Angle of Repose: Mine and Thine

Abstract

In the composition of *Angle of Repose* (1971) Wallace Stegner drew heavily from the unpublished writings of Mary Hallock Foote (1847-1938)—a practice that shapes the novel in more ways than one. Stegner seems to have felt that the wholesale use of another's writings is legitimate provided that appropriated text is worked into something original. Hence the strenuous originality of this tale of a Quaker woman whose incongruous marriage, following a loveless engagement, leads to an illicit dalliance which in turn leads directly to the death of her child. Relating a series of events that exists nowhere but in the pages of the novel itself, the author demonstrates that he is not a borrower but a creator. In this case, however, an investment in singularity and the exploitation of what Stegner called "raw material" are two sides of the same coin. The new, and arguably strained, uses to which the author puts text appropriated from Mary Hallock Foote cannot erase the reality that it *was* appropriated.

Any Resemblance to Actual Persons, Living or Dead

Prefaced to Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* (1971) is the following gnomic statement:

> My thanks to J.M. and her sister 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.

The novel in question, one of exceptional richness, tells of the marriage of a 19th-century illustrator to a mining engineer whose failures commit them to an unsettled life in the American West and beyond. As the narrative tracks their journey of disappointment, the reader struggles to understand why a "cultural snob"[1] immutably rooted in the Northeast would choose to transplant herself in the first place to the other side of the continent for the sake of her ill-matched husband. The reader who learns the story of *Angle of Repose* itself comes to understand at least why this decision seems artificial.

It seems artificial because Stegner grafted it onto the material he took from the unpublished writings of Mary Hallock Foote (1847-1938) to create *Angle of Repose*. For an author concerned to represent the West as it was, the chronicle of *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* and the letters associated with it offered a rich source of factuality itself. Much of *Angle of Repose*, which is also a tale of a gentlewoman transposed to the West, is drawn from the chronicle, while many of the letters in this semi-epistolary novel excerpt or paraphrase Foote's. A defender of Stegner's practice calculates that about 10% (or 60 pages) of *Angle of Repose* consists of "letter quotation,"[2] but even if this were the extent of textual debt in *Angle of Repose*, which it isn't, it would clearly constitute an inordinate figure. (The defender argues that Stegner achieved authenticity by his practice of unmarked quotation, which makes one wonder why more of it wouldn't have been even better.) Mary Hallock Foote herself appears in the guise of Susan Burling Ward,

[1] *Angle of Repose* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 13.

[2] Introduction by Jackson Benson to *Angle of Repose*, p. xxv.

the central figure of *Angle of Repose*, now married to a man about whom she always harbors a degree of misgiving. This striking yet subtle twist introduced by Stegner for reasons of drama into material appropriated from Mary Hallock Foote cannot erase the reality that it *was* appropriated.

The irregularity of Stegner's practice in *Angle of Repose* seems to have exercised the minds of the lawyers for Random House. The disclaimer on the copyright page of my edition of the novel reads:

> This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

With the addition of the middle sentence, the standard defense of fiction becomes involved, equivocal and confusing. How exactly can a resemblance be coincidental if the author has "used" an original for his own purposes? Is *Angle of Repose* the product of a thousand coincidences? The truth is that of the myriad close resemblances of *Angle of Repose* to its sources in point of phrasing, "events," "locales," not one is coincidental. An actual coincidence is the award of a Pulitzer Prize to *Angle of Repose* in the same year that saw the publication of Mary Hallock Foote's reminiscences—1972.

The story behind *Angle of Repose* is a matter of record. After discovering the unpublished letters of the author and illustrator Mary Hallock Foote (1847-1938), Stegner sought permission from her granddaughter Janet Micoleau to use them for a novel**,** albeit

with an explicit assurance that he would not quote directly.[3] Permission was given. (Some time later Stegner managed to read Mary Hallock Foote's unpublished reminiscences, the other principal source of *Angle of Repose*.) Assuming that Janet Micoleau had no objection to the transcription of passages from letters into *Angle of Repose* despite Stegner's assurance to the contrary, her approval still wouldn't clear Stegner of the charge of plagiarism, a judgment that rests with readers, not parties with reasons of their own for waiving the usual rules and norms of authorship. Moreover, Stegner seems not to have informed Janet Micoleau of his intention to portray Susan Burling Ward (that is, Mary Hallock Foote) as a disaffected wife, possibly an adulteress, responsible for the death of her five-year-old child. That he invented.

The extent of Stegner's debt to Mary Hallock Foote was documented in painful detail by Mary Ellen Williams Walsh in 1982. In a lengthy article which is all business, Walsh itemized Stegner's takings, from specific phrases to characters, settings, incidents, letters. The "selected facts" mentioned by Stegner in his acknowledgement turn out to be not a handful but a cartload. When even stray remarks in Stegner's source appear in *Angle of Repose*—such as a quotation from Confucius or an apology from an offstage Henry James for not appearing at a dinner party, both tangential, both cited by Walsh—we know that something more than occasional borrowing is at work. *Angle of Repose* is above all the chronicle of Susan Burling Ward, and "the outline and most of the major events and

[3] In 1967 Stegner wrote to Janet Micoleau: "Since it would involve no recognizable characterizations and no quotations direct from the letters I assume this sort of book is more or less open to me." Susan Salter Reynolds, "Tangle of Repose," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2003.

scenes" of her story derive from the writings of Mary Hallock Foote.[4] Just as important, Walsh called into question the use of all this wealth to portray Susan Ward as "an adulteress" whose dalliance with a suitor leads directly to the death of her child. Without disputing the textual parallels, Stegner took umbrage at the Walsh article and dismissed it as a "holier-than-thou" hatchet job that mistakes a work of fiction for something else.[5]

Evidently referring to the death of the child, Stegner said in a letter to Janet Micoleau, "For reasons of drama, if nothing else, I'm . . . having to throw in a domestic tragedy of an entirely fictional nature, but I think I am not too far from their real characters."[6] But if Stegner had to inject a catastrophe for reasons of drama, why did he have to inject drama? The implication seems to be that without the element of drama, the novel would lack shape. In the special case of a novel employing ready-made materials, a second consideration arises: perhaps only a sufficiently striking departure from sources could extenuate all this borrowing. The middle of the novel, following the winding course of *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*, gives some idea of what an *Angle of Repose* minus drama would look like.

Despite making such large use of another's writings, *Angle of Repose* doesn't feel derivative. Partly this is due to the foreground presence of our narrator, the brilliant,

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[4] Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, "*Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study" in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner,* ed. Anthony Arthur (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 184-209.

[5] Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), pp. 86-87.

[6] Benson, p. xxvii.

splenetic, perversely companionable historian Lyman Ward, Susan's grandson. But where else will we find a marriage that devolves in the end into a fifty-year stand-off as a result of an act of reckless negligence by a Quaker wife engaged in an illicit encounter? Here then is a sequence of such singularity that we cannot expect to find it anywhere but in the pages of the novel itself. It proves, as it were, that *Angle of Repose* is the work of a creator.

In effect, then, Stegner's use of the writings of Mary Hallock Foote shapes *Angle of Repose* in two ways. On the one hand, there is transcription to a degree a reader would not have thought possible before the fact. On the other hand, Stegner has the Mary Hallock Foote figure do things she herself would never imaginably have done, whether entering into a loveless engagement, dallying with her husband's assistant, or losing a child through negligence as a direct result. Little wonder two of Mary Hallock Foote's granddaughters resented what Stegner did with her writings.

The Demands of Originality

Both Random House and Stegner himself clear *Angle of Repose* of any imputation that it misuses source material by asserting that it is an original work of fiction. With the legitimacy of *Angle of Repose* invested in its originality, it is essential for the author to distinguish the marriage at its center from its model in Mary Hallock Foote's reminiscences. Stegner gets to work on this problem early by having the young Susan Burling enter into a pre-marital understanding with Oliver Ward despite not actually loving him. A strangely disengaged engagement leads to the marital disaffection which in turn leads to the "domestic tragedy of an entirely fictional"—and therefore original—"nature."

When Oliver Ward makes his appearance in the life of young Susan Burling, "She was in love with Art, New York, and Augusta Drake [the pseudonym for Helena DeKay Gilder]" (p. 23). She does not contract a new love that eclipses these attachments. She does love Ward when he clasps her ankles as she peers over a cliff at a waterfall in the Hudson Valley (p. 56), but that moment is not enough to found a marriage on. (Indeed, at a critical juncture late in the novel, her suitor closes his fingers "around her bare foot" [p. 562].) All in all, her engagement to Ward is apathetic, and it is this bond—at once straining our comprehension and standing out amidst material imported into *Angle of Repose*—that sets the course of all that follows.

The "tacit engagement" (p. 44) between Oliver Ward and Susan Burling over the five years when he sought to prove himself in the West was distinctly cool on her side. "He kept writing, and she didn't have the heart to shut him off. And he was a reserve possibility" (p. 46). This is not love but calculation, although a calculated decision to marry an engineer who is a complete stranger to the world of aesthetic sensibility, as well as a virtual stranger to herself, makes little sense for Susan Burling, and still less in that she is open to the thought of spinsterhood (p. 47). In more than a hundred letters to Augusta over this period, Susan mentioned the existence of Oliver Ward not once (p. 35), quite as if he were unmentionable (an impression confirmed later in the novel when Susan understands that in conversing with Augusta her husband's name "was to be walked around like something repulsive on a sidewalk" [p. 397]). Moreover, we are told that the engagement itself was "not entirely of her volition, perhaps not even with her full consent" (p. 35), as if she were not a party to her own action, or were sleep-walking for five years. The narrator seems to be

struggling to say that Oliver Ward was Susan Burling's default option if other prospects should fail, and that this was something she did not care to contemplate. So it is that a highly intelligent young woman makes the most consequential decision of her life in a peculiar state of apathy and suspended "volition" that she shows nowhere else in *Angle of Repose*.

Indeed, "if the cards fell wrong, if Augusta should come to marry or move away . . . they why wouldn't she have looked toward Thomas Hudson rather than toward an unliterary, unartistic, not-too-successful engineer [that is, Oliver Ward], a mere pen pal a continent away?" (p. 47). This question appears to put Susan's thoughts in the narrator's voice, making it an expression of snobbish contempt toward the man to whom she has implicitly pledged herself. At this point Susan Burling has known Oliver Ward for all of one evening (p. 49). Was the engagement only tacit because she wasn't prepared for anything more definite? Certainly her heart at the time was not with Ward but Thomas Hudson (whom she would have married if asked) and her friend Augusta Drake (whom she loves more than either Ward or Hudson). When Augusta and Thomas marry, thereby cutting her out, Susan Burling simply falls back on her relationship with Ward. Here, then, is a sequence that adds one riddle to another. First Susan Burling enters into a half-hearted engagement that lasts five years; then, as a result of this romance-less agreement with someone she scarcely knows, she enters into a marriage that removes her from all she does know and radically and irreversibly changes the course of her life.

Quite as if originality demanded it, Stegner said he had to throw a domestic tragedy into *Angle of Repose*; and it is the conflicted marriage of Susan Burling to Oliver Ward that

leads to it. A strangely indifferent engagement sets the stage for the marriage itself. The marriage locks in the doubts concerning Oliver Ward that make Susan's engagement to him so detached, so nearly inexplicable to begin with.

Says the narrator of Susan Burling Ward, "I think her love for my grandfather, however real, was always somewhat unwilling" (p. 15), with the words "however real" introducing a note of ambiguity. Evidently the deficit of "volition" in her engagement to Oliver Ward never left her. In another example of the operation of originality in *Angle of Repose*, Susan is married to a reserve possibility for sixty years. But if she wasn't really in love with Oliver Ward when she married him, why then would she uproot herself (if only until he makes his name) from the northeastern society that contains everything and everyone she cherishes and move, for his sake, across the American continent?[7] After marriage, moreover, there is always some element of regret or doubt, some qualification, mixed in with her love of Oliver Ward not too far under the surface. Despite outward similarities, there is nothing in Mary Hallock Foote's reminiscences corresponding to the enigma at the heart of the marriage of Susan Burling and Oliver Ward. This too, then, is original.

Over the course of *Angle of Repose* Susan Ward has flashes of aversion to the unliterary, unartistic figure she chose to marry. In a scene in the early New Almaden section she notices with disapproval that Oliver "had not properly washed his hands for

[7] Defending his grandmother, the narrator says, "I think she had been stirred by Oliver Ward's masculine strength, by his stories of an adventurous life, by his evenness of disposition, by his obvious adoration. I think she was for the first time physically in love with a man, and I like her courage in going where her emotions led her" (p. 60). Like the reader, Lyman Ward is trying to make sense of his grandmother's decision to marry.

supper" (although the discoloration turns out to be a bruise from saving a man's life in the mine), has the "treasonable thought" that her husband is out of his depth in cultured conversation, and rebels inwardly against "the conditions of their life, which excluded . . . men sensitive enough to appreciate the finer things" (pp. 116-18). In Santa Cruz, "Silent and rebellious, she brooded about how crossed their purposes now seemed. . . . She had never put permanently out of her mind Augusta's doubts about Olivert Ward" (p. 183). In Leadville, "For a second they confronted each other like enemies" (p. 324). In Mexico, "Everything about him, from his sulky face to his animal odor, was offensive to her" (p. 382). Yet through all this Oliver remains the same quietly driven man he was from the beginning (and will remain to the end), which makes one wonder again why Susan ever married someone so ill-suited to her. A half-hearted engagement commits Susan to a marriage which is a kind of standing paradox; and this marriage sets up the tragedy without a counterpart in the reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote.

Thus, while it is hard to comprehend Susan's voluntary exile from all she loves for the sake of a husband she has mixed feelings about, it serves a narrative function. As Oliver grows into the role of the not-too-successful engineer (lacking as he does the dishonesty, political savvy or luck to succeed), she herself grows bitter and resentful; and of this the novel's catastrophe—the "domestic tragedy of an entirely fictional nature"—is born.

Even as she suffers under the failure of her husband's ventures, the ever likelier prospect that his ambitions will not bear fruit, and his surrender to alcohol, Susan Ward is in the daily presence of Oliver's assistant Frank Sargent, who is sensitive enough to

appreciate the finer things and cannot conceal his infatuation with her. One day in July 1890, Susan, occupied in some kind of dalliance with Sargent, takes her eyes off her young child Agnes and she falls into a nearby irrigation ditch and drowns. The narrative leaves no doubt, nor does she herself doubt, that it was because of her betrayal of her husband that the child perished. Sargent kills himself a few days later. Oliver Ward abandons Susan, and in another of the paradoxical turns that give *The Angle of Repose* its character of striking originality, the marriage both ends and continues.

Perhaps nothing better exemplifies this work's investment in singularity than the transformation of the Ward marriage, following the child's drowning, to a kind of death-in-life that lasts fifty years, until the actual death of Oliver Ward finally puts an end to it. Over this eternity, we are told, there was "not a change in them" (p. 623), meaning that Ward maintained a stony silence that never let his wife forget her betrayal and its consequence, while she remembered and endured. On the other hand, we are told that Oliver and Susan Ward, once reunited, "lived happily-unhappily ever after," whatever that means. Whether we conclude that the union survived its own destruction by half a century or that the parties lived in a kind of reconciled misery once they attained their angle of repose, we find ourselves using the idiom of paradox that seems to be this marriage's private language. A novel that makes heavy use of derivative material portrays a union with no like or parallel anywhere, one that exists only in the pages of *Angle of Repose* itself.

Rocks and Walls

Presumably, then, what Stegner meant by saying that he used the writings of Mary Hallock Foote for fictional purposes is that his portrait of an alienated Quaker wife—so alienated that she actually tells her husband at one point that he ought to be more like her suitor (p. 480)—was original enough to overbalance all textual debts. If this is so, then what cleared Stegner was also, in the eyes of two of Mary Hallock Foote's three granddaughters, the unkindest cut of all. Not only was their grandmother robbed of her writings, she was defamed in the process. Stegner defended his practice in *Angle of Repose* by claiming not only that he transformed real persons into fictional ones, but that—again paradoxically—these fictional persons were much like their originals after all. "I think I am not too far from their real characters."

The most original presence in *Angle of Repose* is undoubtedly the narrator Lyman Ward, grandson of Oliver and Susan Ward. In the 1960's when *Angle of Repose* is set, the cry was "relevance," and Susan Ward's betrayal of her husband in the year 1890 turns out to be only too relevant to Lyman, whose wife left him for the surgeon who removed his leg. Whether or not she appreciated the black humor of this escapade, Ellen Ward caught the transgressive spirit of the times. Lyman himself is badly out of phase with the times, not only because, as a historian, he values the past but because he was reared by the woman whose story he tells—that is, a woman born in the middle of the 19th century. Susan Ward taught him "honesty" and "uprightness" (p. 345), presumably because of the disaster she brought on her family by her lack of them. ("She instructed me as if out of bitter personal experience.") That Lyman loves his grandmother deeply and at points in the narrative

addresses her in absentia should have reminded his creator that the grandchildren of Mary Hallock Foote might not want to hand over her memory to him.

As a sort of belated child of the 19th century, Lyman Ward could hardly be more estranged from the hippie revolution playing out in the novel's present. Just as he disdains those, including his son, who would supplant the discipline of history with sociology, he disdains the hippies who think they can make history itself vanish like a bad dream. No more distinction between work and play, no more husband and wife, no more property.

Toward the end of *Angle of Repose* Lyman comes upon a hippie manifesto, possibly from Berkeley, where he taught; and this document he incorporates into the text as an exhibit of the cloud-cuckoo utopianism of the young. The anonymous authors declare themselves free not only of the sort of constraints that bore on the lives of Susan and Oliver Ward, but all constraints whatsoever.

MANIFESTO

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT TO EVERYONE EXCEPT GENERALS, INDUSTRIALISTS, POLITICIANS, PROFESSORS, AND OTHER DINOSAURS

That possessions, the "my and mine" of this corrupt society, stand between us and a true, clean, liberated vision of the world and ourselves.

We believe in community, sharing, giving, using without using up. He is wealthiest who owns nothing and needs nothing. . . Proprietorship has no place in love or in any good thing of the earth. [Etc.]

While this mimeographed Magna Carta catches the tone and spirit of the hippie movement, it reads a little too well to have come off the street. It's a nice touch that the land leased by the communards is owned by a mine.

Lyman Ward regards utopianism with a profound contempt born of his sense of reality and attachment to history, and in this he probably speaks for Stegner. Yet in his way of mingling Mary Hallock Foote's words with his own, Stegner himself showed little regard for the distinction between mine and thine. Assuring Janet Micoleau that his novel was a work of fiction, he proceeded to act as if he had a right to take anything he wanted from the writings of Mary Hallock Foote and do anything he wanted with it. Lyman Ward composes the narrative we are reading in his grandmother's study, a room he never entered as a child "without the respectful sense of being among things that were old, precious, and very personal to Grandmother" (p. 349). Stegner approaches the writings of Mary Hallock Foote, including her private letters, quite otherwise. He approaches them as if her proprietorship meant nothing. As he once stated, "As far as I am concerned, the Mary Hallock Foote stuff had the same function as raw material, broken rocks out of which I could make any kind of wall I wanted to."[8]

[8] *Conversations with Wallace Stegner*, p. 87.

This contemptuous remark possibly implies that the ability to make a work of art out of stuff with no shape of its own proves one's right to do so. And if the finished product is truly impressive, it seems to transcend the conditions of its own making. In other words, if *Angle of Repose* exhibits an originality striking enough, then its exploitation of the writings of a woman born, like Susan Burling, in the middle of the 19th century becomes as nothing. How ironic that Stegner chooses for his metaphor of construction a wall—that is, a boundary marker, often a marker of property.

Conclusion

In order to endow this narrative of the 19th-century West with an aura of authenticity, Stegner drew heavily from the then-unpublished writings of Mary Hallock Foote, in particular her chronicle *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* and letters to her dearest friend across the continent (the model of Augusta Drake Hudson in *Angle of Repose*). Stegner's statements to the effect that he used all this to compose fiction imply that such dealings are legitimate provided that the appropriated material is transformed into something original. This helps explain a certain strained originality in *Angle of Repose*, such as its portrayal of an engagement which is both apathetic and yet life-altering.

Several problems lurk within the position that appropriating material from Mary Hallock Foote is all right as long as it is put to an original use.

1. In order to transform a Victorian chronicle into a tale of his own, Stegner made the marriage at its center a living paradox. The paradox began before the marriage, with

Susan Burling's engagement to Oliver Ward despite scarcely knowing him and despite her peculiar, not to say improbable, lack of volition and consent all the while. Is there such a thing as a disengaged engagement? Also paradoxically, the marriage dies with the death of their child as a result of Susan's illicit liaison, yet persists for another half century. In between the prelude and afterlife of the marriage, it never becomes clear why Susan Burling would choose to remove herself from everything and everyone she holds dear in order to move to the West with a man of little culture and few words about whom she always has reservations. "She wondered often how she had happened to marry a man for whom words were so difficult" (pp. 303-04). How indeed. It is this unlikely marriage that makes possible the tragedy that cements the novel's claim to being a freestanding work of fiction. In molding appropriated text ("raw material") into this shape, Stegner overdid originality itself and made the marriage at the center of *Angle of Repose* a sort of contradiction from beginning to end.

2. The transformation of the Mary Hallock Foote figure into a possible adulteress responsible for the death of her child is certainly both bold and original and helps define *Angle of Repose* as a work of fiction independent of its own sources. When Stegner rejected out of hand the accusations of Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, he meant that she forgot she was concerned with a novel, not a work of history. But it is not as though Walsh failed to notice that Stegner transformed Susan Ward into someone Mary Hallock Foote herself wasn't—namely, a wife engaged in an illicit dalliance that costs the life of her child. That in itself was the last of Walsh's complaints, and her indignation at what Stegner made of Mary Hallock Foote was shared by two of Foote's three granddaughters. Stegner's claim

that his portrayals in *Angle of Repose* are quite true to their originals, despite being fictitious, rubs salt in the wounds of persons who never consented to his use of Mary Hallock Foote's writings in the first place. Perhaps the deeper point in all this is that poetic license, or the obligation to one's art, does not cancel other obligations binding on us as human beings.

3. The author's way of drawing at will from personal letters which he engaged not to quote has a little too much in common with the erasure of the distinction between mine and thine—a utopian practice subjected to satiric commentary by the narrator of *Angle of Repose*, Lyman Ward. There is much to be said for respecting distinctions between mine and thine, self and other, rather than confounding them in the interest of something purportedly more intriguing or authentic. Unfortunately, the narrator's "respectful sense of being among things that were old, precious, and very personal" did not enter into the composition of *Angle of Repose* itself. Stegner's denigration of the Foote papers as so much "raw material" shows precious little of this respect.

4. If Stegner's efforts to justify the wholesale use of another's writings create problems of their own, maybe the practice itself resists justification. It's not clear that any amount of new-modeling, any expedient at all, can excuse the sheer quantity of appropriation that went into the making of *Angle of Repose*. While its portrayal of an incongruous marriage can lay claim to originality, the novel's debt to the writings of Mary Hallock Foote remains greater than one might expect in any work of fiction. Stegner

himself preferred to say that *Angle of Repose* "is built on quite a lot of historical research,"[9] which solves the issue of appropriation by ignoring it.

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[9] *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner,* ed. Arthur, p. 53.