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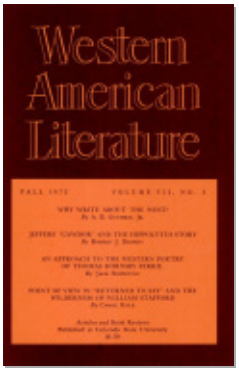

Carol Kyle

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CAROL KYLE
University of Illinois, Urbana

Point of View in "Returned to Say" and the Wilderness of William Stafford

The perspective in William Stafford's "Returned to Say" is probably the most interesting of the approaches to an understanding of the poem. From the title of the book of poetry, *Traveling through the Dark,* the perspective is clearly that of the *traveler;* in this poem, the traveler seems to have emerged from the other world, to have come back from the other side of the grave, as the title again "Returned to Say" suggests. The returned figure is a "lost Cree / on some new shore"; from all accounts an Indian could only be lost in a world totally alien, on the shore of a kingdom not his own.

The exact identification of the persona of the Indian is not so important as an identification of co-existent possibilities. A spirit returned from the other world like a ghost haunting a cove does not rule out the interpretation of the spirit as a sort of guide, or a kind of guardian angel. Information on the Cree Indian identifies the tribe to which he belongs as the North American Cristineaux Indian living in the forests and plains of Montana through Ontario and Saskatchewan, thus the allusion to facing north, and also to *traveling* north. But more than this, the Cree tribes believed that the basis for success in life was the acquisition of a guardian spirit acquired at adolescence. The return of a spirit to guard another person just starting his adult life is not at all inconsistent with the general view of the returned spirit, but it is difficult to reconcile with the fact given in the poem that the supposed guide is "lost." This is hardly explained in the name of irony since the tone of the poem suggests an ideal world of romance or dream vision, or trance, not a world of absurd contradictions. The reconciliation *might* be made however on the grounds that the Cree, having just returned, must begin anew to reacquaint himself with the topography

of the North American wilderness. Like a true American, descended from Christopher Columbus who lost his way to find America, the Indian must temporarily lose himself to find himself. Like Frost's "Directive" in a pre-historic, geologically-strange wilderness, the directions lead only to one's getting lost; the road to the children's playhouse back into time, the closed-off road to the center of one's childhood, the map for the finding of the treasure buried with the Holy Grail, lie in one's self. The "directive" is St. Mark's from the Bible, losing one's self as a part of the process of growing up, of moving through childhood and adolscence to a kind of self-knowledge.

Perhaps this is the reason for the strength of the identification of the spiritual guide as one's alter-ego. The clearest support for this theory comes from the point of view registered in the poem of the gradual merging of the first and third persons after the initial split. That is, originally, the speaker is the "I" of the poem and the two figures are definitely traveling separately: "he in a hurry and I beside him" closes the first stanza. The person shifts back and forth from first to third person in the second stanza:

> It will be a long trip; he will be a new chief;
> we have drunk new water from an unnamed stream;
> under little dark trees he is to find a path
> we both must travel because we have met.
>
> (11. 5-8)

The two symbolically drink water as "we," but then "he" finds the path and both the pathfinder and his pupils follow. This pattern continues throughout the poem: in stanza three "we" gesture, but the Indian performs the ritual alone of blowing the grain of sand off his knifeblade. Again this Indian history shows a special devotion to certain symbolic objects, sometimes recommended in a dream or vision. As the breathing of this by now very physically present Indian "darkens the steel," "his eyes become set / And start a new vision" (11. 11-13). At this point, the most ambiguous of the uses of the peronal pronoun occurs: "the rest of his life. / We will mean what he does" (11. 13-14). The syntax can be taken two ways: either the new vision will exist for the rest of his life, or for the rest of his life, ignoring the period punctuating the end of the line, "We will mean what he does." Again, there is no reason why *both* could not work: the vision established for the rest of his life will serve as guide for them both as they are parts of the same person. In this

way, the developed part of the original "I," the Indian part, suggests a concentration on one's own ancestral pathfinder, on a return, perhaps, to Indian lore as a guide.

The present Black Mountain poets, of course, are the chief exponents of the return to lost cultures as a kind of restoration of the imagination. The term offered by Robert Duncan is, in fact, the description of such a place as a "made place"; I prefer the term "found place" as in "found poetry" or "found art" of any kind. The temptation here is to immediately identify this territory as found culture; as Olson's *The Kingfishers* refinds and embraces the lost Mayan culture as his own, the lost and refound Cree culture shifts the Indian locale from Central America to North America. The difference between Olson's found culture and Stafford's located place, however, is enormous: the difference exists chiefly in the distinction between that which is imaginative as projective verse projects the mind into the past, into a once actual place, and that which is actual as the place is identifiable in the present and marked for travel in the future. Stafford's place is more locatable on a map; Olson's is down there somewhere in a rain swamp as he himself suggested, and occupies more a theory of space than an actual place. Stafford's Indian steps out of, perhaps, *The Pathfinder* or out of the pages of Indian history and folklore: "Back of this page / the path turns north" (11. 14-15), but this, of course, is part of the poetry. The difference lies in the perception of the degree of the emergence of reality from a dream, or perhaps the difference lies in the power of the imagination to conjure up the real world from the imagined world. In this latter case, if Olson's theoretical found place is more imagined, Stafford's poetic imagination is certainly stronger, for the Indian actually emerges from the past, is recalled to life, is resurrected and in *person* proceeds to restore the spirits of the main speaker of the poem. The emphasis on actuality and on *action* as part of actuality cannot be ignored. To 'mean' and to 'do' are different; Olson only *means,* but only Stafford's Indian *does.* He is silent; he travels quietly north. The moccasins of both swift runners, travelers, by the last line of the poem, "do not mark the ground," and the integration of the two companions is complete.

The word "mark" is a kind of pun here as the line above read "We are looking for a sign" (1. 15). The imagery of sight in the

poem reinforces the multileveled interpretation of the speaker as seer searching for a direction. The sign of the compass for north is just one example of the possible puns on language as first sign and then symbol; the South American Spanish have an expression: *tener un norte en la vida* and the implications are clear that the poet holds the north as a desirable direction in more than one way. The habit of "looking for a sign, is, of course, more developed than inherited although a certain set of mind is required. This set of mind is, again, reflected in the setting: the new shore shows "rock in the light and noon for seeing" as if every possible detail of the environment is visibly intensified by the sun at midday reflected off the blanched rock.

II

The general question of the spirit of Stafford's wilderness is raised by the inferences in the specific example. A set of descriptions of his state of nature emerges from which certain conclusions may be drawn. One clear element discernible in "Returned to Say" is the very palpable imagination of the forest; this wilderness of Stafford's truly has a life apart capable of producing an echo of its own mysterious personality in the actual figure of the Indian. The Indian here represents the nature that he seeks to know; the energy required for the resurrection of the spirit of nature must be enormous; it is the wilderness itself who has "returned to say" that what is mandatory in this city-plagued time is a return to nature. Nature then becomes the new chief as the Indian, at first lost and unsure, retrieves his confidence and merges with the spirit around him. Again, in this twentieth-century Renaissance, the harmony between body and spirit has been re-established and a direction toward integrity achieved. The beginning of the journey is blessed by the ritual of baptism: "we have drunk new water from an unnamed stream" and nournished by the peace of soul that characterizes the quiet of the line "Henceforth we gesture even by waiting."

As usual in Stafford and in most romantic poetry, nature is also somewhat dependent upon the state of mind and the state of activity of the men in the poem. Here, the noon brightness reflects the open vision of clarity that distinguishes the lucidity of this direction. The effect is dramatically anthropomorphic. In this poem also the drama depends upon the confrontation, the *meeting* of two people: "because we have met" is characteristically grand,

majestic, definitive. The same reaction in nature to a meeting of two people appears in "Glances":

> Two people meet. The sky turns winter,
> quells whatever they would say.
> Then, a periphery glance into danger —
> and an avalanche already on its way.
> (11. 1-4)

The second stanza proceeds to explain how careful, how calculating these two people have always been; however, "they didn't know what it is to *meet*" and the italics are Stafford's. The romantic notion that a whole world can crumble at a glance supports the suspicion that the poet's world, though large and grand, is not so strong as the psychic bond behind two people, or that the spiritual bond created between men is supported by the physical and instinctively responsive force of nature. Such consequences to a single act of man are dangerous, like an avalanche, but man rides its force like the sea, looking firmly at the present, concentrating on the balance needed for the motion of the ride "calm and still on a speeding stone" (1. 14).

The form of the poem supports the theme behind this phenomenon of "meeting." The rhyme scheme is consistently either whole or slanted in the alternate lines. For instance, in the first stanza, the whole rhymes are *say* and *way,* the slanted *winter* and *danger.* In the third stanza, the rhymes are eye and slant: *gone, stone,* and *avalanche, stand.* But right in the center, the eye of the hurricane, *haste* and *waste* rhyme, but the two outstanding words of the poem, the words *lives* and *meet* do not conform, do not rhyme at *all.* Since *meet* is the only word in the poem that appears in italics and since it is the other word in the poem that does not rhyme, it is certain that the attention drawn to the word significantly intensifies the poetic description of the theme of encounter.

The wilderness in Stafford's poem is alternately active and passive; the degree of activity changes from poem to poem, and also sometimes within the same poem as the latent power of the wilderness emerges after a long wait. Fort instance, in "Representing Far Places," the realization of the life of the universe occurs in the first stanza; it is necessary to quote the entire stanza in order to see the transformation take place:

> In the canoe wilderness branches wait for winter;
> every leaf concentrates; a drop from the paddle falls.

> Up through water at the dip of a falling leaf
> to the sky's drop of light or the smell of another star
> fish in the lake leap arcs of realization,
> hard fins prying out from the dark below.
>
> (11. 1-6)

The arc appears through the transformation of the extraordinary energy required to convert a passive mass into an active, moving force. The laws of physics govern both atoms of water and light, as well as the astronomical world of "the smell of another star" which turns out to be a star / fish emerging from the underworld of the sea, traveling through the dark. The ocean represents the "far place" of space just as the place of the poem represents the "far place" conjured up by the mind "in society when the talk turns witty" (1. 7). Then, "you think of that place, and can't polarize at all" (1. 8), can't, that is, locate the pole exactly, but the "land fans in your head / canyon by canyon" (11. 9-10) and the mind itself becomes a representation of not only far places but of the concept of place itself. Like a seventeenth-century cosmographical description of the human body, this twentieth-century cosmographical description of the human mind sees in "one little room an everywhere" as: "Representing far places you stand in the room . . . among contradictory ridges in some crescendo of knowing" (11. 11, 14).

The opposite also occurs frequently in Stafford, that is when the wiledrness, the place, assumes human characteristics. In "Traveling through the Dark," it is not only nature who responds instinctively to life, the fawn ready to be born inside a deer dead on the edge of the road, but also the mechanical world of the car that responds organically:

> The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
> under the hood purred the steady engine.
> I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
> around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.
>
> (11. 13-16)

The point of view very often, then, becomes what the words literally signify—the point of view from a particular place. You travel through the dark to reach the place and that intersection of the traveler and space becomes the X spot. In "Elegy," the spots are marked as signs:

> At sight of angels or anything unusual
> you are to mark the spot with a cross,

for I have set out to follow you
and these marked places are expected,
but in between I can hear no sound.

(11. 36-42)

In "Time's Exile" the place is marked by sunflowers; they mark the meeting place, the original encounter between two people and as well the path of the traveler "who finds his way by sunflowers through the dark," in the last line of the poem. A "groove in the grass" marks one's "Vocation" so that the place again becomes the point of view and the vocation or task of the poet is to find the place and thus "to find what the world is trying to be," as that last line suggests. Sometimes the search is very subtle and strong, when, for instance, the magnetism of the spot repels the deer but draws the poet: "a fear peace, / where you always had to go to listen" (11. 16-17 "The Thought Machine"), and an exchange takes place between man and nature: afterwards, "the forehead / has the noble look that hill had" (1. 21). Again, although the title of "Things We Did That Meant Something" is very directive, the process of locating the place through color is very imaginative, delicate, and suggestive. In a very fine, precise way, the act is reminiscent of the geometrical process of finding the "locus"; the direction is haphazard but sure. The poet, for instance, tells us "I often glance at a winter color — / husk or stalk, a sunlight touch" (11. 3-4) or maybe the color of a wasp nest in the bush "near the winter river with silt like silver" (1. 6). He tells us that he may get "lost" walking toward this color, and disappear on "the edge of a new knowing" (1. 2), but that is the risk of beauty as Charles Olson would say.

Other times, the parallel is much too obvious. Nature is alive and shouting in "Requiem" where: "A tree in the forest fell; the air remembered. / Two rocks clinked in the night to signal some meaning" (11. 3-4). Or, the point of view from the position of nature's animals is appalling: the view for example of the "Chickens the Weasel Killed" appealing to the ground with their wings, or "The View from Here" of the cold Antarctic penguins who, supposedly like Milton and like us, stand and wait. In "Captive," the tiger at the zoo and the man watching him outside his cage change position and point of view as the bars of the cage melt into a pattern of stripes on the tiger's back.

Also somewhat weak but interesting from the point of view of originality and technique are the museum poems. The problem

of writing poems about objects in a museum is that the objects themselves as works of art are already once removed from the concrete level of image, already abstracted from the senses to begin with. The phenomenon is like writing a poem about a painting or about a piece of music: the instinct is to *see* the object rather than write about it. But aside from that initial artistic problem, the point of view as technique is extraordinary: the objects are more capable of staring than Emily Dickinson's frozen nature: "Still faces on the wall: that look / the early camera gave—hold still for time" are opening lines for the perspective of "The Museum at Tillamook." The faces on the wall watch the traveler in the museum "looking history / back and forth." Then the perspective shifts back to the traveler describing the men who belong to the faces: Joe Champion first white settler, with his carved cradles, one for the baby and the other for the grain. "Where's his grave," Stafford asks, and you see the figure, the wax ghost of the settler for the first time perhaps as an unburied corpse, a purgatorial soul wandering through the museums of the world. A grave in the form of a canoe — "canoe or coffin" — *does* appear then to demonstrate the flood of '49 and the eyes of one of the old men stare at something "above the camera: the eyes go back" (1. 23).

This very macabre tableau of the historical cycle of life and death is paralleled by a tableau of natural history on the next floor:

> Upstairs other creatures from the wild
> have gathered — cold, natural scenes: an owl of snow,
> a wolf with clear eyes looking down over the blown
> birds' eggs, through the floor
> . . . . . .
> into Joe's hollow tree (11.24-29)

The reproduction of the natural scene suggests what probably originally took place as the natural scene watches the settlers, and the settlers in turn attempt to protect themselves against the natural forces: animals, winter, hunger, flood, death.

Somewhat less effective — lacking the two dimensional vision of the tunneled watching hole through the floor to the tree—is the poem "In the Museum." The speaker puts a talisman, a shard, a relic, a fragment, into the hand of his companion and the effect is supposedly like that of radium—the waves of energy and association circle out in ripples from the center. The idea is fine, but the chosen metaphor and closing lines are weak: "Let one by one

things come alive like fish / and swim away into their future waves."

The shard in "In the Night Desert" is much more of a talisman although Stafford does not say so. Instead, its power appears in its effects, in the ordering of the night desert behind its back and in the analogy with language which gives the energy to the relic: the "Apache word for love" is a "talk-flake / chipped like obsidian," so strong that, once said, it is never said again, the tongue so twisted and numb, the desert so placed out of the way that it can never interfere again. The magic talisman, the ancient Indian word for love, controls person and place through time; lesser words succumb to time and the desert like dead Indians: "one / more word that spins / In the dust." (11. 5-7). Although the colon after this dust introduces the "talk-flake," it is the word for love Stafford is talking about and the colon represents antithesis rather than similarity. Here the talisman is strange and alive, twisting like a tornado, powerful as the empty space of silence when missing. Its setting is out-of-doors, and since that is Stafford's special place, it could be the contributing reason for the poem's success.

Again, "The Old Hamer Place" is effective because the natural scene claims the abandoned house. The old place is haunted by the animals rushing the house, crashing into the hills, by the "moaning / seasons" wandering through the room, by the shadows of living nature that grow in the dark. The place is vulnerable to nature because it is so hollow, so deserted, so like a "night desert." So even the poet can cause the place to fall:

> I touch that wall, collapsing it there where
> no one knows, by the quavering owl sound
> in a forest no one knows.
>
> (11. 16-18)

But at the same time the place is fragile for collapse, it is also open for restoration and can "come shuddering back" at a magic touch. "A place that / changed is a different place" says the poet but the process of change allows the object to become its former self — sliding back or forward along the same nerve. In the same way, the poet can touch these places in his mind and find them: Stafford is no projectionist; the places that he conjures up in his mind as a look-out from which to view the world are real, have names like "The Old Hamer Place."

Stafford's strongest places, however, are those which are not so

visible, not so well named although in fact they are very palpable to and locatable by the imagination. Like "Returned to Say," "A Look Returned" represents a borderline between one world and another. Between two states "where Montana meets Alberta" lies the "border of October," or the beginning of change from one season to another. Between the grass and the sky the border is drawn, but the line is imperceptible: "a hill twisted the line / of the seamless land" and "clouds correct the fence's stance" (11. 8-9-10). This is the day relating "winter's province to the state" (1. 7) so that each territory is clear but none is defined. The same "wild" country appears in "late Thinker" where the "pale fields meet winter" (1. 33); two unequal states meet, and the meeting is dynamically uneven. All that the two states ever share is the condition of neighborhood: two countries share the common quality of being next to each other as two seasons and two people. But as Stafford suggests, good fences do *not* make good neighbors, and in this attempt to "find a place" in "unlikely places" as he says in "In Dear Detail, by Ideal Light," sometimes it is necessary to stand right on the border, right at the edge, right at the interesection where two things meet and nothing exists really by itself. This is the "Late Thinker" again hiding in the woods with the fern or hiding behind the map like the northern state afraid of cold and curled behind the paper of the map to avoid the wind and snow. The speaker too, like a tree that acts out what is happening to it in "At Cove on the Croked River," holds the map before his face and looks and hides at the same time, stalking place like the sun in Lake Chelan, dodging peaks of mountains like and intruder trespassing on forbidden ground. This traveler moves like an instinctive natural force but reads the map like the map reads him. The "Look Returned" then is continual as the relationship between man and nature knows no end, as the hands of nature—the swirling snow—touch the face of man in a prototypal Stafford interchange of attributes, as the poem closes:

> But that state so north it curled behind
> the map in hands of snow and wind,
> clutching the end of no place —
> I hold that state before my face,
> and learn my life. (11.16-20)

The one dimension of place left so far only slightly touched is time; Stafford's poetry, like obedient twentieth-century poetry, sees time as an extension of space so that a certain time in fact becomes

a place. In "The Only Card I Got on My Birthday Was from an Insurance Man," the point of view is from the fixed position of a star: "on a line meridian high / state by state my birthday star comes on / and peers" (11. 2-4). Just as "peers" puns on the point of view from the peering star and the contemporary view of his "peers," "Past its light" also suggests that past is a time as well as a space and the dark well of time is a double representation of time and space like the spoked wheel that turns both the clock and the weather. A candle "marks" the instant of birth like a star marks space. By the end of the poem the deep well of space has merged with the well of time until the space traveler can say: "Who travel these lonely wells can drink that star"; the line is separate from the rest of the poem and closes it. The speaker has found a birthday place and any strong enough to do the same can follow and watch. The whole world could fall away but like the speakers in "Before the Big Storm," the actors are quiet at the moment of expectation, at the edge of the town.