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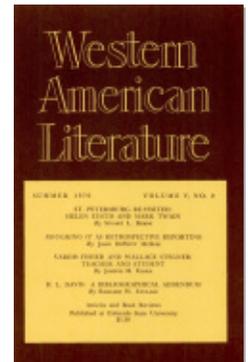
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Vardis Fisher and Wallace Stegner: Teacher and Student

An important aspect of Vardis Fisher's autobiographical tetralogy and its revision and expansion as *Orphans in Gethsemane* (1960) is Vridar Hunter's relationships with his teachers and later with his students. Fisher first taught English at the University of Utah as a graduate student. He returned to Utah for three years after he received his Ph.D. from Chicago, and then taught at New York University for three years. He also taught two summers at the University of Montana. Fisher's readers will have little doubt that few of his students could quickly forget their experience with him. His personality seldom—if ever—elicited a neutral judgment.

As far as I have been able to learn from reading the Fisher correspondence at Yale University, from correspondence with Fisher, and from an unforgettable weekend visit in the summer of 1963 with Vardis and Opal Fisher at their Hagerman, Idaho, home, the most famous student to emerge from any of Fisher's classes was Wallace Stegner. Stegner was an undergraduate at Utah enrolled in Fisher's English class; one would naturally expect a person of Stegner's talents to have found Fisher of especial interest—as he did. Our conversation turned to Stegner during that 1963 Hagerman weekend because I had detected certain similarities with Vardis Fisher in a character in a Stegner short story I had recently taught. The short story is "The View from the Balcony," a story set in an Indiana college town but which really seemed to me to be based on Iowa City, where Stegner had done his graduate work and where, I knew, Fisher had several friends. Fisher told me that he had not read the story. I promised to send him a copy, which I did. Fisher wrote back, not pleased to find himself reflected in the character of Paul Latour but at the same time describing a fight that he had had with Stegner that left no doubt that my hunch had been correct.

I call the attention of Fisher's readers to Stegner's story not because Paul Latour is Vardis Fisher but because he does reflect a side of Fisher's complex personality. Nor do I mean in any way to limit Stegner's story, which is very fine. It is not a factual account but, like most fiction, uses the stuff of reality and transmutes it into something else. The story stands in its own right. However, I think Fisher and Stegner readers will find the story of interest in an autobiographical light, for it indicates what one would have expected—Vardis Fisher was an important influence on Stegner. I think that one would also have to conclude that the portrait is also—in part—Stegner's judgment on his former teacher.

"The View from the Balcony" portrays a married graduate student community living in a converted fraternity house just after World War II. The students in their sheltered present look forward to "the assured future."¹ Their confidence is brought into question when Tommy Probst freezes and walks out of his final Ph.D. examination. The group decides to go on with the beer party that was to be a celebration and to invite Professor Clark Richards, head of the social science department, and Paul Latour, a psychology professor, to come to help straighten Tommy out. Especially through these characters who were "outsiders, older, with better perspective" (p. 100), Stegner demonstrates that the future is never assured, that even if the students live in a fraternity house, each is "alone, terrified, and at bay, each with his ears attuned to some roar across the woods, some ripple of water, some whisper of a footstep in the dark" (p. 120). When the story ends, Richard's wife, Myra, is off in a canoe with a student and her husband is very upset; Paul Latour—whose profession emphasizes understanding of emotional needs and fears—has fought so savagely with Charley Graham that the student would have been thrown from the balcony had he not also been a good wrestler.

Of special interest here is Paul Latour. Stegner describes him as possessing a "grim but difficult smile" (p. 100). Latour has the strongest, most difficult personality of anyone in the story. He drinks his own hard liquor rather than the offered beer, without ice because it reminds him "that it's poison" (p. 111). Like the hard-drinking Vardis Fisher, Latour chooses rather direct methods.

¹"The View from the Balcony" in *The Women on the Wall* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1950), p. 100. Stegner's story first appeared in *Mademoiselle*. Pagination is to *The Women on the Wall* and will be hereafter included in the text.

He looks right through people. His physical appearance is like many descriptions of Fisher. This is how Latour looks to Lucy Graham, from whose point of view the story is focused:

His face was like the face of a predatory bird, beaked, grim-lipped; because of some eye trouble he always wore dark glasses, and his prying, intent, hidden stare was an agony to encounter. His mouth was hooked back in a constant sardonic smile. He not merely undressed her with his eyes; he dissected her most intimate organs, and she knew he was a cruel man, no matter how consistently and amazingly kind he had been to Charley, almost like a father, all the way through school. Charley said he had a mind like a fine watch. But she wished he would not come over, and she trembled, unaccountably emotional, feeling trapped.

Then he was in front of her, big-shouldered for his height, not burly but somehow giving the impression of great strength, and his face like the cold face of a great bird thrust toward her and the hidden stare stabbed into her and the thin smile tightened. (p. 108)

Those who have studied photographs of Fisher and read their Fisher will detect much in the long description of Latour that sounds like Vridar Hunter of *No Villain Need Be* and *Orphans in Gethsemane* as well as like some descriptions of Fisher. Vridar, like Fisher, had serious eye trouble, and Vridar, again like Fisher, felt it the novelist's business to be able to strip away human facades. Both minds were often "like a fine watch" in their analyses of human behavior. Readers are invited to compare this description of Latour (*Latour* is an approximate rhyme with *Fisher*) and the picture of Fisher that occurs in *Time* magazine of August 12, 1946. The *Time* article is also relevant; it is titled "Man with a Temper." It begins by calling Fisher "Hawk-nosed" and emphasizes temper. It is not, of course, a flattering article, and it annoyed Fisher greatly. He had his own ideas about why his nose was frequently an item singled out by his critics. The article summarizes, indeed, the way many saw Fisher. But it is not the whole of Fisher, nor are the unflattering aspects of Paul Latour the only truth about him.

As Stegner's story reveals, Charley is correct in saying that Paul Latour has a fine mind. Even though there is a certain irony involved, it is Latour who gives the incisive analysis of Tommy's difficulty. Tommy is a child, afraid to grow up. The truth is—and the story bears Latour out—Tommy was afraid of passing the exam. Paul Latour not only looks like Vardis Fisher, but he functions in a similarly tough, analytic fashion.

It is also clear that Latour has had a beneficial relationship with Charley; Latour has given a great deal of himself to Charley—he had been “almost like a Father.” This will strike the most casual readers as Freudian, but for Fisher’s readers the ramifications are indeed even greater. The relationship between fathers and sons is crucial in Fisher’s books and becomes more so the further Fisher goes with his *Testament of Man*. As Fisher shows it, one of the tragedies of modern life is that fathers have tended to prevent—and often struggle to prevent—their sons from becoming adult. *Orphans in Gethsemane* is set most pointedly to illustrate this theme. It is an irony that Latour’s animal action is really an intellectual favor to Charley and his wife. I think Fisher’s own rudenesses were often attempts to prevent emotional dependencies. Fisher felt tempted to play the role of Father, but what he tried to say was: You need to be adult. I’ll tell you what I know, but don’t look for me to be Big Daddy for you. Fisher’s main dissatisfaction with American politics was the abundance of Father-figures who were all too eager to play that role. Interestingly, Vridar found college campuses filled with professors eager to play the role of daddy.

Fisher would have wanted Stegner—or any of his students—to go his independent way. Like Latour, he behaved in such a way as to insure it.

One of Fisher’s comments to me indicates the depth and complexity of his relationship with Stegner. Fisher felt that Stegner’s first novel (really a novelette), *Remembering Laughter* (1937), was importantly indebted to his own *Dark Bridwell* (1931). I think there was some resentment on Fisher’s part, since Stegner’s book was very popular and won a Little, Brown prize for the year. The success of the novel encouraged Stegner’s commitment to creative writing. On the other hand, *Dark Bridwell*, although it had been very well reviewed, did not have a large printing. It gave Fisher some attention, but not what he deserved, and little money. The father might understandably feel resentment at the son—especially, I think, since *Dark Bridwell* (Fisher’s second published novel) is very much the better of the two books. *Remembering Laughter* is an interesting first book, full of promise, but it does seem in ways derivative and not always credible.

The major strain on credibility comes in the relationship between Malcolm MacLeod and his mother. Malcolm has been born

out of wedlock in a rural Iowa community. Everyone knows who his mother is; in fact, she alone carries him to his christening. But his mother and her sister bring the boy up to think of both of them as aunts. Since they are still living in the same community, it is difficult to imagine that the boy would be sixteen before someone would suggest to him that his parentage was not as he supposed.

The point of interest here, however, is possible influence of *Dark Bridwell* on *Remembering Laughter*. While it is true that Stegner's book might as easily invite comparison with Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, it is not difficult to find what Fisher might have sensed in *Remembering Laughter* as similar to his own work.

Both *Dark Bridwell* and *Remembering Laughter* are emphatically rendered with a sense of finality about the histories related. Both are clearly "rememberings." The sense of distance and finality in each is struck by use of frames—a labeled Prologue and finally an Epilogue. In between is a drama of years—high passions and then their frustration and denial. Both works treat the loss of joy and fulfillment. Tonally, the similarity is striking.

The telescoping of time in passages summarizing certain samenesses mark both *Dark Bridwell* (and much of Fisher's fiction) and *Remembering Laughter*. Typical is this languid passage from Stegner:

And the years,—the stifling nights of summer, windless and humid, the hot oppressive blackness when the three lay awake in different rooms listening to the petulant discomfort of the child and the curtains hung slack in wide-open windows; the interminable days when clothes clung to perspiring bodies and the oaks drooped under the fierce sun and the darkened parlor was the only passably cool room in the house; the slow ripening of September, the golden fields, the farm alive with strange men, huskers and threshers powdered with the bright dust of harvest, and in full view from the window of the haymow the incredible streak of flame that was the creek bed; and in October also the still wavering fall of leaves,—and in the intervals between labor and labor the wild regret that was never to die, but was to be hidden in silence and unforgiving and the avoidance of outward feeling until over it grew a shell of habit, so that for days at a time the three forgot the reasons for their watchful silence and the bleakness of their house. . . .²

There is much of Fisher's rhythms here and in other passages of indirect discourse and summary. To cite another example:

²*Remembering Laughter* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1937), pp. 124-25.

And Margaret, watching him delightedly pour out a lavish stream of nonsense, watching her young sister with bright eyes and pert disbelieving merriment drink it all in, was contented to sit sedately beside them and let her own questions wait. There was much about Scotland, about their father's death, about friends and relatives, that she wanted to know; but meanwhile Alec was telling about the cannibal eels in the Coon River, which seeing their own tails following them, turned and snapped and ate themselves at a gulp in a swirling eddy of water.³

In *Dark Bridwell* Fisher has many passages which compress time and summarize feelings. The following passage is typical:

But though Lela believed, in a simple childlike way, that she had been transported to the loveliest place anywhere, she was sometimes strangely shaken when she looked at the river, washing downward over its path, and at the wild tree-bedded bluffs and peaks around her. She would look at her children and wonder what their education would be. She would look at her home and wonder if she would never have more than boxes for chairs, more than pine boughs for a bed. And upon her, even during these first weeks, there would fall a melancholy, a deep and nameless unhappiness, that was to grow with the years, that was to sleep in her heart and await its tremendous hour. Because under her earnestness, deeper than the birdlike joy which she often felt, there was a dark heritage of adolescent doubt and pain. There were memories of childhood years, half-crazed and altogether lonely, when she had been an orphan, dragged from place to place, cuffed and abused. And there was in her, too, a lively ambition, a wish to toil and build, and hoard savings against her old age. But all this in her Charley never understood. In her blue eyes, he saw an infrequent madness, and it troubled him. It made his love for her unreasoning, a desperate greedy devotion, and it made of his jealousy in later years an inner storm of delirium. It stampeded his thoughts, churned his emotions into whey, and left him white and helpless with his own wrath.⁴

There is something of the poet in Fisher's naturalism as he empathizes with his people.

Fisher's *Dark Bridwell* and Stegner's *Remembering Laughter* are strongly regional. Stegner's region is rural and remote Iowa; Fisher's—of course—the Antelope country of Idaho, a setting that emphasizes even more the relationship of the characters with the forces of nature. *Dark Bridwell* relates the history of a family which lives in an isolated area where they often see no other persons for months. When the action starts, they are making their way to this wild home. *Remembering Laughter* starts with the

³Ibid., p. 18.

⁴Vardis Fisher, *Dark Bridwell*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1931), pp. 41-42.

arrival of Elspeth MacLeod from Scotland at the Iowa farm of her sister and brother-in-law. Eventually both works counterpoint a strong Puritan heritage against the force of a joyous embracing of life. In both works the Puritanism is triumphant; everyone loses, but especially the man of the house.

It is probably the great similarity between these two men that most arrested Fisher's attention when he read *Remembering Laughter*. They are not twins, by any means, but they are cast in the same mold. Both are the yea-sayers to life. They have the ability to merge into nature; they have a kind of basic pagan affirmation and have to fight to keep it intact, for civilized life would deprive them of this joy. Alec Stuart's wife can understand her husband even less perfectly than Charley Bridwell's understands him. Alec likes to joke, swim in the nude, and even take a drink now and then. His way—like Charley's—is essentially the way of laughter. He imitates all sorts of animals and loves to invent fantastic stories. For example, he tells Elspeth of Mississippi Valley angleworms so long that a hen worked a whole day to eat one:

The hen . . . would get hold of one end of the worm and start backing away, to pull it from its hole. If it was a really grown worm, that hen would back away from eight in the morning till three in the afternoon, with an hour's rest at noon. When the tailend finally came loose from the hole the worm, snapping together after its long stretch, would knock down trees for miles; and if it happened to slip around a house or a barn, would snap that off its foundations slick as a whistle. Then the hen, if she recovered from the elastic backlash, would start eating her way back toward home, arriving there generally after nine in the evening, dusty and foot-sore and completely spent, and so gorged with angleworm that she couldn't get in the door of the henhouse.⁵

Elspeth loves Alec for such tales and laughter—as later her and Alec's son loves him for it.

Like Alec, an extraordinary fund of nonsense is one of Charley Bridwell's chief traits. Charley, too, can do remarkable imitations. Once he imitates a bear so convincingly that he makes a life-time enemy of Adolph Buck. But Charley's motives are not usually malicious, and children love him for his talents. For instance, on his way to his new home Charley explains to the Tompkins boy

⁵Stegner, *Remembering Laughter*, pp. 16-17.

that he will make "my halter-ropes out of rattlesnakes. I'll use a rattlesnake for a quirt. And if my kids won't be good, I'll blister their hinders with a live snake. How's that suit you?" The lad looks at his father and snickers. Charley continues to elaborate: "And as for wolves and bears and lions . . . I'll carry them little beasts around in my pockets. I'll eat a whole bear for my breakfast, teeth and backbones and toenails. How's that, now?"⁶ As we learn in *In Tragic Life* and *Orphans in Gethsemane*, Vridar Hunter is one of Charley's most ardent admirers. Charley is wilder than Alec Stuart, but I think it likely that his portrait more than anything else caused Fisher's reaction.

In any event, Fisher and Stegner scholars may find reading *Remembering Laughter* with *Dark Bridwell* in mind of more than passing interest. It may be that Stegner's "The View from the Balcony" reflects rather than announces Stegner's adieu to the direct influence of his important teacher. In ways, it is a tribute to both Stegner and Fisher.

⁶Fisher, p. 27.