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HISTORY AND NATURE

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GREAT PLAINS IN THE WORK OF SHARON BUTALA AND WALLACE STEGNER

WALTER ISLE

When he was five, Wallace Stegner's family moved to a small town and to a homestead on the Great Plains, in the extreme southwestern corner of Saskatchewan just above the Montana border, where they lived for six years before drought and crop failures forced them to move on. Sharon Butala moved to a ranch and farm in the same short-grass prairie country in 1976 when she was thirty-six years old and newly married to Peter Butala, a rancher native to the place. Both Stegner and Butala went on to write about this land, and their representations manifest very different attitudes toward the Great Plains. Curiously

enough, Wallace Stegner seems less engaged with the natural world, at least in comparison with Sharon Butala and in the specific context of the Great Plains, than we might have expected. A closer look at their respective works will provide a fuller sense why this is so and of the complex differences between the two writers.

In general, Stegner's experience is past and was formative. He places his childhood experience in the context of his later historical understanding of the region and represents it in the recovery of personal memory, the recounting of the history of a place, and in his fiction. In contrast, Sharon Butala's experience is a transformative, developing one that she describes in her ongoing life in the natural world of the prairie. It is at first "an apprenticeship in nature" and then a "life in nature" (to echo the subtitles of her two works of non-fiction, *The Perfection of the Morning* and *Coyote's Morning Cry*)¹ which she represents in personal essay and in fiction. She sees her life in the immediate and local context of the natural world, of the prairie and the flora and fauna on it, and she finds transcendent meanings in that world. Stegner, on the other hand,

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sees his life in the context of history, of what he calls the last Plains frontier and of the settlers' myth of the garden West, and for Stegner any transcendent meaning resides in history. We see Wallace Stegner finally as the cultured writer and historian who grew out of the "sensuous little savage"² of his childhood, while Sharon Butala appears as the rural woman writer in daily contact with the natural world of the prairie.

Wolf Willow is Wallace Stegner's account of six years in his childhood and the history of the place where he spent them. Stegner also recreates some aspects of the prairie experience in *On a Darkling Plain* (1940) and of his childhood in a section of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) and in several short stories.³ The child's world revisited in *Wolf Willow* is framed by Stegner's account of a visit as a "middle-aged pilgrim" (WW, 5) back to the town he calls Whitemud (Eastend, Saskatchewan, in actuality). At the beginning of that visit he describes a walk around the town during which he tries to recover his past, to make memory become real. That happens only in a moment of sensory experience when he encounters "the tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell" (WW, 18) of the bush wolf willow. In this Proustian moment he connects directly with his past, "reality is made exactly equivalent with memory," and Stegner recognizes that "the sensuous little savage I once was is still intact inside me" (WW, 19). Stegner has said that he has "tyrannous sense of place" (*Stories*, ix), and it is from early experience of the land "submitted to with all the senses" (WW, 8) that his sense of place develops, to be modified later by a sense of history. This direct contact with the natural world through the senses is one pole of *Wolf Willow*. As Stegner says, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. . . . I am a product of the earth" (WW, 23).

The child's contact with the natural world, however, is not always pure and innocent. In his novel *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and also in a short story, "Buglesong" (*Stories*, 13-20), the fictional character modeled on the

young Stegner traps gophers to protect the crops, feeds some of them live to a weasel⁴ he's also caught and caged, and collects the tails of the ones he's killed for a bounty. In *Wolf Willow* Stegner describes this as "an idyl of miniature savagery, small humans against rodents" (WW, 275). He kills seemingly without emotion, although at the same time he is vividly aware of "the small things [that] took the senses. He knew the way the grass grew curling over the lip of a burnout, and how the prairie owls nested under those grassy lips" (*Mountain*, 183). Some of his strongest emotions, however, come from his reading, from his lively imagination, rather than from the prairie world around him. The contrasts are clear when "the enchanted forests of his mind" in which he loses himself while reading an anthology of poetry are broken into by "the sudden metallic clash" of a gopher trap (*Mountain*, 190).

His childhood of "wild freedom, a closeness to earth and weather, a familiarity with both tame and wild animals" (WW, 29) is one part of the world Stegner evokes, and intimacy with that world includes a deep awareness of the harshness of life on the plains. The weather is "violent and prolonged," the emptiness is "almost frighteningly total," and the wind "blows all the time" (WW, 3). The severity of weather is central to the long story "Genesis" in *Wolf Willow*, which vividly portrays herding cattle in a blizzard, and in the companion story "Carion Spring," which gives the full sensory experience of a landscape littered with dead cattle when the spring thaw comes. John Daniel calls these stories "one of the great acts of knowing in the American literature of place."⁵ In a broader context, the plains often seem to Stegner "one of the most desolate and forbidding regions on earth" (WW, 6) and can be overwhelming. For Stegner, the immense space and the limitless horizon have two effects: to diminish man to insignificance or conversely to mark him out as singular. The second comes through sensory awareness and a sense of individual presence as we have seen, but the first is one of the dominant notes of the last parts

of *Wolf Willow* when Stegner considers the "horizontal world" of the prairie homestead.

It is at this point that Stegner's sense of history complicates his memory of his childhood. There are abandoned homesteads all over the Great Plains. Small farms fail, burned out by drought. The Stegners, for example, were burned out by a drought that lasted from about 1917 to 1920 on the northern plains.⁶ The city and culture also attract younger generations away from the country because the plains are such a hard place from which to make a living. For Stegner the homestead ended as it began—nothing but "empty space, grass and sky" (WW, 268). "That was a wind, and that was a country, that hated a foreign and vertical thing" (WW, 271); and a sense of the place that includes "searing wind, scorching sky, tormented and heat-warped light, and not a tree" (WW, 278) in sight leads to the knowledge that his family should never have tried to farm on the dry plains. It is also significant that while Stegner revisits the town and the river that flows through it, he will not go back to look at the homestead. Even though they made paths on the earth for six years, he believes that those paths are gone, the marks of their life there have vanished, and he does not want to see the place that is not still marked with historical and personal traces. The paths may well not have vanished, of course; marks on the prairies remain evident for many years, even generations, but Stegner's reluctance to return seems connected with his sense that the river and town represent safety while the prairie is exposure.⁷ In some sense the erasure of those paths is Stegner's own—a refusal even to prompt his senses and memory with a return visit. For Stegner, even though he has been formed by that place, and much of his "remembering senses is imprisoned there where I would not for a thousand dollars an hour return to live" (WW, 277), the plains were "as good a place to be a boy and as unsatisfying a place to be a man as one could well imagine" (WW, 306). A place that "hates" the vertical figure who feels "imprisoned" is bound always to be "unsatisfying" and man will feel alien.

Another limit to life on the plains that Stegner notes is that in his childhood he had no sense whatsoever of the history of the place in which he was living: "the world when I began to know it had neither time, geography, nor history" (WW, 28-29). As he has later in life learned the history of the land of his childhood, he has understood it as one part of the history of the continent as Euro-Americans moved westward over the land—the moving frontier, manifest destiny, the American vision. Stegner sees the homestead period on the plains as a final episode in the westward movement of the frontier when the settlers were forced to see that the possibility of a garden in the West was really only a myth. Almost a third of *Wolf Willow* is devoted to this historical account, and Stegner's attention to the fixed past tends to reinforce the enclosing of his childhood experience in memory and the context of history. Stegner is content to remember childhood plains life and its sensuous pleasures, but that time and that land are closed to him; he has no desire to return. His historical imagination marks the boundaries of his representation of the Great Plains. His childhood in that place formed him, but it is a closed episode in his life. As he says, he is *from* there, and that experience helped form the adult writer and historian.

In her short story "The Prize," Sharon Butala invokes the spirit of Wallace Stegner when the protagonist, a young writer, moves into a house in a small prairie town that an American writer had lived in during his childhood.⁸ Stegner's spirit hangs over the story as the young writer gradually discovers he cannot continue his novel based on his life in the city but must respond to this new place he is in "with nothing but hills and wind for company."⁹ That realization parallels Sharon Butala's own experience. The young writer's initial sense of alienation from the new place and his feelings of isolation are ones she describes in her own life as she recounts her struggles to adjust to her new life and new place. The presence of the earlier writer's spirit, however, remains linked with the town and

the area in general, while Butala's life is rural and tied specifically to the natural world of the prairie. In this way Butala seems to distance herself from Stegner and his representation of the country she is coming into. Sharon Butala represents the Great Plains in two non-fiction volumes, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* and *Coyote's Morning Cry: Meditations and Dreams from a Life in Nature*, and in a loosely related trilogy of novels set on the plains: *The Gates of Heaven*, *Luna*, and *The Fourth Archangel*.¹⁰

Sharon Butala's new life begins when she comes to the ranch her husband, Peter Butala, has lived on all his life. The natural world of prairie and ranch life is all around her every day, and Butala's story is one of learning the place she finds herself in and gradually becoming a native to that place. Coming into the country, she "used to wait for that first moment when I neared the ranch, when the country seemed to open up, and I saw again the wide fields of native grass cured, very quickly even after that wet, green spring, to a pale yellow by the sun, . . . for with that sight . . . my urban concerns fell away from me. It was as if in that magnificent spread of pure light across grassy miles I could breathe freely for the first time since childhood" (*Perfection*, 11). She becomes immersed in nature and later says, "the nearness of Nature, the way it grew into my life until I could no longer make a clear separation between it and myself, so that I saw the whole world differently, is the ground on which I rest my writings and life" (*Coyote*, 2). The alignment or congruence with nature comes as she realizes "how life for all of us in the West is informed and shaped by Nature in ways we don't even realize" (*Perfection*, xiii)—an awareness that we have seen in Stegner, but one that is much less limiting for Butala. Butala's West of Nature is not bound as Stegner's seems often to be by a historical conception of "the Last Plains Frontier;" her focus is on an ongoing present.

Her daily walks out onto the prairie and her learning the details of ranch life lead to her transformation from alien to native. She

also learns from her husband, who is truly native to the place. During one of her walks she looks down from the crest of a hill and sees Peter's horse and the cattle, and Peter lying on the ground asleep in the midst of his animals. She is very moved and only gradually understands that from this vision she can learn how to think about and how to live in this new world. What she has seen is a man completely at peace in his place in the natural world, a man who is horizontal on the prairie, an intimate part of it, and not the lone vertical, isolated figure described by Wallace Stegner.¹¹ Sharon Butala comes to understand that Peter is the "true rural man" (a term that could never be used to describe Wallace Stegner). "He understands the world in terms of wild things" (*Perfection*, 76).

For Butala "wild things" come to include plants and animals and the whole shape of her Great Plains world. She learns what a life in nature teaches one about being in the landscape. The prairie "seeps into one" and she becomes "knowledgeable about the history of the area and its plant and animal life," in some ways a more inclusive history than Stegner's. She starts to feel "at home in the terrain, at home in the landscape" (*Perfection*, 86). And in a chapter entitled "The Subtlety of Land" Butala describes her gradual realization that, like Peter, she is being shaped by the land, by nature in myriad subtle ways and that through this adaptation she herself can become native to this place. At one point she says, "this land makes Crees of us all." The Crees' culture developed "because it was the best fit between themselves and the land. And it was the *land* that taught them that" (*Perfection*, 87). Again, the note is one of alignment, of a congruence that has come about through opening oneself to and responding to the natural world. Learning the history of her place is also part of becoming native, but for Butala that history is often more the history of Native peoples in the area than the history of Anglo-European settlement. She studies petroglyphs and tries to understand ceremonial stone circles she finds on the land. The "last frontier" that

Stegner was so aware of is in some ways erased by Butala's efforts to link her place on the land with that of the earliest peoples.¹²

Sharon Butala is, however, not blind to a history that includes the ways in which man has tried to shape the land rather than respect its natural forms. A major theme in both *The Gates of the Sun* and *The Fourth Archangel* is the irreversible change that farming brings to the prairie. Once the sod is broken it will be years before the land can be returned to its original state, if it ever can. Those paths and marks on the land that Stegner thought had vanished will be there for generations, even if the farmhouses and fences themselves are gone. At the beginning of *The Gates of the Sun*, the young protagonist, Andrew Samson, a son of the original homesteader, looks out over the plains and sees "the greening prairie turned for a few rounds in long, brown furrows" and his irritation rises "because they spoiled the look of things" (*Gates*, 7). Years later, near the end of his life, he will break with his son who turns his part of the ranch into farmland. At the end of his life Andrew Samson leaves his land "to the Wildlife people" rather than to his son, even though he thinks that they probably can't "hang on to it very long, but at least it'll slow them tractors up some" (270). And in *The Fourth Archangel*, as all the farms begin to fail and people are driven off the land, a young farmer and his wife wonder about the fate of the land. The wife suggests it will "go back to the wild—be full of animals and the grass will grow again." But her husband can't imagine "farmland turned into so much . . . scenery." She replies, "That must be the exact reverse of what the first ranchers said . . . all this scenery turning into farmland" (*Archangel*, 287). Significantly prairie restoration is an important theme in Sharon Butala's newest novel, *The Garden of Eden*.¹³

Sharon Butala, however, often goes beyond what is basically a realistic portrayal of the consequences of man's use of the plains. In *The Fourth Archangel* there are two scenes that follow the one described above. In one the young scholar Neil despairs of ever finding

the native grasslands he has envisioned and come to this place in search of; nature is change and return is not possible. In the final scene, though, the young artist Amy Sparrow relinquishes thoughts of art galleries and theatres "for the sky, for the sweet, hot smell of the earth in the spring . . . for the distant, eerie melody of the coyotes as they sang their ancient, wild song of the prairie" (295), and her choice of nature over culture is the opposite of that implicitly suggested by Wallace Stegner (not least in his frequent references to his childhood self as a "young savage").

There is another element in Sharon Butala's work that counters her historically realistic, often pessimistic assessment of life on the prairie and the fate of the plains. Wallace Stegner notes early in *Wolf Willow* that the prairie is "a country to breed mystical people" (8), a remark that Sharon Butala echoes in *The Perfection of the Morning* when she says that "the Great Plains are a land for visionaries" (88).¹⁴ Visionary experiences are prominent in her novels as well as in her memoirs, and they provide an opening out of sensory experience through dreams or transcendent encounters with the natural world. She describes "numinous experiences" walking on the prairie, experiences during which she reaches "the place where words stop" (*Perfection*, 55), moments of mystical awareness that are difficult to describe. For example, at the end of *The Gates of the Sun*, an aging Andrew Samson encounters a painter out on the prairie who is painting the land as it originally was—native grassland and animals. When the painter shows Samson his pictures, Butala expands on individual pictures to a conflation beyond realism that incorporates a vision of the whole of the natural world and of Andrew's full life in that world, a "painting" that contains

The prairie in winter, in the summer, in fall and the spring. All the animals: badger, skunk, rabbit, snake, weasel, gopher, fox, antelope, deer, porcupine, coyote, bobcat, lynx; the birds: swallow, sparrow, crow, burrowing owl, great horned owl, snowy

owl, Swainson's hawk, nighthawk, magpie, vulture, great blue heron, blackbird, sage hen, prairie chicken, partridge, meadow-lark, horned lark, golden eagle; the plants: spear grass, needle and thread grass, blue grama grass, June grass, blue joint grass, winter fat, vetches, greasewood, buckbrush, sagebrush, cactus, buffalo beans, club moss, locoweed, death camas, lichen. (274)

Although the paintings are "sharply delineated," for Samson the visionary moment is filled by an extraordinary light and an overwhelming recognition of perfection and beauty in the natural world. Sharon Butala recounts such visionary experiences to convey the fullness of her own experience of the natural world. It is integral to her experience of nature that "the earth becomes more beautiful, approaches, even achieves, perfection, and everything in it and on it is imbued with meaning" (*Perfection*, 91), and that meaning is often transcendent in character. The perfection she finds is echoed in the title of her memoir, *The Perfection of the Morning*, and transcendent meanings are at the center of the meditations in *Coyote's Morning Cry*. That title itself echoes the image in Amy Sparrow's vision of coyotes' songs at the end of *The Fourth Archangel* and reinforces the suggestion of morning as the stage for new life.

Sharon Butala's "new life" is unlike that of the young Wallace Stegner. Stegner describes himself as an "incorrigible realist"¹⁵ and "a sensuous little savage," and neither would be very open to the visionary. It is at this point that the difference between the male writer and the female perhaps becomes most emphatic. Butala in her essay on Stegner, "The Night Wallace Stegner Died," describes the West Stegner created as a "man's West" characterized by the "lack of understanding about women and their place in the world" in the times he is remembering, although there are passages late in *Wolf Willow* that directly address the plight of women in that culture.¹⁶ At the same time, she finds in a few of his short stories "a feminine sensibility" that is "explicit,

detailed, passionate" ("Night," 24). Even so, for the most part the voice in *Wolf Willow* is a dominant, masculine one, the voice of history and culture that only at times, as in describing the evocative scent of wolf willow, approaches something immanent or transcendent, and finds that only in the way memory can transcend time. Butala's essay on Stegner ends with a scene that Stegner could not have comprehended. On the "night" of the title a "wide awake" Butala was "visited" by Wallace Stegner's spirit, a literal presence that brought her a sense of "the distilled essence of the man" ("Night," 25). Such an experience is certainly unusual, but the visionary character of it is perhaps more feminine than masculine.¹⁷ Such experiences open Butala to more dimensions of the natural prairie world than Stegner would accept, but Stegner had sensed that possibility when he recognized that that land might "breed mystical people."

The subtitles of her two nonfiction books, *An Apprenticeship in Nature* and *Meditations and Dreams from a Life in Nature*, and the progression suggested from one to the next, also indicate how fully Sharon Butala's new life is shaped by her experiences in the natural world. Her direct and continuing response to the land around her, to the plants and animals of the natural world, has transformed her life, a transformation she has recorded in fiction and personal essay. In his childhood Wallace Stegner's identity was formed, not transformed, by his few years on the prairie. But that time exists only in memory and in the character of the writer it formed. It is a time limited by history, and a vision that is in some ways determined by a particularly American sense of history, of the fate of the plains, and of the end of the frontier. Wallace Stegner has a vivid sense of the severe limits of life on a dryland farm or in a small prairie town, as well as an awareness of the need for being bound to the earth. For him the myth of the garden in the West is historical determinant that shaped his family's life. Sharon Butala, however, while certainly aware of the forces of history, has a fuller sense of the possibilities of a life lived in the natural world

of the prairie. For her the garden, understood properly, is not a myth and her apprenticeship to nature transcends history. Stegner's and Butala's representations of the Great Plains make clear the differences between the two writers. Stegner is finally detached from the place where he lived, looking back on it as novelist and historian, but Sharon Butala has become the "true rural woman" who writes about her place out of an immersion in and attachment to nature.

NOTES

1. Sharon Butala, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995) and *Coyote's Morning Cry: Meditations and Dreams from a Life in Nature* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996).
2. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 19. Much commentary on Stegner's work concentrates on his fiction, his historical studies, and his environmental writings. A somewhat anomalous work like *Wolf Willow* has not been given as much attention. Useful discussions, however, can be found in John Daniel, "Wallace Stegner's Hunger for Wholeness" in *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision*, ed. Curt Meine (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), and in Rob Williams, "'Huts of Time': Wallace Stegner's Historical Legacy," Dick Harrison, "Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada," and William Bevis, "Stegner: The Civic Style," all in *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, ed. Charles E. Rankin (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).
3. Wallace Stegner, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), *On a Darkling Plain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), *The Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
4. Stegner later in life realizes that the "weasel" is actually a black-footed ferret, an increasingly rare species. See Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 8-9.
5. "Wallace Stegner's Hunger for Wholeness," (note 2 above), p. 36.
6. An interesting companion to *Wolf Willow* is Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1996), which chronicles similar experiences in those drought years and their consequences on the Great Plains in eastern Montana, south and east of the Stegner's Saskatchewan homestead.
7. Melody Graulich in "Ruminations on Stegner's Protective Impulse and the Art of Storytelling" expands on this contrast in Stegner's fiction (Meine, *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision* [note 2 above], pp. 43-59). Dick Harrison in "Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada" also comments on "the archetypes of freedom and sanctuary that formed a consistent polarity in Stegner's thinking about western experience throughout his life" (Meine, p. 182).
8. Sharon Butala has written about the effort to restore the Stegner home in Eastend in "Reclaiming a Citizen of the West," *NeWest Review* 14 (October-November 1988): 5-6. The house is now a retreat for writers and an arts center under the guidance of Butala; see her essay "The Night Wallace Stegner Died," *Brick* 46 (summer 1993): 21-24. See also Harrison, "Frontiers and Borders" (Rankin, *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer* [note 2 above], p. 184).
9. Butala, "The Prize," in *Fever* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 65.
10. *The Gates of Heaven* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1986), *Luna* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1988), *The Fourth Archangel* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992).
11. See above and Dick Harrison's comments in Rankin (note 2 above), p. 185.
12. See Harrison's "Frontiers and Borders" in Rankin (note 2 above) for a discussion of the differences between the Canadian and American conceptions of the history of the "frontier" and of the border.
13. Sharon Butala, *The Garden of Eden* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).
14. In an interesting discussion of *Wolf Willow* the Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch considers Stegner's comment and relates it to Butala, "The Cow in the Quicksand and How I(t) Got Out: Responding to Stegner's *Wolf Willow*," in *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1995), pp. 73-76.
15. Wallace Stegner and Richard Etulain, *Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature* (rev. ed.), (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996), p. xxviii.
16. See, for example, *Wolf Willow* (note 2 above), pp. 293-4, 304-5.
17. See Vera L. Norwood, "Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 323-50, and Williams, "Huts of Time," in Rankin, *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer* (note 2 above), pp. 132-33.