer. He does not have long but wants to spend the last of his strength on his grandmother's letters. He will keep on working as a historian, yet his motive has little to do with wringing from himself another history, at which he has already excelled, as evidenced by his being awarded his profession's highest prize, "a Bancroft" (22, 211).

Instead, in something so deeply personal that Ward barely understands it himself, he searches from one letter to the next to find out what to do with the unfaithfulness of his wife, according to what his grandfather had done with the unfaithfulness of his own wife. Ward's reasoning is, who better to follow in this wretched marriage business than his much put-upon grandfather? Ward's choice looks like a good one, for still very clearly he can remember his grandfather as having had "a big warm hand" that Ward associates with "a sloping [iron] shaft," which drove "nearly a mile" into the Zodiac Mine, and there ran twelve massive pumps (437). Ward's pride is that his grandfather had designed and helped to build this drive shaft that "went twenty-four hours a day, [its pumps turning] seven strokes to the minute, like a slow, heavy pulse." These memories are intense ones, in one who indulges himself in precious little sentiment. All his life, however, Ward has kept returning to this iron rod as the incontrovertible symbol of his grandfather's "dependability." Yet Ward must find
that he has not placed his trust all that well: "I, who looked up to him all his life as the fairest of men, have difficulty justifying that bleak and wordless break [. . .]. I think he never got over being ashamed, and never found the words to say so" (540).

Marriage seldom has such advocacy in our fiction. By Stegner's reckoning, American literature of the 1960s and the 1970s went practically barren of this advocacy. But a paradox of Repose is that however defensive and conservative it sounds on marriage, its narrative strategy is decidedly progressive. One of the claims Repose has to its Pulitzer, though one not often noticed, is Stegner's innovative use of an unreliable narrator. This is what Audrey C. Peterson called the "manipulative" narrator, but either term means that Lyman Ward is just as variable an entity in the story's search for truth as are any of his antagonists. The unreliable narrator works in this wise: he tends to speak no more of the truth than does the average person; whereas, reliable narrators (especially the omniscient ones) speak the level of truth we usually associate with the Gospels. The premise for the unreliable narrator is that such a one offers a more realistic and compelling read, in that truth must be gleaned from a variety of voices—as in life. Lyman Ward seems life-like, in this way, because he proves himself to be the Ly(ing) Man, the one who goes on for quite a time twisting the story of his grandparents' marriage.

That L(ie) Man does such a thing is not immediately apparent. But there is probably the best glimpse of his lying when his secretary, Shelly, catches him taking liberties with his grandmother's letters. Lyman's clumsy dodge of Shelly's charge is—oh no, "I'm extrapolating" (436). But she will have none of that, as she comes right back with a scatological quip: "Ah, right on the rug. Shame on you." Her irreverent humor is never better than here and derives from Stegner's having made a hippie of her. Not to put too fine a point on it, Shelly hasn't a shred of respect for any of the
customs her curmudgeonly old boss holds dear, although she can overlook his conservative attitudes and his ghastly illness and can like him for himself. And so, caught lying a time or two, Ward has to steel himself every morning when Shelly shows up for work. But he does not stop his lies.

He persists with them, even rather perversely, and the fact is Lyman knows that he has been “guess[ing]” about his grandparents’ marriage. He has always on hand the salve of telling himself that he never guesses “wildly.” And this is true—for as far as it goes. There is something more, however: his tampering with the record turns out to be his means of heaping an extra measure of punishment onto his wife, Ellen. The psychology at work here is a fairly subtle case of projecting blame from his wife to his grandmother. This shows up in Lyman stretching the allegations of his grandmother’s affair. Each time Lyman does this, he makes her look that much worse, and in this way, he justifies himself in keeping his door and his heart barred against the return of his own unfaithful wife. His rationalization, pretty clearly, is that if his heroic grandfather had to keep a Jezebel of a wife at bay—well then, Lyman will have to, himself.

This twist in his psyche is not that easy to see, just as it is never very clear that Susan had fallen into adultery with Frank Sargent. But that Lyman Ward has been projecting from one woman to the other becomes a virtual certainty during the last night of the novel’s action. Lyman has a nightmare that his wife comes calling on him. Interestingly enough, the seed for this anxiety has been planted by Ward’s son, Rodman. This one, remember, is the Berkeley sociologist, whose credentials are “by Paul Goodman out of Margaret Mead” (18). The allusion simply means that Rodman has been going around swinging at the foundation of marriage with a pickaxe. The gist of his college lectures (at least, according to Lyman’s understanding of them) is that a Shangri-La of free
love awaits those who will tear up their marriage licenses. Out of this attack on marriage develops one of the best ironies: Rodman is one to have let slip the expletive “Shit!” when word came that he had accidentally fathered a child of his own (117). And yet, when threatened by the wreck of a marriage that still, at this late date, Rodman depends on—that is, by the wreck of his parents’ marriage—he runs around dropping hints all over the place. His sociology be damned! As those from broken homes usually will, Rodman wants to help his mother reconcile with his father and with the rest of his relations.

Almost needless to say, any thought of Ward’s about his wife returning makes his blood freeze. He can hardly conceive of forgiving a wife’s running off with the surgeon who had taken off Ward’s diseased leg. So during those first moments of his nightmare, Ward manages to be courteous and at the same time cool toward her. It would be important that he feels himself in charge of the meeting that he says he would never want. But then, his psyche plays that trick: the Ellen who wells up from his unconscious happens to step near a portrait of his grandmother, and Lyman’s breath bates: “[. . .] there they were side by side, my ex-grandmother and my ex-wife, two women upon whom I have expended a lot of thought and feeling [. . .]” (557). That “ex-” affixed to his grandmother (something that many skim right over) gives Lyman away. All along, he has been dealing with his wife and with his grandmother as essentially the same person. The unreliability sustains this most interesting tension, and even at the end, it continues. Lyman’s forgiveness of Ellen remains something of an open question. The dénouement has him jerking awake, soaking his sheets with sweat, “wondering if I am man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather” (569).

To readers of twentieth-century novels, this late-night scene will have some resonance: a soul staring forlornly into itself, with
never a thought that prayers might help. *Repose* can be read as a comment on what we often call "the modern condition," but this works only insofar as Ward's cancer is a symbol of modern diminishment. This symbolism is apparent in that his disease has reduced him to an amputee, who more than almost anything else wants to reach "downward" and "to touch once more the ground I have been maimed away from" (17). And that it also stiffens his spine and neck, effectively narrowing his field of vision, says something further about the weakened perceptions of moderns. Though he does not give a name to Lyman Ward's disease, Stegner had twice before used cancers suffered by women as his dramatic nubs: in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1938) and also in *All the Little Live Things* (1967). As for Lyman Ward's apparent cancer, Stegner found its inspiration in the suffering of Norman Foerster, a longtime friend and colleague who had once directed a much younger Stegner in his dissertation at the University of Iowa (*Conversations* 12). Foerster's disease fused his vertebrae and made it hard for him to turn his head to either side (*Conversations* 84, 87). In this same skeletal stranglehold, Ward does his best to forget about himself and to concentrate on finding the truth about his grandparents' petrified marriage. But few manage to forget by trying to forget, and Ward cannot stop his brooding. When inevitably he feels low, he turns back on himself and marks time by imagining himself writing to the newspaper: "Dear Editor, As a modern man and a one-legged man, I can tell you that the conditions are similar. We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair" (17). The lament here is the modern reversal of the epithalamium, that lyric ode in honor of a bride and her groom. Stegner made it sound bleak enough, but it is not Lyman singing in his lowest key. His emotional register once or twice goes much beneath his editorials. He hits bottom when his late-night
thoughts drag from him the hard question: “Am I some Kafka creature sweating in its hole?” (473).

Even though Ward can strike a matrimonial note as black as that one, it is not the final note. Repose does not let loose another of Eliot’s midget Prufrocks, forever “measuring out” their misera-

bly small loves “with coffee spoons.” Where modern novelists

have used such devices as deep scars and psychotic voices to con-

vey alienation or self-referentiality, Stegner drew Ward’s scarring

and lying along the more conventional lines of testing the man’s

mettle. And that Ward emerges victorious marks the point beyond

which Repose cannot be read as another comment on “the modern

condition.” Far from it, a traditional note of affirmation was basic

to Stegner’s storytelling, and the two who were probably most in-

fluential in helping him to lay the pattern for this imagination

were Joseph Conrad and Robert Frost. Stegner often spoke in the

highest terms of Conrad’s ability, and Stegner had actually walked

and talked intimately with Frost during the several summers they

spent together at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conferences in Vermont.

Both of these writers had been fascinated by what lone, brave men

have been able to do against long odds. So it should be quite a bit

less than surprising that this same tough cord of heroism would

also run through Stegner’s work.

What does surprise is that for all the illness and the lies, Ward
cuts such a strong figure. Some who have trouble reading beneath
his surface will simply recoil from his grotesque appearance.
Admittedly, you will need something of a stomach to keep much
company with Ward, who in his rueful moments calls himself a
“Gorgon head” and a “freak.” By comparison, Stegner’s lesser pro-

tagonists had been more likely heroes. He had created them in the

persons of Bruce Mason of The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1938)
and in Leonard McDonald of A Shooting Star (1961). And after
Repose, Stegner would create another hero in Larry Morgan of
Crossing to Safety (1987). But with Lyman Ward, Stegner may have come up with the most unusual hero in Western American literature. Ward’s age and illness are the first and second strikes against him—in that close order. The hard question, however, is what about his lying? There is the trait that should tell against him—regardless of his time or place, and regardless of the circumstances of his health. But it turns out that Ward is not imprisoned in a deceitful nature, and he grows when finally he tells himself the unvarnished truth. In this, his heroism is less a simple, hands-on bravery, as it had been for his grandfather; Ward’s is more a spiritual bravery. In plain fact, Ward’s body is shot. But his soul (if you will) keeps getting stronger. And the timbre of this strengthening sounds, if anything, like that last-march pathos in the last lines of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (1842):

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

For comparison, just below is that same dauntless compulsion played through the voice of Lyman Ward. Its vernacular is quite clearly of its modern time and place, which leaves aside the poetry—much our loss. But the voice is just as confident of its own adequacy:

What the hell, my right is in retreat, my center is giving way, my left is crumbling, I have just sent my bottled support to the rear [his whiskey—he has gone on the wagon]. I shall attack. I shall go on writing the personal history of my grandmother, following Bancroft’s advice to historians: present your subject in his own terms, judge him in yours. (475)
Very well, then, judging for ourselves, Ward’s victory must not be mistaken as a small one, for it comes against that most intractable of modern foes—the self. And winning against that one, Ward frees himself to face what is most important. It is one of those moments when reality seems to become very “dense.” Lyman Ward goes deep into himself. He need bother with no one else. Having harmed none (in the course of this novel), he has none before whom he must atone. And in those last few seconds, swallowing what his grandfather had been, Ward can see that for the good of his soul, he had better try to be a “bigger” man than his grandfather.

This is not an ending to please the unimaginative. Those who are impatient want a more explicit ending, with Ward taking that last logical step, either of making overtures in Ellen’s direction or of damning her all to hell. Often called to account for the ambiguity, Stegner once grew reflective and said: “I didn’t really want to answer that question [of forgiving Ellen] because it seems to me egregious to say all of a sudden: Well, now having [. . .] finished understanding his grandmother’s life and coming to the point of crisis in his own [. . .], he will have an epiphany and accept what up to now he hasn’t accepted” (Conversations 95).

This restraint of Stegner’s was something he had learned. It is not of his earlier novels, but as he matured, there grew in him a vein of classicism, and he began to exercise the powers inherent in reason and the virtues of balance, order, and harmony. Along these lines, he was able to pare down his style to language that would as much contain things as express them. He would wring austerity from himself, but not the ambient austerity of the modern, and become, in this sense, the “quiet revolutionary” that has long been James R. Hepworth’s basic take on Stegner (17). So while going hammer-and-tong on Repose, he was fighting the “tendency to overexplain” (Conversations 88). The problem was
trusting everyone. He need not keep piling up his story, working out each detail of its finish, if the thrust of it were enough to prompt a conviction. And for most, Repose brings that conviction of what Lyman Ward would have to do. He has to open up to his wife, and he hasn’t long to do it. To be sure, he has the courage to die alone. But he need not. His pride need not be a false one. All this comes to us in those last few accelerated pages, and it is another good instance of what Stegner had always been driving at: “All fiction is dramatized belief.”

As his close acquaintances repeatedly testified, Stegner’s beliefs never had too much elasticity in them. But when he came to Repose, he decided to experiment with the kind of narrative that most lends itself to the expression not of immutable values, but of relative ones. His hope with Repose was to produce a “contemporary” piece of work (Conversations 84), and not another “historical” novel, like Joe Hill (1950), nor, for that matter, any more “cowpuncher” realism, like The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1938) and Wolf Willow (1955). In Repose, Stegner wanted to show he was of his time, and also of a certain shrewd bent, and capable of adapting the unreliable narrator, a technique that had been enjoying the popular spotlight. For himself, he could go on despising the decadence of modernism, or of California’s wrecked romanticism: its sexual high jinks, its socialist economics, its half-baked Eastern mysticism, and the rest of the mishmash in that counterculture. But whatever unreliability Stegner gave to his narrator would lead back in the direction of recovering some old, ineffable truth between the soul and the world. As Stegner recalled teaching at Stanford, “I would have placed a lot of emphasis upon the central problem of making the narrator absolutely persuasive or, if he is an unreliable narrator, like Humbert Humbert in [Vladimir Nabokov’s] Lolita [1955], giving us those subtle clues that will let us mistrust him at just the right places and to just the right amount” (Conversations 90).
The irony in this “mistrust” is nothing to miss. That Stegner would experiment with any degree of uncertainty is well-nigh astounding. He had often enough held forth in his Stanford classes against modernism’s ill-conceived experiments. And he had written criticism aplenty that brought the avant-garde down to the depraved. He simply hated any who affected the effete manners of the literary camps or salons, and in his time, he had seen the avant-garde go from sipping too much absinthe to smoking too much dope. In other words, Stegner was one to have been professionally embarrassed that Dada as the name for the artistic movement had come from French babytalk for “hobby horse.” And from the Dada hobbyists, it might just as well have been a slippery slope to the hippie revolts.

A presumption might well have been that in such an ambitious piece of work as Repose, he would have risked trading no more with his enemies than he had in his other books. Yet what did he do? Stegner dared for once to try out something of the avant-garde’s prized unreliability. But he added just the most judicious pinch of it to one who otherwise has the morals of a boy scout. Repose goes about following that narrator, who is still touchingly star-struck by a grandfather whose own heroism had been trying to make “the desert blossom as the rose” by digging a ditch clear across the dry sands of a valley beside the Snake River. This conjunction of narrative technique and raw story material may be the most unusual one in our Western literature, but Stegner made it work superbly.

Now, how he got himself around to this blend of story elements is hardly clear. Repose’s formula does not have much precedent in Stegner’s creativity. The only other first-person narrator he had drawn was Joe Allston of All the Little Live Things (1967). As for their similarities, Allston does have a healthy slice of Ward’s wit (which Allston also lavishes on hippies). But Allston has none of
Ward's psychological hang-ups. Allston is a much simpler creation—almost refreshingly so—in that he understands perfectly well what makes him miserable; he just can't do anything about it. And apart from the narrative voices of Joe Allston and of Lyman Ward, Stegner had told his stories in the third person, with narrators who are absolutely safe and sane. It was almost as though Henry James, that venerable old "lawgiver," had been coaching Stegner's early narratives. But this is simply to say that Stegner's reputation was just what The New York Times said it was in the report on his Pulitzer: he had been a "forthright craftsman" and a "traditionalist"—all in a tone implying that Stegner was a hide-bound traditionalist at that ("Biographical").

Stegner's willingness to experiment with narrative technique stemmed also from his starting into Repose with the advantage of working in one of the country's most important literary jobs. From the end of the Second World War, when Americans could again let their energies back into their domestic lives, Stegner had been co-director (along with Richard Scowcroft) of creative writing at Stanford. For nearly two-and-a-half decades, Stegner had sat atop an exceptional gathering of talent: the names Larry McMurtry, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, James Houston, Thomas McGuane, Robert Stone, N. Scott Momaday, Tillie Olsen, Ernest Gains, Al Young, and Nancy Packer can be taken as a representative "short list" of those who trained there. But it is one woefully small for conveying the program's wide appeal. Stanford's program was by many estimates the country's leader in creative writing, and so much did Stegner put his stamp on it that not long after he took it over, Stanford's officials began advertising its stipends as "Stegner Fellowships." Former Stegner Fellows have become a virtual Who's Who of contemporary American writers, with their teacher often still affectionately referred to as having been the "dean of Western American literature." It is not too much to say that Stanford's was
the most progressive influence on Stegner, and it is hard to think of him even nudging in the direction of _Repose_ without his having worked in Stanford’s liberal and experimental atmosphere.

Unfortunately, the good in this influence is not so readily apparent, while the college scene that does show up in _Repose_ has caused its problems. For many, Stegner’s hard treatment of hippies has suggested that he was rather inartistically washing his fiction in the dirty water of a college polemic. _Repose_’s reference to Gary Snyder, of the University of California at Davis, is the most important case in point. Born in 1930, Snyder is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet (1975) probably best known for _Turtle Island_ (1974). Over the years, Snyder’s central theme has been a defense of nature, waged through the sixties counterculture, and through a nature-worship that is Zen-inspired.

In _Repose_, Snyder’s name appears as the author of one of the quotations on the back side of a “Manifesto,” whose revolution will bring “Freedom, Meditation, Love, Sharing, Yoga” (514-15). Anyone older than, say, forty-five should remember such words as the hippies’ compass points, and Shelly’s running on about them becomes the occasion for yet another of her arguments with Lyman. As he is able to ferret from her, Larry Rasmussen, Shelly’s good-for-nothing, estranged “other half” (that he has actually married her is none too clear), has been coming around, trying to recruit her for a commune that the fiction attributes to Snyder. It will be a commune whose hippie ideology is the complete, volatile package. The novel has Snyder say—as quite plausibly he may well have somewhere said: “If we are lucky we may eventually arrive at a totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, natural-credit Communist economy, less industry, far less population, and lots more national parks” (515).

Ward has to suspect the worst for Shelly and pointedly wonders: “Are you being asked to bring what you have to this joyous tribal
gathering?” (516). His interest is two-fold: beneath his gruff exterior, he has come to care for Shelly, much as Stegner himself had become concerned about a student who had run off to a commune and on whom he had modeled Shelly: “She seemed to me a nice girl, crazy in a peculiarly modern way and absolutely ahistorical; she had no sense whatever that time didn’t begin yesterday” (Conversations 91). Seen in this light, it is clear that Shelly’s role is to help tell against the Snyder-inspired myopia. Stegner appears to have worked very deliberately to fill Repose with the “historical precedents” (516) that would show Shelly—and by extension, young people everywhere—the dangers in the fad of communal living. These dramatic passages are extraordinary in that they have to carry the added loads of history and philosophy. But these do not overload, because Stegner resorted to that old trick of setting up the philosophy in the form of a struggle between Dionysius and Apollo. Ward has, of course, the Apollonian part, and to make him all the more plausible, he has the further advantage of having had that professorship in history. This is what enables him to sit before Shelly and to tick off, with all the savoir-faire of a wizened professor, a list of America’s earlier communes (which he says were “utopian” failures based on “superstition-ridden, ritual-bound, and war-like” primitive tribal groups):

Brook Farm and all the other Fourierist phalansteries. New Harmony, whether under the Rappites or the Owenites. The Icarians. Amana. Homestead. The Mennonites. The Amish. The Hutterites. The Shakers. The United Order of Zion. The Oneida Colony. Especially the Oneida Colony. (516)

This is how Lyman’s fast survey of our native communalism comes across as less of a text and more like a wise man confidentially letting us in on something well worth knowing. The effect came from Stegner’s somewhere figuring out how to cast his narrators
in the maieutic role of a Socrates. Thus can Ward, the gadfly, duck, dodge, and tease his antagonists. This skill is something rare, for few can take otherwise dry historical points and turn them dynamic. But Stegner could deftly tune his scenes to just the right pitch, as in this answer to Shelly, and ultimately to Snyder and the rest of the counterculture.

And Lyman’s second interest in Shelly is that by helping, maybe, to spare her the “promiscuity” sure to be at the commune—he cites the “VD statistics for California”—he also spares her parents, Ed and Ada Hawkes (518). To Lyman, they are both old friends and caretakers. Ed has been doing the yardwork and the other fixing up around Zodiac Cottage, while to Ada have fallen the harder jobs of nursing Lyman through his amputation and, thereafter, of helping him with his cooking and bathing. The Hawkes family has the job of reminding us, if reminder is necessary, that even the smallest of our actions affects others. Repose says that few manage to go through this world alone. Shelly, because she is young and has fallen into the overt romance of the hippies, would like to try it alone. But that would never do for her parents. She could not take one step toward the dangers lurking in Snyder’s commune without Ed and Ada worrying themselves sick.

Through this mini-allegory of Apollonian wisdom, in the person of Lyman Ward, arguing with Dionysian sensuality, in the person of Shelly, Repose casts Snyder as something of a satyr. Whether the Stegner-Snyder conflict ran deeper in fiction or in life is an interesting question. On the fictional side, Lyman goes on striving with Shelly to resist all the comic bra-burning, the era’s most arresting street theater. Some of what is funny here is that he argues in order to keep his own safe distance from her restless sexuality. Although a cripple, he is not yet dead to ordinary passion. Far from it—his private euphemism for her is “Ohne Bustenhalter,” or without brassiere, and once, at least, he has to
dash a sweater over his lap to hide what he is mortified to discover is his own priapic interest in her (466). Still, he is not one to betray any more than he has to, and he ventures to explain himself in the safest, the plainest, and the coolest words possible: “I’m put off by the aggressively unfeminine and the aggressively female women that would be found in a commune like this” (519). The welcome reversal here is that in this topsy-turvy world, whose stereotypes are all of men on the rampage, and of women’s virtue always outraged, Lyman speaks to the danger of sexuality cutting both ways.

Shelly remains deliriously dead to most of this, however, and goes on beamishly pleading Snyder’s cause with the innocent hope that history “doesn’t have to repeat itself” (517). But the single slice of charity Lyman will allow is “[t]he rebels and the revolutionaries are only eddies, they keep the stream from getting stagnant but they get swept down and absorbed, they’re a side issue” (519). Take care to note that Lyman’s rational self says this. His emotional self will elsewhere catch one whiff of a hippie, and he would be apt to spit out the name Caliban, the New World monster in The Tempest (1609). As those who read Stegner will know, Lyman Ward’s kindred spirit, Joe Allston, from All the Little Live Things (1967), always quite delightedly takes the name of Caliban in vain whenever some witless hippie happens by. And had Stegner not pretty thoroughly used up his allusion to Caliban, he almost certainly would have wanted to tag Snyder with it in Repose.

Outside the fiction, Stegner and Snyder were every bit as acrimonious. They began to get after one another some time during or near 1968, when Stegner was also starting on Repose. As a novelist frankly autobiographical in his approach, Stegner was forever adapting to his fiction all manner of things going on around him—especially those that had gotten under his skin. Snyder had gotten
there by leading a protest at Stanford. The bone of contention was
Snyder's boast that the hippie revolt would leave none of this cor-
rupt culture's walls still standing. Stegner fired back with essays in
*The Nation* and the *Saturday Review*, cautioning that the ac-
tivists were "reckless[,] they stampede toward the emancipated fu-
ture like dry cattle scenting a water hole" (Benson, *Wallace Stegner* 312-13). In the meantime, Snyder had gone to a
monastery in Japan to further his studies of Buddhism. But that
was not enough of a remove to keep out of the fray. Snyder in-
evitably got word of Stegner's broadsides and set aside his Zen
meditations to answer with his own flinty letter (also copied to the
*Saturday Review*). Their battle was then on and ran hot-and-cold
for some twenty-five years. It was just before Stegner's death in
1993 that the two of them patched it up. For Stegner's part, he
had written conciliatory letters. And Snyder saw at last a chance
to invite Stegner to speak at the Davis campus, an invitation
Stegner accepted (Benson, *Wallace Stegner* 315).
But the two old rivals broke this bread long after *Repose* had
helped to fix Stegner's reputation as arch-conservative. One of the
paradoxes of Stegner's career is that he often enlisted himself in
progressive causes—race relations and land conservation among
the best of his fights—only to go to work in his writing cabin and
make himself look anything but progressive. This apparent incon-
sistency is a shame, because Stegner could rightly claim that he
had been "on the same side with them [the student activists] on a
good many issues, but whenever they opened their mouths they
alienated me" (*Conversations* 96). His complaint of the agitators
was often the same one that a friend and a Harvard mentor,
Bernard DeVoto, had once caught in a quotable line: the radicals,
too many of them, were "throbbing, not thinking." Stegner's own
expression hadn't that arresting alliteration, though Stegner's was
hardly less effective: the radicals were those who somehow could
always turn "a difficult situation into an impossible one."
From this perspective, Repose turns out to be the work of one whose private leanings were progressive, but whose public persona urged caution, even restraint. In 1968, this was less of a contradiction than it might now seem. The times fairly cried out for someone to yank an emergency brake—for 1968, that first year of the novel’s gestation, might well be remembered as the Annus horribilis in a long run of tough years. In fact, 1968, when outlined for clarity, still has the power to sober even those who lived through it (see Charles Kaiser’s 1968 in America). The year fairly stormed by with the bloody Tet Offensive in Viet Nam, with the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and with another shooting (a nonfatal one) of the pop-artist Andy Warhol. Meanwhile, Newark and Detroit saw the worst of the summer’s race riots, though race trouble was erupting everywhere, as was evident at the Olympics in Mexico, where the U.S.’s victorious black sprinters raised their fists against the American anthem. Anti-war riots then tore apart the Democrats’ National Convention in Chicago. This helped to make the segregationist George Wallace a viable candidate for the presidency. But, even more, the violence helped to tip the office to Nixon. Altogether, by Charles Kaiser’s reckoning, nearly 100 lost their lives in riots, 2,000 suffered wounds, 11,000 were arrested, and one billion dollars worth of property was destroyed. Hair took full-frontal nudity to Broadway, and consumer advocate Ralph Nader, who had just released Unsafe at Any Speed (1966), started prodding Congress to require seatbelts. Cars were suddenly no longer so fun nor so affordable. And neither were American cars any longer the world’s best ones. Toyotas and Volkswagens came in from opposing fronts that ambiguously reversed the battles of the Second World War. And where there were not shiny new imports—by God, there were Jesus freaks and hippies. To many, and to those of Stegner’s generation especially, 1968 came close to the end of hope.
Repose was a way for Stegner to rekindle hope, and he seems to have gone about it with an anger nearly as righteous and as high as Steinbeck's in The Grapes of Wrath (1939). Stegner expressed part of this anger by resigning his place at Stanford and pouring himself into his novel. This was a dramatic move, but actually not as costly as may be supposed. In retrospect, Stegner's resignation seems to have launched him from the ranks of good novelists into the ranks of great ones. During his later Stanford years, instead of concentrating on his fiction, with which he would make his lasting reputation, he had been grinding out editorials about the "love-ins" on school lawns. For the life of him, he could not let that euphemism stand, when manifestly love-ins were so much like riots. He found a lot to say, and perhaps the best of it he caught in a piece whose title seems the perfect capsule, "California: The Experimental Society" (1967). But Jackson J. Benson, in his authorized biography Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work (1996), has helped to show why this kind of journalism was a waste of the ability that was Wallace Stegner's.

His topical editorials have amounted to nothing, or near to it, since he waged them not against the best in his antagonists, but at the frivolous or even the stupid in them. Benson has singled out the instance of Stegner's trouble with the otherwise successful novelist Ken Kesey, whose fame rests mostly on One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962). Benson uses the ominous-sounding "the Kesey years" (312) to acknowledge Kesey's having been one of the most experimental of young Californians and, at the same time, one of the most promising to have gone through Stegner's classes. But this unlikely combination simply points to what was Kesey's diabolical genius, as when he had been in psychology and had started lacing the Kool-Aid for his parties with something brand new from the labs—LSD. Kesey thereby laid claim to having been the first hippie, who, when not stirring his party punch, was
tearing hell out of Stegner's classes. A rollicking account of Kesey and of those heady hippie days appears in Tom Wolfe's satire The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968). Its mile-a-minute social invective can be an excellent, if not also an antic, book for gauging Stegner's dark mood.

He was well-nigh livid, as even a casual reading of Repose will suggest. And from this distance of thirty-odd years, it can also be poignant that Repose's satire of university life should bring us so near to Stegner's pulling the plug on one of the great academic careers. Stegner had started at the University of Utah, where he crawled out from under the influence of a scapegrace father, who had been knocking around Salt Lake City, searching for his "big rock candy mountain" by running speakeasies during Prohibition. Then, at the University of Iowa, Stegner earned a Ph.D. with an omnibus of a dissertation that hinted at the future breadth of his interests: Clarence Edward Dutton: Geologist and Man of Letters (1935). Back at Utah on an instructorship, Stegner somewhere found time to write the novella Remembering Laughter (1937) and with it won first prize—and even more—won what was big money in the Depression, $2,500 (his salary that year was $1,800)—in a fiction contest sponsored by Little, Brown Publishing of Boston. That prize money bought Stegner and his new wife, Mary, an old-fashioned summer's tour of Europe, during which he began dreaming of the fat masterpiece of the American novel. He went next to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, from which he won two further sources of artistic support: to the Yaddo Writers' Colony in New York, and to Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont. Those connections helped to open doors at Harvard, where he held a Briggs-Copeland Fellowship in writing. And the springboard of his Harvard connections launched him across to Stanford, where he settled in.
These career stops had richly complicated Stegner's imagination, providing him with much of the background and the insights he would need for a story of the caliber of Repose. Yet the paradox is that his university work would taste so bitter as he was taking leave of it. As late as February of 1968, just as he was starting on Repose, he could still bear testimony to the university's stated aims. In an interview, he sounded forthright about universities turning as the hubs of our "cultural life" (White 34). And mincing no further words, he declared that the "town without an academy is an unbearable hole." Not that universities would always function smoothly, he cautioned; for they would have to "grow by trial, error, and conflict." But universities were on balance "less tarred with the brush of racism, [and of] class conflict" than were the other parts of society. And he, for one, "would not want to live more than fifteen minutes drive from a good one."

Repose belies that faith. This is one of the more unexpected judgments we have to make. But there it is—proffered with the understanding that the turmoils of the sixties were not the last ones our schools have faced, nor will face. Academic life seems always a chancy prospect, endangered just as much by certain of our utopian social engineers as by our outright philistines. For Stegner's part in it, anyway, he had had enough. He went home to finish his novel. For income, he would market his writing more aggressively and could further fluff up his bank book with lucrative fees from speaking engagements (which he seems not to have relished). By accounts closest to him, Stegner put a brave face on his academic leave taking. But he was really passing through a tight, sallow, and saturnine time, whose relief may have been staging Ward's revolt from a plight that in many ways would have felt like Stegner's own.

As for the part of Repose set back in the nineteenth century, there, too, Stegner rolled up his sleeves over material that he
would be able to carve into something unique and arresting. Writing about the Old West probably would have been as difficult as the contemporary part of his novel was proving to be, for innovative writers have seldom found the Western genre to be a workable or a plastic medium. This difficulty, no doubt, has to do with Western literature's preoccupation with landscape. When it comes right down to it, there are limits to this focus. Only so much can be wrung from stately saguaros or from breathtaking sunsets. As Joyce Carol Oates has argued in her influential essay "Against Nature" (1986), it has been something of a necessity for art to have kept up a “resistance to Nature” (408). Casting her own cool eye on nature, Oates attacks with a staccato of sentences arranged vertically. Thus nature, in her view,

has no sense of humor: In its beauty, as in its ugliness, or its neutrality, there is no laughter.

It lacks a moral purpose.

It lacks a satiric dimension, registers no irony.

Its pleasures lack resonance, being accidental; its horrors, even when premeditated, are equally perfunctory, “red in tooth and claw” et cetera.

It lacks a symbolic subtext—excepting that provided by man.

It lacks (verbal) language.

It has no interest in ours.

It inspires a painfully limited set of responses in “nature-writers”—REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYSTICAL ONENESS.

It eludes us even as it prepares to swallow us up, books and all.

Oates' skepticism was also Stegner's, and perhaps never more so than in Repose. Elsewhere, Stegner could show up as a nature
writer, even one of surpassing ability, as in This Is Dinosaur (1955), in The Sound of Mountain Water (1969), in American Places (1981), in The American West as Living Space (1987), and in many additional uncollected essays. But as the one who signed his name to Repose, he had worked closer to Oates' view than most who have specialized in Stegner would be comfortable acknowledging.

The supposition here is that when Stegner turned to fiction, he felt his own "resistance to nature." This he put into complaints about the "peekhole" of the Western perspective, or worse, about the "prison" of its aggressive, even its belligerent, regionalism (Conversations 124-25). Stegner was proud enough of his Western heritage. But he was never one to think that the West is sufficient unto itself, and he did more and more of his work with the view of that ancient Greek Cynic, Diogenes: "I am a citizen of the world." While Stegner was still a young writer, he had worked well within the Western frame. Sensing some growth in himself, however, he began testing his abilities in fields farther off. The best instances of this reaching are Crossing to Safety (1987), set in the Midwest and New England; and The Spectator Bird (1976, National Book Award 1977), set in Denmark. Repose came midway in this evolution and can be thought of as a piece that was in its own way breaking out of provincialism.

Stegner would make this break with the rarest of Westerns, a subtle comedy. There are so few of these that I can think of only one other well-known Western comedy, Thomas Berger's Little Big Man (1964). Berger's dark humor is hardly ever subtle, but Berger's and Stegner's stories are similar in breaking with those grim and lonely tests of manhood, set on "a whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb"—to use Stephen Crane's rather fulsome line from "The Blue Hotel," his much anthologized story of Nebraska (273). But Repose goes much further
back for its comic spirit, perhaps to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and more generally to the comedies of manners from the eighteenth century. Simply put, *Repose* in its social swirl is often a humorous story. Awful things happen—cancer, suicide, adultery, drowning—typical fare in comedies, as well as in tragedies. Sober moments in *Repose* inevitably punctuate mirthful ones. Yet the whole of it ought to be judged a comedy, because arching over all is Ward's wit and his ironic detachment. He comes across as a master of the deliciously sour quip and of the punchy periodic sentence. And while his humor is not often easy, it is nevertheless the refined sort that comes from a great intelligence suffering some great pain. This was Stegner's forte in his mature novels. Through Lyman Ward's alkaline voice (as well as in Joe Allston's and in Larry Morgan's), Stegner found his mastery of comic prose. Its nuances, tropes, and subversions are so well tuned that even Lyman's smallest gestures turn passages out of their ordinary course of sober information and change them into saboteurs of that information.

Thus does *Repose* stand the Western on its figurative head. The cast of the typical novel has been as authentically small as was the territorial population small and scattered. But *Repose* has enough of absurd humanity's critical mass that, inevitably, there are love triangles to contend with. The one tying together Oliver, Susan, and Frank Sargent handily defies the formula of a few hearty souls out there on a vast plain. Lyman's discovery of this triangle—"The West is not so new as some think" (28)—reminds him much too much of the triangle tying together Ellen, himself, and that anonymous doctor who took off his leg. These hurts keep confirming his worst suspicions about women and keep tipping him toward misogynist grumbling: "Gentility is inherited through the female line like hemophilia, and is all but incurable" (314). This is a comedy that has to operate under the cloud of our
“correct” thinking and other political niceties, and Stegner numbers among only a handful who lately have been able to pull this off.

Two triangles, balancing the past against the present, might have seemed quite enough. But Stegner was not yet done. Repose has a full triptych of love triangles. And the third one is as complicated as any might wish. Instead of two men colliding over a woman, the third triangle has two women loving one another during the last of their girlhoods, and then, bending to social order, admitting an effeminate man, who gradually pairs with one, marries her, and saves all together—with a bare minimum of hurt feelings. That, at any rate, is what Lyman has to wonder about, because standing on one point of the triangle was his grandmother. Lyman can hardly believe his eyes when, reading between the lines in the letters, he sees these first hints of “lesbianism,” and he back-pedals—insisting that the “twentieth century, by taking away the possibility of innocence, has made [her] sort of friendship unlikely; it gets inhibited or is forced into open sexuality” (34). He clings for the longest time to the possibility that his grandmother’s “case” had been merely a “standard” one, by which he means that he can still “elect to join her in innocence.”

This third triangle brings together Susan, Augusta Drake, and Thomas Hudson, who together ran “around safe, platonic, and happy to galleries, theaters, and concerts” in an “Edith Wharton version of New York” (54). Of course, Augusta and Thomas were the two who married, but not until “the uncertain needle of Thomas’s affections” stopped spinning (56). And then, after “waiting just a little longer than Jacob had waited for Rachel,” Oliver got Susan to marry him and to follow him west (66). But, then, did her girl-love for Augusta cool? Ward has to conclude that it did not—or else, what drove all that letter writing (not only voluminous enough, but also intimate enough for him to reconstruct
Susan's passions and despairs)? Having once tried to settle the question of his grandmother's affections, Ward sees that he will have to be more careful: “The more I study Grandmother [before her marriage], the more complicated that Quaker girl seems” (55-56).

Then, at a second unmistakable suggestion of lesbianism, Ward explodes, “what, Grandmother?” (57). He feels like a “Peeping Tom” in taking up the letter that contains: “So I hurried [. . .] and changed my dress and pulled my ruffle down low in front to please my girl.” Once again, only more so, Ward has to look askance at his grandmother: “I should guess that neither Thomas nor my grandfather ever stirred that amount of turmoil in her breast.” And if we should guess, these early chapters in Repose are about as far away from a true-grit story of pioneers as a Western has ever gotten.

But in Old Repose, in this sense of the Old West, Stegner was not yet finished breaking with formula. He worked another angle by focusing on a class of pioneers whose stories, he maintained, “[. . .] hadn’t been adequately told” and “who represented a phase of [the westward expansion] more-or-less forgotten so far” (Conversations 91). These are represented by Oliver and Susan, who, because of their native abilities, as well as the polish of their schooling, were the “upper crust of pioneers.” This was Stegner's phrase, which in today's class consciousness is apt to give offense, though it need not. Stegner simply meant by it a meritocracy. Both of the grandparent Wards had healthy slices of the “brains” and the “talent” that were out on the frontier. They had little money nor other influence to speak of; however, neither were they pioneers in the plow-and-one-Shanghai-rooster sense; they were always people who had a household around them, who employed other people. There were always three or four people, a governess, people Ward employed in his
Call them an intelligentsia on a social map, and resist the conditioning that has us call them bourgeoisie, for they need more operating space than the Marxist critique provides. In truth, they are usually betwixt and between the established social strata, as their “Cornish” and “Cousin Jack” neighbors knew them to be—flush and flying high one season, and next season bankrupt. In all of their habits and their wishes, Oliver and Susan are more complicated than our usual depictions of those who bent their steps westward.

As Lyman imagines him, Oliver Ward is quite a bit more than those old, saddle-sore, hard-handed “waddies,” who rode the open range (and who ended up fencing it). When young Oliver enters the story, he has only one trait to fit the Western type: he can be as laconic as Gary Cooper in High Noon. He shows up having just fled a holiday drawing room, for “[t]hat much talk wears me out” (38). Then, happening on Susan Burling, who has herself quit that parlor (because its talk was not good enough), he coughs up his ambition to go “out West and make myself into an engineer.” It seems a misdiagnosis of advancing blindness had kept him two years behind his class in “the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale.” But spectacles cured his astigmatism. And his wire-rimmed glasses do the further service of aging his boyish looks “about a decade.” A bit younger than Susan, he hasn’t the bearing nor the prospects he needs to court her. He will slowly manage that, of course. But he keeps growing ever more “far sighted,” in this figurative sense, and so misses Susan and Frank drifting ever closer together. But as Lyman would be inclined to add, since he cannot stop worrying about Ellen—“I thought we had a good life”—there
never has been a pair of glasses to help a man see that kind of trouble coming (441).

Susan Burling Ward is even more complex than her husband. For starters, she is quite a bit more than those legions of pioneering women whose “poke bonnets” were not, Stegner thought, the absolute symbols of their social origins (Conversations 91). In speaking with Richard W. Etulain, who compiled the invaluable, book-length interview Conversations with Wallace Stegner (1983, revised 1990), Stegner cautioned students of the region by observing that “a lot [. . .] who came west in poke bonnets were not just housewives with a third-grade education,” but “perfectly well-educated” women for their time. Some, Stegner continued, “botanized happily all across the West,” just as once it is Susan’s joy to teach Ian Pricey, often her riding companion in the Rockies above Leadville, Colorado, to identify the common puccoon as “Lithospermum multiflorum” (297).

Here is something different from what pioneering has usually meant in Old Westerns. With “a tough and unswerving dedication to her art,” Susan Burling becomes a pioneer well ahead of Oliver’s setting out to be one (53). She starts for a far horizon of her own reckoning when she attends “The School of Design for Women at the Cooper Institute,” the “only place, at that time, where anything approaching an art education could be had for a girl” (27). As her hands gradually acquire ability with pencils and brushes, her head fills with dreams—all of the good life in the artists’ mecca of New York. Her ambition (this not unlike her husband’s) is to ride the crest of her ability as far as it will take her—while her fate is to settle for one whose own plans carry him to the outposts of the West. There are plenty of times when she is convinced this fate has been her undoing. But, with her chances to draw the West, and also to write about it, she works with subjects not only new, but challenging. And so she becomes in this refiner’s
fire of her Western “exile” a much better artist than she ever could have been in the East (371).

Her career as an artist and writer changes the whole idea of adventure. So much of the adventure in Repose is of the mind and of questing through books and paintings and music. Susan comes to the foot of what will be her Parnassus in the first of the mining towns where she will have to patch together her homes. She climbs down from the stage in New Almaden, California, resolved to keep up her guard, “not to join a new society but to endure it” (81). Yet her drawing—her artistic sensibility—releases her.

The first episode of this transformation disarms in its apparent simplicity: a Mexican has come with firewood, and she employs a rudimentary Spanish, newly acquired, “Como?” and “Cuanto?” Trying out another language has its way of releasing us into something both upsetting and yet wonderful. It can be like swimming for the first time, and here Susan dares to reach past herself (108-09). It is a defining moment, and finding that she is still all right, that the alien means her no harm—she cannot help but notice the man’s “great theatrical gestures” in the sweep of his “sombrero” and in the “volley of [his] orders” to some “Sancho”—all of a sudden, the “whole event [. . .] acquire[s] gaiety,” and she dashes for a sketch pad, while the woodcutter finishes unloading.

The Mexican next contrives a means of payment, which becomes another reason for Lyman’s despairing over his grandmother: a “terrible snob you were” (95). This exchange has the wood merchant throw his handkerchief, in which she is to tie up his five dollars. But the sight of a dirty handkerchief on her porch gives her “gooseflesh,” and the maid, Lizzie, has to pick up the sweaty rag (109-10). Still, not the least offended, the Mexican’s “admiration double[s],” for he has heard that the Anglo woman just in from the East is an artist, and now he sees for himself that she is a lady. The finishing touch is that she is finally bold enough to
show her sketch, and then, "impulsively," to give it away—while he admires it "extravagantly, all but kissing his fingers. A masterpiece." The long journey of her artistic adventure in the West has begun with this small step.

In just a few more pages, the painter and illustrator also becomes a writer with a crusading spirit. The appeal of this to book lovers is undeniable, which is Melody Graulich's point in praising the way that Stegner could bring many "books into conversation with each other and with us, and [make] them relevant to the [W]estern past—and present" (250). Graulich's essay is founded on a shared affection: who among the book-loving can resist the adventures of finding stories and of working them up to bring on great reforms? Whatever else may be said about Stegner, he was a writer for other writers and for students of writing. In this way, Susan's adventure of going deep into New Almaden's mercury mine becomes ours vicariously when she thanks the manager, Kendall, for "indulg[ing]" her in a tour, but she lets slip that the miners "seem so like prisoners" (144). An hour before, she had descended and "thought of Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice" (another triangle?) because the mine shaft seemed so like a "vertical Styx." Another shock had been learning that the mine's only safety features are the Cornish "Tommyknockers," climbing high-and-low like ants and "tapping at the [mine's] timbering to make sure it's sound" (140). Right on his historian's cue, Lyman takes this as a chance to plug the historical imagination: "we need to know what real injustice looked like," he thunders at the hippies packing their placards. He writes off modern grievances as "[f]leabites by comparison" (153):

When Kendall was running the New Almaden[,] the United Mine Workers were a half century away, the Western Federation of Miners a generation off; the IWW wouldn't be founded until 1905. (153-54)
Aspiring writers would sell their souls to have these problems of Susan’s, as when once she has to send a shamefaced letter to her old friend Thomas Hudson, who has become her editor at Scribner’s (132). She had not had enough confidence in her ability, and so had submitted her manuscript not to Hudson, but to Howells of the Atlantic, who—no fool—bought it on the spot (111). This is why she mails her “apologetic note to Thomas Hudson [. . .], lamely explaining how it had happened that her first published writing, and her first drawings of New Almaden, might be appearing in Atlantic rather than in Scribner’s” (132). This ironic success is all the more affecting in that she writes and paints against the difficulties of her first pregnancy, during which she
somehow keeps upright and working like “some sort of cross between a hummingbird and an earth mover” (126). No sooner has she confessed herself to Hudson than she goes into labor and delivers her first, who, by the estimate of a Victorian gentlewoman, “weighed a humiliating eleven pounds” (132).

This is Wild West adventure lived at a level of culture way above what the region was supposed to have had. And throughout, the irony is that Susan is the last to realize how her art flourishes in the West. She has trained her eye and her hand. But she has not trained herself to understand the value that fresh and challenging material can have for her work. One who does understand, and who tries to get it through her head, is none other than Hudson. During one of her trips back East, Hudson sets his table richly, and amid a well-heeled company, he shows off Susan as his prized writer and illustrator. With a sense of his own about how to stage a moment, he leads with: “How art thou remarkable?” (356). He knows, then, just how long to pause:

Hmmm? She’s been out in the unhistoried vacuum of the West for nearly five years, as far from any cultivated center as possible. What does she do? She histories it, she arts it, she illuminates its rough society. With a house to keep and a child to rear, she does more and better work than most of us could do with all our time free. (356)

From one such as Hudson, this is high praise, indeed; and it might just as well be recognized for its achievement: a portrait of the artist as a young woman, or a woman’s Künstlerroman. The focus here is so unusual that to the best of my knowledge, Repose is one of few such works in the canon of the Western states. The only other Western woman’s Künstlerroman that comes immediately to my mind is Willa Cather’s under-appreciated The Song of the Lark (1915).
This is not to say that the Old West part of Repose is all Susan’s story. There is a balance, and Oliver has a fair slice of the attention. In many ways, in fact, he can pretty much match his wife point-for-point, including his vexing inability to see himself for who he is. Where she cannot see her art thriving, he cannot see his engineering standing up beside her drawing, and “poor devil,” he keeps kicking himself: “I’ve had a lot of experience marrying women smarter than I am” (183).

That’s debatable—in that Repose will use Oliver to plead a broader view of art. When seen rightly, art should spill out into the world much beyond our libraries, concert halls, and museums. Let it be said that one of the most likeable things about this novel is the way it goes about dignifying ordinary work. When we do it well, which is when we pour in not only our minds but our souls, we become artists in our own right—regardless of the exact nature of the work. The story makes one of its strongest appeals on behalf of those whose crafts or trades engage their passions for excellence.

Repose does this by holding up Oliver as an inventor whose genius comes in good part from his sweat, and whose tragedy is to keep having his “big ideas” always “twenty years ahead of their time” (23). Whoever are the gods of invention, when they decide to torment a mortal, they grant him one chance at something as big and as lucrative as Oliver’s discovery of a new kind of hydraulic cement (180). He can see his cement filled with its promise of better tomorrows. But he can never get financial backing. And this failure leads to more of his conflicts with Susan, who keeps alive the hope that a million from cement—for that matter, a million from anything—will sweep her back to the good life in the East. Her reproachfulness comes out of her setting him down as nothing more than “a county-fair Moses” who has no Aaron to speak for him (366). Oliver’s development is in this way arrested; he never
becomes any good at all at the "talkee-talkee," his disparaging term for the \textit{laissez-faire} markets in which he must stake his chances. In a sorry parade of venture capitalists, the Gilded Age keeps letting Oliver down or keeps passing him by, and it is left to Lyman to observe that others would take his grandfather's cement, which "he characteristically had not patented or kept to himself, [. . . and] grow rich out of it" (192). Not that Lyman much laments the fortune his grandfather might have started amassing back in 1877. Lyman has to grieve, instead, that the gritty chemical mix "of the argillaceous and calcareous" was the one "insoluble marriage" his grandfather had ever been able to make.

Lyman's agitation over his grandfather is also something of our own agitation, for in many ways, Oliver Ward is ourselves. In addition to what he represents of the recalcitrant in marriage, he also represents what we have been trying to do with our land and water. To see this, jump to the end of Oliver's long downward arc of having tried "to do something grand and humanly productive and be one of the builders of the West" (23). He has worked right up to the limits of his powers. And what has he wrought? The land is not much better for his having scratched at it. And there are also in his old age other signs of his hard living: he "put on weight and fell in love with flowers and learned to take his consolation from a lonely bottle [. . .]" (29). Behind lies his troubled presidency of "the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company." His grand scheme had been raising "the Arrow Rock Dam." It would have called for a lot of cement, fulfilling a dream. But Lyman, as a kind of "Connecticut Yankee who has foreknowledge of an eclipse," can see why his grandfather's career kept balking him (35):

As a practitioner of hindsight I know that Grandfather was trying to do, by personal initiative and with the financial resources of a small and struggling corporation, what only the
immense power of the federal government ultimately proved able to do. That does not mean he was foolish or mistaken. He was premature. His clock was set on pioneer time. He met trains that had not yet arrived, he waited on platforms that hadn’t yet been built, beside tracks that might never be laid. Like many another Western pioneer, he had heard the clock of history strike, and counted the strokes wrong. Hope was always out ahead of fact, possibility obscured the outlines of reality. (382)

This ambivalent note, or doubtful one, is the same with which Lyman began telling of his grandfather’s schemes. It has always that certain sideways glance that the “West would be in good part built and some think ruined by that cement” (192).

These lines are worth some of the last of our attention because they are more “little leakage[s] of conservationist, anti-development sentiment” that Stegner would not—evidently could not—leave out of his novels (Conversations 172). Even though he held such sentiments to be artistic mistakes, he let them into every one of his novels since “slipping up” the first time in A Shooting Star (1961), with so much of its talk of rapacious developers running amuck with bulldozers. Probably the best way to explain this difficulty is to return to Oates’ “resistance to nature” and to point out how closely it resembles Stegner’s aesthetic guide. He offered the Sierra Club some of its best leadership, yet at the same time, he was something of a purist in his novels. Although not perfect in applying this principle, he maintained that fiction should focus on “human relations, and human feelings, and human character, and not [on] things that you could join and get a card in” (Conversations 172). On the theme of conservation, he told Richard Etulain that “it’s a cause. It means joining, it means activism, and I don’t think fiction should really have proselytizing as its purpose” (172).
Times change, and the theme perhaps most emergent in Western American literature of late is of nature, and it does question our relation to a fragile earth. Insofar as we continue to threaten nature, our poets and philosophers are very apt to persist in writing about this theme instead of relegating it to politics, where Stegner thought it belonged. So if conservation is in this sense “a leak,” then, we will bear with it. On this point, Gary Snyder may have gotten off with the better part of the argument. But give Repose its due, because the story does obliquely show those relations that conservationists might take as the right ones with the natural world. Stegner demonstrated this when he set Oliver and Susan to building a house for themselves. They make what should seem a sensible, even an admirable, use of resources. Brimming over in enthusiasm for her work, Susan reports back to Thomas Hudson:

Have you ever built a house with your own hands, out of the materials that Nature left lying around? Everyone should have that experience once. It is the most satisfying experience I know. (390)

This instructive scene has started with Oliver and his crew hauling rock, load after load of it, to be dumped into forms for cement. He will make a better use of his cement—“that experiment [. . . ] in Santa Cruz has finally proved useful after all”—than using it to dam a river. And all the while, Susan has been making suggestions for the house with “the view of the wife.” Her delight is not only for the building itself. Her delight is for her home, because the building is bringing together “the tightest little society [. . . . a] Brook Farm without a social theory.” Its magnetism captures even Susan’s second child, the daughter, Betsy, who though still a pre-schooler, gamely throws her “pebbles” into the wooden forms standing ready for the cement (391). And for the architecture, Oliver lays out their “temple” with the classical “multiples of
seven,” which he has learned are “the proportions of the Parthenon!” Technology does not here overmaster nature. The technology serves architecture, which is simply a branch of art according to its best definition—an actual improvement upon nature.

From this equilibrium with nature, and in what we should think of as its subdivision, human nature, we have a novel to vie with the best in the canon of the West. That Repose should have made its steady way seems only right. But it had its share of troubles. One of the preposterous bits of Repose’s reception was The New York Times neglecting to review it. Incidentally, The Times later neglected to review The Spectator Bird (1976), Stegner’s National Book Award winner (1977). But this slight seemed hardly anything when Stegner would remember how John Leonard of The Times had broken his paper’s silence with a blast that Stegner’s Pulitzer was poorly awarded and that John Updike’s Rabbit Redux (1971) or Joyce Carol Oates’ fiction had been more deserving (47).

A quick comparison of Repose and Rabbit will not only review one of our more interesting literary fights, but the contrast may also predict what should be our sustained interest in Repose. Start with the admission that Rabbit is highly modernist and so would have been favored by the critical establishment once led by The Times. But Stegner would have come in on the debate, objecting that Rabbit is as anti-heroic as ever an effete, modernist corps could wish for. Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom is one who can be measured, first, by the redux in the title. Redux indicates that there is to be some further reduction of Rabbit, already a small enough character in a series of Updike’s novels. And transliterating Harry into “hairy rabbit” does nothing to flatter. Consider next that “Rabbit” is the nickname that has come from Harry’s never having had enough of an upper lip to cover his teeth. He has one of nature’s most unlovely grins—a rabbit’s. And factor in that the name Angstrom suggests not so much a Swedish heritage but the
physicists' unit of length for one hundred-millionth of a centimeter. Some leading man—Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is the shortest and softest of stuff, much the inferior of a Lyman Ward. Angstrom might have readily satisfied those who were defining many of the tastes of the early 1970s. But Stegner would have had to wonder why anyone would go to all the trouble of a novel whose leading figure looked no bigger than the average kid on the street. It made no sense to Stegner, who wrote in hopes of enlarging the imagination, not of dampening it. Stegner offered Repose to those who would make marriage work, even in modern times. And Stegner's hopes were also for those suffering. To read Repose with any success at all is to ask about our chances of suffering with humor, and even with something approaching grace. Repose is affirmative fiction of a much different sort from Rabbit, and the question should be, as we enter this new millennium, which kind of fiction is going to do us the greater good?

A second critical mishap that Repose has weathered is a "source" study by Mary Ellen Williams Walsh (1982). Actually, this episode in the criticism is as surprising as anything back in the novel's reception. The crux of Walsh's argument is that Stegner "borrowed" too freely from the life and the letters of Mary Hallock Foote. Hers was the material from which Stegner drew his story. Foote had been an illustrator and a writer who had lived all over the West, following her husband from one mining project to another. Stegner had gotten onto Foote while preparing to write a chapter for the Literary History of the United States (Conversations 85). He liked what he saw in Foote and included some of her local-color sketches in the classes he offered at Stanford.

Stegner might have had nothing further to do with Foote, except one of his graduate students, George McMurray, came in with a project (Conversations 83). McMurray had gotten access to Foote's private letters and unpublished papers, but finally, giving up on
the alchemy of working them into a dissertation, he let Stegner look them over. Tempted by their richness, Stegner wondered, first, about a biography, but then, about a novel. What tipped him toward the fiction, he explained, was that Foote’s life told the same story of “the boomer husband and the nesting wife” with which he had had so much success in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943). He could work that same familiar vein, but perhaps more satisfyingly, because Foote’s letters played out the story “on a much higher social level,” where after years of study Stegner had climbed, himself. So, in due course, it came time for him to acknowledge *Repose*’s source:

My thanks to J. M. [Janet Micoleau, a granddaughter of Foote] and her sister [Marian Conway] for the loan of their ancestors. Though I have used many details of their lives and characters, I have not hesitated to warp both personalities and events to fictional needs. This is a novel which utilizes selected facts from their real lives. It is in no sense a family history. (v)

Stegner thought nothing was amiss in that acknowledgment. His use of the initials “J. M.” was at Micoleau’s request, to discourage too many precise equations between her family and the novel (*Conversations* 86-87). Stegner said, furthermore, that he had invited Micoleau to review his manuscript. But she had declined, saying she was busy elsewhere; and besides, she understood that he was writing fiction and she would be comfortable with it.

But what might Micoleau (or others of the family) have wanted had she looked over Stegner’s draft? She would likely have had him change more of the names in the extended cast of characters. While Susan and Oliver Ward are made-up names for Mary and for Arthur Foote, many of the other characters have names right out of Foote’s family. Stegner seems to have worked a little bit
carelessly on this point, and by Walsh’s report, Marian Conway and others of the family had been hurt when gauche neighbors puzzled connections together and broached things like: “I never knew your grandmother did that” (208).

Such superficial levels of reading have always been trouble for those willing to hazard the roman à clef, the novel in which real persons make some appearance. Probably there always will be those who fail to read this kind of fiction, much as there were once others of a puritanical bent who went around frightened of the “brain fevers” to come from fiction. But this apology notwithstanding, Stegner could have done a better job of keeping out of difficulty. It does not seem quite enough for him to have said that he treated Foote’s papers as “raw material, [the] broken rocks out of which I could make any kind of wall I wanted” (Conversations 87). Considering how easily he could have changed all of the names, it is surprising, frankly, that he did not.

Another of Walsh’s charges is that Stegner “borrowed” too much of Foote’s language. The bulk of Walsh’s “source study” is a detailed comparison/contrast, pointing out where Stegner had not sufficiently “re-created” Foote’s lines. The allegation is that credit for the creativity must go back to Foote and can be none of Stegner’s (186). And, plainly, some of the examples of this “borrow[ing]” do show Stegner working alarmingly close to Foote. There is one instance of Oliver’s introducing himself to Susan and explaining, “I have no Beecher blood” (40)—in a reference to the family of Harriet Beecher Stowe, famous for Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). Foote once had occasion to write the same line. Her husband, Arthur, had explained similarly of himself, “I have no Beecher blood” (Walsh 189).

This use of Foote’s writing does raise questions. What is it to respect sources? And what of creative license? In this case, an answer is that Stegner pushed the limits a time or two. He may even
have trespassed those same few times. This is another of those hard judgments we have to make of his work, but he may have reached too far because he recognized his limitations. A rightness or an authenticity of dialogue demands a certain ventriloquism. Stegner could speak out of the mouth of almost any mature man and sound one hundred percent right. But Stegner was not one who could speak out of the mouths of a great variety of women. It seems to have been hard enough for him to have created his contemporary women. He had been disappointed, perhaps most of all, by Sabrina Castro of A Shooting Star (1961), who turned out, in Stegner’s own view of her, a little too “soap-operish” (Conversations 73). He had merely been trying for one who would look “attractive, intelligent, advantaged [. . . and] educated beyond anything [she was] allowed to do in the world.” But no matter how softly he drew her lines, she kept tearing her passions “to tatters.”

So one of Stegner’s solutions was to do his most serious drawing of women while they were in their sick beds, usually with cancer, where some stress in their voices would not matter so much. This was his successful formula for Marian Catlin of All the Little Live Things (1967) and for Charity Lang of Crossing to Safety (1987). But he had no such recourse in Repose, and we can only guess at the mimetic headaches of his trying to draw women of the nineteenth century. So, when it came to Susan’s intimate letters, was it Stegner’s good sense to have taken his lead from Foote’s letters, even at the risk of stepping over a line? And should this problem be as large as Walsh would make it, when the epistolary part of Repose counts for no more than about ten percent of its whole? The way out of this conundrum was once suggested to me by one who had been a teacher and then became a colleague. My friend’s initial take on Repose’s apparent triumph of verisimilitude was that Stegner had to be the greatest novelist ever. But learning of Foote’s letters, my friend’s enthusiasm cooled to where he would
say *Repose* is a great novel, period. That downward adjustment seems both accurate and fair.

Finally, a third point of Walsh’s, which she deems “perhaps my most significant discovery,” is more like the weakest one in her campaign to bring “attention” to Foote’s work “for its own sake” (185, 208). This is the charge that the germ for Lyman Ward had to have come from Foote’s unpublished story “The Miniature” (185). This has a protagonist, who, much like Ward, is bound to a wheelchair, who also lives in a mining town of California, and who has caretakers resembling those at Zodiac Cottage. How coincidental could all these be? Walsh holds against coincidence, while Stegner’s claim was that he had never even seen Foote’s “Miniature” (*Conversations* 87).

This point of contention is probably long past resolving, pitting what “she says” against what “he says,” and—wouldn’t we know it?—no third parties saw anything. Stegner’s reputation seems to have been sterling. Walsh has been able to stand on some solid ground. The question comes down to what did Stegner read? This bedevils. And yet, had Stegner the details of “The Miniature” in the mix of his storytelling, as Walsh feels so sure he did, Lyman Ward is still Stegner’s intellectual property—and very fairly so. There is such an obvious and enormous psychic and spiritual kinship among Lyman Ward and Stegner’s other narrators, Joe Allston and Larry Morgan, that any similarity with “The Miniature” looks incidental, at most. The ink flowing in Ward’s, in Allston’s, and in Morgan’s veins makes of them bookish bloodbrothers, and they are manifestly Wallace Stegner’s best creations. Walsh must forfeit on this point, and over-all her ambitious (and somewhat obtundent) critique has found little purchase on *Repose*.

The novel seems everywhere else unchallenged as a classic of modern Western American literature, whose astonishing success has even led to something that looks decidedly un-Western—an
opera, sung to modish, atonal music. An unusual side note in the novel’s history was the San Francisco Opera taking *Repose* to its stage for what the Opera’s general director called the “Twin Bicentennials of the Nation and of the City of San Francisco” (*Angle of Repose* Playbill 1). The reproduction of the playbill (see facing page) should suggest the range of talent and taste of those who once took *Repose* as a worthy artistic medium. What other Western novel can boast of anything like this?

Stegner’s novel has become a lodestar of our literature in much the same fashion that Lyman Ward says his grandparents had to live, “making new out of old the way corals live their reef upward” (18). It has also had a powerful personal impact on its readers. To illustrate that latter point, I have two short, personal anecdotes with which to finish up. Although they furnish only the smallest parts of the basis for my view of *Repose*, these stories express the kind of honest and unrehearsed responses in which I put quite a lot of trust. First, I was recently at a conference of the Western Literature Association and chanced to overhear two professors. They touched on their affections for *Repose* and on their successes in frequently teaching it. The occasion for this exchange was their browsing over the conference’s book exhibits, whose offerings of Stegner brought their experiences with *Repose* quite happily to the surface. Their few spontaneous words of appreciation show the power of a late twentieth-century novel capable of inspiring something besides cynicism.

My other story comes from last winter having led a discussion of *Repose* under the auspices of the Utah Humanities Council. This has been a program in our county’s branch libraries. The meeting on *Repose* was one of the bigger ones, as I was told. My townsmen spent an evening over what they, too, saw as Stegner’s best. And I was moved by listening to those people testify about a book that gave such a valuable sense of precedence. They found that *Angle*
of Repose anticipated not only their marital challenges, but also the larger aspects of the lives we are all making here in the West.

ANGLE OF REPOSE

World Premiere
November 1976
San Francisco Opera

Andrew Imbrie, Composer
Oakley Hall, Librettist
Wallace Stegner, Author
John Mauceri, Conductor
Gerald Freedman, Director
Douglas W. Schmidt, Scenic Designer
Selected Bibliography

Works by Wallace Stegner

Stegner, Wallace, and Richard W. Etulain. Conversations with Wallace
   Stegner on Western History and Literature. Rev. ed. Salt Lake City: U
   (First published with the title The Preacher and the Slave).
This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers. Boulder, CO:
Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in
Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier.
Interviews


Other Sources


Hepworth, James R. “Wallace Stegner, the Quiet Revolutionary.” Rankin 17-26.


*South Dakota Review*. Special Wallace Stegner Issue. 23 (Winter 1985).
Walsh, Mary Ellen Williams. “Angle of Repose and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study.” *Arthur* 184-209.
Western Writers Series

(list continued from outside of back cover)

97. JACK SPICER by Edward Halsey Foster
98. JEANNE WILLIAMS by Judy Alter
99. JAMES D. HOUSTON by Jonah Raskin
100. CAROL RYRIE BRINK by Mary E. Reed
101. ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABAÑA DE VACA by Peter Wild
102. LAWRENCE CLARK POWELL by Gerald Haslam
103. WINSTON M. ESTES by Bob J. Frye
104. BESS STREETER ALDRICH by Abigail Ann Martin
105. WILLIAM HUMPHREY by Mark Royden Winchell
106. PETER WILD by Edward Butscher
107. NORMAN MACLEAN by Ron McFarland
108. PEGGY POND CHURCH by Shelley Armitage
109. WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE by Diane Dufva Quantic
110. ISHMAEL REED by Jay Boyer
111. ANN ZWINGER by Peter Wild
112. LAURA INGALLS WILDER by Fred Erisman
113. REX BEACH by Abe C. Ravitz
114. JOHN WESLEY POWELL by James M. Aton
115. HAROLD BELL WRIGHT by Lawrence V. Tagg
116. CAROLINE LOCKHART by Norris Yates
117. MARK MEDOFF by Rudolf Erben
118. JANE GILMORE RUSHING by Lou H. Rodenberger
119. THOMAS AND ELIZABETH SAVAGE by Sue Hart
120. TESS GALLAGHER by Ron McFarland
121. THEODORE STRONG VAN DYKE by Peter Wild
122. RONALD JOHNSON by Dirk Stratton
123. GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL by Robley Evans
124. RICHARD RONAN by Jan VanStavern
125. JANET CAMPBELL HALE by Frederick Hale
126. FRANK BERGON by Gregory L. Morris
127. BERNARD DE VOTO by Russell Burrows
128. PHOTO AND WORD by David Robertson
129. LAURA JENSEN by Dina Ben-Lev
130. GARRETT HONGO by Laurie Filipelli
131. ALBERTO RÍOS by Peter Wild
132. VERN RUTSALA by Erik Muller
133. JOY HARJO by Rhonda Pettit
134. RICK BASS by O. Alan Weltzien
135. READING RICHARD BRAUTIGAN'S TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA by Joseph Mills
136. DAN DE QUÊLLE by Lawrence L. Berkove
137. READING WILLA CATHER'S THE SONG OF THE LARK by Evelyn Funda
138. DESERT LITERATURE: THE MIDDLE PERIOD -- J. SMEATON CHASE, EDNA BRUSH PERKINS, AND EDWIN CORLE by Peter Wild
139. READING CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BLOOD MERIDIAN by James Bowers
140. IVAN DOIG by A. Carl Bredahl
141. NARROW WAY TO NEARBY by David Robertson
142. READING GARY SNYDER'S MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WITHOUT END by Eric Todd Smith
143. DANA GIOIA by April Lindner
144. DESERT LITERATURE: THE MODERN PERIOD by Peter Wild
145. READING A.B. GUTHRIE'S THE BIG SKY by Fred Erisman
146. DESERT LITERATURE: THE EARLY PERIOD by Peter Wild
147. READING WALLACE STEGNER'S ANGLE OF REPOSE by Russell Burrows
148. URSULA K. LE GUIN by Heinz Tschachler
149. NEW FORMALIST POETS OF THE AMERICAN WEST by April Lindner
150. GRETEL EHRlich by Gregory L. Morris

Please send orders to: WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

Phone: (208) 426-1190
Fax: (208) 426-4373
E-mail: wws@boisestate.edu

http://english.boisestate.edu/westernwriters

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
BOISE, IDAHO 83725
Western Writers Series

This continuing series provides brief but authoritative introductions to the lives and works of authors who have written significant literature about the American West. Our attractive fifty-page pamphlets are useful to the general reader as well as to teachers and students. The following titles are currently in print.

3. JOHN MUIR by Thomas J. Lyon
4. WALLACE STEGNER by Merrill and Lorene Lewis
5. BRETT HARTE by Patrick Morrow
8. WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK by L. L. Lee
11. H. L. DAVIS by Robert Bain
13. FREDERICK MANFRED by Joseph M. Flora
14. WASHINGTON IRVING: THE WESTERN WORKS by Richard Cracroft
15. GEORGE FREDERICK RUXTON by Neal Lambert
16. FREDERIC REMINGTON by Fred Erisman
17. ZANE GREY by Ann Ronald
18. STEWART EDWARD WHITE by Judy Alter
19. ROBINSON JEFFERS by Robert J. Brophy
20. JACK SCHAFFER by Gerald Haslam
21. EDWARD F. RICKETTS by Richard Astro
22. BILL NYE by David K. Kesterson
23. GERTRUDE ADHERTON by Charlotte S. McClure
24. HAMLIN GARLAND: THE FAR WEST by Richard F. Gish
25. JOHN G. NEIHARDT by Lucile F. Aly
26. E. W. HOWE by Martin Buczk
27. GEORGE CATLIN by Joseph R. Millichap
28. JOSIAH GREGG AND LEWIS H. GARRARD by Edward Halsey Foster
29. EDWARD ABBEY by Garth McCann
30. CHARLES WARREN STODDARD by Robert L. Gale
31. VIRGINIA SORENSEN by L. L. and Sylvia Lee
32. ALFRED HENRY LEWIS by Abe C. Ravitz
33. CHARLES ALEXANDER EASTMAN by Marion W. Copeland
34. RUTH SUCKOW by Abigail Ann Hamblen
35. DON BERRY by Glen A. Love
36. GARY SNYDER by Bert Almon
40. C. L. SONNICHSEN by Joyce Gibson Roach
41. JANET LEWIS by Charles L. Crow
42. TOM ROBBINS by Mark Siegel
43. JOAQUIN MILLER by Benjamin S. Lawson
44. DOROTHY JOHNSON by Judy Alter
45. LESLIE MARMON SILKÖ by Per Seyersted
46. GEORGE R. STEWART by John Caldwell
47. SCANDINAVIAN IMMIGRANT LITERATURE by Christer Lennart Mossberg
48. CLARENCE KING by Peter Wild
49. BENJAMIN CAPPS by Ernest B. Speck
51. HORACE MCCoy by Mark Royden Winchell
52. WILL HENRY/CLAY FISHER by Robert L. Gale
53. MABEL DODGE LUHAN by Jane V. Nelson
56. STRUTHERS BURT by Raymond C. Phillips, Jr.
57. JAMES WELCH by Peter Wild
58. PRESTON JONES by Mark Busby
59. RICHARD HUGO by Donna Gerstenberger
60. SOPHUS K. WINther by Barbara Howard Meldrum
63. MARI SANDOZ by Helen Winter Stauffer
64. BARRY LOPEZ by Peter Wild
65. WILLIAM EVERSON by Lee Bartlett
68. JOHN HAINES by Peter Wild
70. ROBERT CANTWELL by Merrill Lewis
71. CHARLES SEALESFIELD by Walter Grünzweig
72. WILLIAM STAFFORD by David A. Carpenter
73. ELMER KELTON by Lawrence Clayton
74. SIMON ORTIZ by Andrew Wigen
75. JOHN NICHOLS by Peter Wild
76. JOHN GREGORY DUNNE by Mark Royden Winchell
77. GERALD HASLAM by Gerald Locklin
78. HELEN HUNT JACKSON by Rosemary Whitaker
79. RICHARD BRAUTIGAN by Jay Boyer
80. OLE RØVAAG by Ann Moseley
81. LANFORD WILSON by Mark Busby
82. JOHN C. VAN DYKE: THE DESERT by Peter Wild
83. D'ARCY MCKINCKLE by James Ruppert
84. KENNETH REXROTH by Lee Bartlett
85. EDWARD DORN by William McPherson
86. ERNEST HAYCOX by Richard W. Etulain
87. TONY HILLERMAN by Fred Erisman
88. DAVID WAGONER by Ron McFarland
89. JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH by Paul N. Pavich
90. DAVID HENRY HWANG by Douglas Street
91. JOHN GRAVES by Dorys Crow Grover
92. MATT BRAUN by Robert L. Gale
93. GEORGE WHARTON JAMES by Peter Wild
95. DEE BROWN by Lyman B. Hagen
96. PAULA GUNN ALLEN by Elizabeth L. Hanson

(list continued on inside of back cover)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
BOISE, IDAHO 83725