

Pacifist Poetics

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Notice what this poem is not doing.
—William Stafford

I have long paid attention to writers who would teach us to inhabit natural landscapes more completely, more sensitively. That interest, turned toward region and then to bioregion, has in recent years bracketed the Canadian aspect of my reading of Canadian literature. In a bioregion, Canadian is at once meaningless and still crucial.

What he terms the “brim gravity” of place has often pulled me toward Oregon poet William Stafford. But when asked recently if I had anything to say about Stafford as pacifist I was uncertain. Would there be anything in the concept of a pacifist poetics? Reading Stafford again not as regionalist but as *pacifist*, I was confused. For all that he had been celebrated, or sidelined, as regionalist, surprisingly few poems now seemed to be *located*. Where place names did appear, in title or stanza, they often seemed incidental or accidental.

I thought then of a Canadian novel intriguingly adept at listening to place—Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John* (1939). O’Hagan’s mythic regionalism leads us on, one strong pulse in it insisting on an obligation for naming:

It is physically exhausting to look on unnamed country. A name is the magic to keep it within the horizons. Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you’ve got it. The unnamed—it is the darkness unveiled.

This nearly psalmic praise of naming reiterates a commonplace of North American cultural history. A good many poets who resist it—and, of course, its celebration is ironically inflected in O’Hagan—do so by *believing* in the magic, but probing the unspoken, unwritten names beneath the name.

Against O'Hagan, I found Stafford saying *no* to naming. Stafford does not want to *keep "it"*; he declines to keep place within the horizons. Although I'd not thought about a pacifist poetics, and certainly cannot claim to have done any study of the matter, or of the shape of a tradition of pacifist discourse, I sensed a possibility here. But having been tutored in a national mythology that mentions "peace" first among its constitutional ideals/aspirations, I was inevitably tempted to test a Canadian connection.

I respected the history of pacifism and the peace movement in Canada. I cringe at the various ways in which the mythology of the peaceable kingdom has too often been thin veneer concealing racist violence at home and abroad. And the conjunctions prompted me to revisit one of my favourite Stafford poems, "At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border":

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,
unfolding their wings across the open.
No people killed—or were killed—on this ground
hallowed by neglect an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

"At the Un-National..." by William Stafford is reprinted from *The Way It Is* (Graywolf Press, 1998) by permission of the Estate of William Stafford.

Part of my interest in this poem, of course, is that it's one of Stafford's defining pacifist manifestos. And it is so by being so decidedly *not* a manifesto. But also I am more lured by the magic of naming than I have noted Stafford is. The tenuous reference in the title might enable me to appropriate the poem for Canadian literature.

"This is the field . . . This is the field." Where is *this*? The anticipatory pronoun, if it has any meaning, refers to some generalized space along the Canadian border. I have always thought of the poem as quite definitely set in Peace Arch Park at the BC-Washington border between Blaine and White Rock. I am not sure I would call the monument there "un-national." It is, perhaps, *binational* with *two* slogans (facing north "Brethren Dwelling Together in Unity"; facing south "Children of a Common Mother"). Inside the arch, a gate, fastened open, with the hopeful wish "May These Gates

Never Be Closed.” By contrast, Paul Merchant, a long-time friend of Stafford, always thought of the poem as set on a body of water, perhaps a lake. Only the poem is correct, of course. The place is not park (or lawn, or garden) or lake, but “field.” It must be an “open” space, an expanse of anything, even a sphere of activity. It is *not* a *battle* field.

The poem proceeds in ten unevenly rhyming lines. You could think of it as an un-sonnet. It bends toward a proposition, ponders a complication, then stops at line ten without a resolution or denouement. More significantly, and crucially, I think, for his pacifist poetics, the poem moves, or loops backward, through a series of negatives—one or two in every line, but the third. It sings, in this uncelebrating insistently privative way, a history—and a site—of no killing.

The “un-” means differently than starkly “the converse of”. “Un” is enabling, as in *unfolding*, allowing flight, and creative reading. The “un”—in unfolding—is not negative; instead it proposes reversing an action. Just this dimension I would want to read back to the title—un national—so different in meaning and aura from un-Canadian and un-American. Unnational is not plainly negative, not “*not* national”: “it seeks to “reverse the action” of national, to reverse being national, or claiming nation. Stafford teaches a *release from* national. Hence, the absence of nation-state ideology—celebrated by a monument we discover in line four does not exist: “where no monument stands.”

Such absence—variously articulated as the unknown, tameness, neglect—is enabling. In line six, it provokes a vestigial memory of the unsound of deafening battle: and no bird sang. What *connects* in this open field is what we used to call *natural*: “grass joined hands” and “birds across the open.”: The unnamings of war is enabled by the invitation to read another form of writing, and speaking: the motion of grasses, the tracks of bird-words.

“Negation,” Anne Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost* “depends upon an act of the imagining mind”; negation, she continues, “requires the collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination.” I like that: I can almost imagine that assertion broken up in lines as a Stafford think-poem. Carson’s intricate reflection points eloquently to the pacifist strategy of Stafford’s poems. “Where the unknown soldier did not die” makes far more demand on a reader than “no soldier died here” or “the unknown soldier lives in memory.” The screen of our imagination will also project that all the soldiers are unknown.

How to see the border in this poem? Or know when you've crossed it? We're not even sure it's a *line*. Or that it is numbered 49. To *name* it, Stafford refuses to assert, would be to assert control, to take some pleasure in control and possession. The feel of control too easily becomes a conviction of border—and a building of *barrier*.

How do you advocate for peace? In William Stafford's case, by not advocating for peace. By un-naming place. Because war is always about place and about getting it, holding on to it, William Stafford leaves it blank. You don't got it. You can't own it. Forget its name. Un-name in peace.

