

ANALYSIS

The Spectator Bird (1976)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“*The Spectator Bird* is a powerful, important work. Because of its themes of aging and identity, it is destined to become even more influential as we move further into this century. Wallace Stegner’s previous novel, *Angle of Repose*, earned a Pulitzer Prize. He has written some twenty other books, including an influential conservationist, nonfiction work, *The Sound of Mountain Water*. He is perhaps best known still for his monumental novel of an American family and its dreams, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, or for his accurate depiction of love’s pain in the novel, *All the Little Live Things*. Whether in fiction or nonfiction, Stegner has consistently demonstrated craftsmanlike ability to carry large concerns, tell large and difficult stories, make cogent observations on a wide range of life experiences. His importance lies not only in his energetic and unrelenting investigation of human motives and actions, but also in his considerable talent at arresting readers’ attentions and telling them spellbinding tales about themselves and their neighbors.

Stegner has never retreated from a tough subject; instead, he has confronted, head-on, the two most difficult decades for fiction writers to grasp in this century. In the 1960s, which many writers found it expedient to slip away from into writing about the past, or biography, or mysticism-fantasy-occultism-escape, he lowered his lance and charged. What he charged, of course, was the tragically distorted emotional landscape of mid-Vietnam War America. The topics were frighteningly complex: the dissolution of the family, accelerating erosion of marital bonds, meaningless sexual permissiveness, political, social, educational and religious chaos, the dying environment. All these he treated, and he worked, too, on a pet theme, the angry, apocalyptic differences between young and old, black and white, people. There was no escape into the nostalgia of the Depression years for Stegner. The problems of the day were his meat. Some of his conclusions were not modish or popular for the acid-rock, guru-haunted, ‘if-it-feels-good-do-it’ mentality of that period.

But Stegner was not blindly attacking the times or youth. In many ways, he stood alone in his equilibrium, excoriating alike the silly balloons of mindlessly, desperately ‘with-it’ kids *and* the repression longed for by the angrily confused, hurt ‘over-30s’ and ‘senior citizens.’ Inexorably, he made those who would read him, young or old, look at how stupid and vain, cruel and wasteful we were being, and his novels offered some leanly won, old-fashioned humanistic remedies for the problems. He depicted characters as having to learn first of tolerance, then of acceptance, then of respect, then, if possible, of love and faith. Along the way, he suggested, it would not hurt to return to and improve upon the out-of-favor skills of listening and of helping, doing both with some modicum of courtesy and empathy. Stegner’s novels have all been pleas for good sense, modulation, union. His gift, however, is that he deals *creatively* with the immediate, the important. He converts reality into art by emphasizing and crafting the drama of life itself mainly through strict adherence to accuracy of observation and thoughtful depiction of the natural drama of human problems.

The protagonists in *The Spectator Bird* is one of Stegner’s most compelling characters. Joe Allston, a seventy-year-old former literary agent, is not enjoying his well-off California retirement. In what his society considers a kind of twilight Eden, Joe and his wife, Ruth, live supposedly quiet, comfortable lives. But Joe is not quiet or comfortable. He rails and rages at television, students, land developers, writers, everything—including himself, and even at times his patient wife. Joe is intelligent and articulate, has enough insight to make himself convolutedly more miserable when he realizes he is indulging in self-pity. He knows it, but finds himself powerless to achieve another form of resistance to two foes his retirement makes it impossible any longer to avoid: his lack of identity, and his painfully advancing age.

Joe estimates himself to be a nonperson. He feels he has no foundations. He never knew his father. He goads himself with sparse memories only of the embarrassment his Danish immigrant mother caused him:

'Everything in the New World that she tied her hopes to, including me, gave way. I spent my childhood and youth being ashamed of her accent, her clumsiness, her squarehead name, her menial jobs'.... Joe is thus emotionally cut off from his past. Additionally, he tortures himself with memories of his failure as a father to his own child. He comes back again and again to the scars of two decades before when he thinks of his only son.... So, Joe is equally bereft of roots or any extension into the future. Moreover, Joe realizes that he has had no control whatever over these events, or any others, in his life. Powerless, it seems to him, except to make tragic mistakes, he has drifted in a current, '...gone downstream like a stick, getting hung up in eddies and getting flushed out again, only half understanding what he floated past, and understanding less with every year.' Even the surface good fortune of an employment which has provided materially well, he now knows required no talent. It was all luck and he feels guilt for that. Indeed, he feels tainted to have lived off the talents of others.

All this painful introspection is compounded again and again by his growing consciousness of age. Joe will forget himself a moment, sitting, talking, then stand-thirty years younger in his mind—only to be arthritically, brutally reminded of his irreversibly deteriorating joints. And the pills his doctor prescribes do not deal with his real pain. Joe is frightened and disgusted, too, by the increasing frequency of the deaths of friends. He sees himself surrounded by decay, death, disease. And he is angry, does 'not go gentle.' He cannot accept the approaching end of things with the calm and—to him—clashed sweetness which his wife seems to possess. Joe has found life empty; now he finds the end of it equally devoid of any affirmative point. His only solace is his own sardonic, wise-cracking, kid-it-before-it-kills-you stance. Unfortunately, his wife and friends are even further alienated by this mechanism, and Joe is caught in an untenable position he has no choice but to occupy.

Even when he contemplates suicide, he mocks himself: 'I have put away a bottle of pills, as who hasn't, but nobody can guarantee that when the time comes he will have the wit to take them, or even remember where he hid them.' This, suggests Stegner, is modern man, either cut off from basic realities, or fearful of them, afloat, alone in an ever faster-moving sea, a tide bumping and cluttered with detritus which was supposed to make life wonderful but did not. Even worse, this is modern man grown old without grace or sense of accomplishment. Like the worst aspects of modernity, Joe is not truly part of any flock. He is an isolated observer. Outside the V-shaped flight of ritual, natural direction. Joe envies and despises those in the flight. He despises his envy and sneers at himself now as 'the spectator bird.'

What brings Joe's frustration to a climactic point is his realization that his advanced age has betrayed him even through its failure to relieve him—through what he calls the 'grandfather clause'—of the memory of an old, disruptive passion. He discovers that, at seventy, he can still stump angrily away from Ruth through the dark of a rainy night, his cheeks stinging with tears for a chance at love lost twenty years earlier. In California, Joe gleans what he can from grumping. He muses, gardens, picks at his past; Ruth visits and entertains 'old' people, is caught up in civic affairs. To occupy his time, Ruth encourages Joe to write a book—the sort of things he calls 'my life among the literary.' To placate her, he thumbs through his journals, knowing he will never write the book. It is all an unspoken charade.

Into this delicately balanced situation comes a postal card out of the past—a note from the Countess Astrid Wredel-Krarup, in whose home Ruth and Joe had lived several months during their journey to get away from reminders of their son's death. Joe had rationalized their traveling to Denmark by suggesting he might visit there his mother's old village of Bregninge. Typical of Joe, he was cynical about his motives in doing this, since he was not sure he really wanted to find any roots after all. He and Ruth had developed a sincere and touching friendship with their hostess, the Countess Wredel-Krarup, her mysterious problems taking them outside their own sadness for the first time since their son's death.

The first hint of just how powerful an impact on their lives the Countess had is given when Joe keeps the postal card secret from Ruth. Inevitably, however, she senses that what he now reads among his papers is something more disturbing and important than he has encountered there before. Her probing results in his sharing the card with her, and in his confession to her that he had kept, secret from her, a very personal detailed journal during their Denmark stay. Now, because of the card, like lifting the bandage from a wound, he has begun to read that journal. Though it is dark and heavy with remorse, pain, confusion, even

horrifying knowledge, Ruth insists that he read it aloud to her—that they share this pain together. Joe reads his journal to her. It becomes *their* journal.

Thus Stegner has provided himself with a remarkably effective framework for his method of rendering and texturing his story. Through this flashback device, we see Joe and Ruth in their present, and we see them in their past. We move back and forth not only in time, but also between cultures. We learn much that is personally linked to Joe and also much that is generally linked to the times and settings which Joe experiences. It is a marvelous device, as Stegner develops it, for giving us one of the most perceptive, brutally honest, and informative profiles of a man, his wife, his country, and his time.

As the story develops on its two levels, Joe and Ruth relive those curiously exhilarating yet puzzling days they spent in Denmark talking, traveling, and learning with their friend, the Countess. They live again, too, the dark turn of the learning, for in a hypnotically complex twist of events, Joe learns that the Countess knew of his mother, indeed knew why and how his mother was able to emigrate alone at age sixteen, penniless. They learn, as well, why no one speaks to the Countess at the opera or on the streets. There is her quisling husband, who has abandoned her, and other sad and sordid truths to be learned about the Countess's family; Ruth and Joe learn them.

The sky of their retreat turns dark with Scandinavian night. Horrified, they learn of Astrid's scientist father's eerily objective experiments in incestuous human breeding. She bitterly tells them of her half-siblings who are listed in the family 'stud book.' They learn that despite both her parents' suicides, resulting from the notoriety of these practices, Astrid's brother, Count Eigil Rodding, actively continues the work of his father. Before he knows all this, Joe, the troubled but relatively naïve American, meets the Count, the bored, moody, superbly intelligent and totally autocratic European, in a strange sort of comic-saga tennis match. Joe barely manages to hold his own in this battle between old and new worlds, one combatant with an ancient family line, the other thinking that he needs a heritage.

Through this dark theme of incest, Stegner seems to be suggesting that the many Americans like Joe should not be depressed at their rootlessness, their lack of discernible family line. Rather, they should see their 'mongrel' blood lines as more natural, and as certainly more conducive to freedom. The distinction is clear: Count Rodding's incestuous experiments have improved nothing and are emotionally bankrupt. Such a clearly known, coldly controlled heritage as Astrid possesses has only produced evil.

Eventually Joe is attracted to Astrid as much, it seems, by her dignity-within-tragedy as by her beauty. In a powerfully restrained scene, Joe kisses her, though they both know they can never have each other. Joe and Ruth return to America and proceed for the next twenty years to avoid acknowledging what happened to them in Denmark. Significantly, something else more powerful happens to them in the comfortable bedroom of their old age as Joe reads his naked confessions aloud to Ruth. They are both hurt and frightened deeply. They talk of Denmark for the first time. They hurt each other. Then they help each other to heal, are drawn closer together—not in passionate love but in companionship. Joe realizes that he has been more blessed than he knew in the woman who is his wife. And he learns he loves and has loved her more than he knew. It is a harsh lesson, tender knowledge that comes to this white-haired Adam and Eve in their stormy Eden. But the knowledge is not too late; they have each other. For a while longer yet.

Aside from his obvious prowess as a weaver of contemporary plots, Stegner's most striking gifts are his sure grasp of telling details and his ability to create memorable characters with an economy of description. Joe first sees the Countess, for instance, as '...sometimes earthy as the stableman's daughter... She noticed Ruth's shoes and cried out, "Oh, those tiny American feet".... She has a smile that would melt glass... a true Dane: her cheeks glow in the rain like shined apples.' Usually, the details which are so sharply etched on Stegner's pages function first as images, then reflect deeper possibilities.

Notice, for instance, these seemingly offhand observations on the first page of *The Spectator Bird*: 'From my study I can watch wrens and bush tits in the live oak outside. The wrens are nesting in a hole for the fifth straight year and are very busy.... They are surly and aggressive, and I wonder why I, who seem to be as testy as the wrens, much prefer the sociable bush tits.' And, in another of Joe's morbid ruminations on death, the images function on two levels: 'One of these days the pump will quit, or the sugar in the gas

tank will kill the engine in a puff of smelly smoke, or the pipes will burst, or the long undernourished brain will begin to show signs of its starvation.' Finally, Joe summarizes his predicament: 'I really *am* getting old. It comes as a shock to realize that I am just killing time till time gets around to killing me.'

In his methods of characterization, Stegner is peerless. He can detect the exact moment or posture or tone in which to reveal a person. For instance, he shows us Ruth at the moment she surmises Joe is troubled by his papers, asks him what he's reading, sees through his demurrer that the journal is merely dull recollections of their journey. Stegner shows her lying in bed holding the cat, Catarrh, on her stomach as she says in her soft Bryn Mawr whisper, 'I was watching you while you read it...'. The look she was bending on me...was troubled and troubling, steady, undisguised by any of the games we play. She wasn't sparring, or joking... "Joe," she said, "Why *not* aloud? Why not together?" It is a poignant moment. Ruth's own loneliness and her bravery in beginning the painful process of healing through honest confrontation is a memorable scene and firmly establishes her among Stegner's finest portraits of women, of whom he writes with much admiration and considerable awe.

In a book filled with memorable characters, one who best illustrates Stegner's remarkable love of people—their resilience, their colorations, their subtleties—is Joe's physician, Dr. Ben Alexander. Ben, seventy-nine, who squires pretty women around in a top-down convertible, and is writing a book on old age as a time of liberation, give 'youngster' some advice: '...For God's sake don't go thinking yourself into any God damned wheel chair!'... It is a mark of Stegner's ability to establish character economically that Ruth, who speaks less than anyone in the book, and who is shown doing fewer things than practically anyone else, remains vividly in one's mind after the book is finished.

Challenging in its structure, *The Spectator Bird* is a vigorously inventive and restlessly seeking, probing work. It is brave in taking on the life-questioning dilemma of old age. It is ambitious in its themes and philosophy. It is honest in its resolution. Stegner's satisfying ability to limn our times is surely one of our most precious natural resources. We know ourselves better for his looking for us. In this novel he has important things to say, and he says them with stylistic sureness and mature power."

Thomas Walters
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