

Pacifism in William Stafford's Poetry

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Abstract

In an age that reinforces a culture of war and faith in military violence as means to resolve social and political conflicts, William Edgar Stafford (1914 – 1993), National Book Award winner and poet Laureate, stands as a prolific pacifist American poet whose both life and anti-war poetry carried a diligent endeavor to articulate a vision of a 'beloved community'. From World War II until his death in 1993, his conviction of peace remained solid and his belief in the futility of wars did not change. A Conscientious Objector, Stafford registered himself as a pacifist along with Robert Lowell (1917-1977) and William Everson (1912-1994), the civilian poets who played an essential role in shaping and representing American anti-war poetry of World War II. He knew that he could not stop war but through his art he sought to implement a culture of peace, a new home, a universe of human fellowship whose members choose to preserve life rather than put an end to it and restore the image of a land that bombing destroyed. Throughout his fifty-year literary career, he advocated pacifism and consistently argued that it is crucial to act independently when violence rules and to speak for reconciliation when nations fight. How Stafford confronted and defied a history of the so-called inevitable wars, the powers of modernism, militarism, and war propaganda as well as the traditional portrayal of the bitter-beauty horror of war within his pacifist poetics is the basic question this paper tends to answer. Whether he was a starry-eyed idealist or a realist in arguing for strife free nation is another question to be answered.

Pacifism in William Stafford's Poetry

"On a battlefield, the flies don't care who wins."

**William Stafford, *Journal Entry*,
Jan., 1986**

To serve his moral code of peace as a Conscientious Objector¹, William Stafford took the challenge to set himself as a modern American poet apart from the mainstream of the cultural and literary expectations. His powerful poetic voice followed the dictates of his social and political consciousness and sought to rebuild his society on basis of justice, freedom, and respect for law and difference. His numerous poetry volumes and his choice of the lyric as his poetic pattern provided an untraditional insight into the meaning of the individual and the collective sense of peace. Neither founding new forms of poetry nor experimental techniques was his objective to embody his poetic perspective. Instead he

projected a serene style to engage his poetry in a direct action against illegitimate wars, nuclear-proliferation, and any destructive consequences of the ever increasing technological development. If it is “naïve to seek for national and international security through poetry,” as Kim Stafford points in his introduction to *Every War Has Two Losers*, Stafford believes “it is naïve to seek with weapons of steel.”²

By the time Stafford published his first major books of poems, *West of Your City* (1960) and *Traveling Through the Dark* (1962) and *The Rescued Year* (1966), New Criticism was at its peak, a movement that marked the intellectual development of literary theory. Though it championed lyric poetry, it emphasized a linguistic approach to literary works by means of a structure-modeled on language, excluding the reader’s response, the author’s intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis. Within this context anti-war poetry was largely dismissed by critics as untypical of the literary and social craving of the current era, too easily categorized, dangerously ahistorical, self-righteous, politically unviable, not self-critical and easily forgotten.³ Stafford’s pacifist poetics and lyrical poetry that relied on the use of colloquial language and casual conversational and narrative style was often assumed as deceptively simple, preachy, untimely and lacking complexity of thought. Stephen Corey, for instance, a reviewer in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* critiques Stafford’s simple language, conventional ideas and coherence, saying:

But still the poet must give new words to old ideas...Stafford is willing to have his language collapse at times as the price paid for building a voice virtually engirdled by poetic gestures...there are times when freshness departs from Stafford’s writing, and we are left only with the clarity of statements.⁴

Some critics like Richard Howard, in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* objects to the concealed meaning of Stafford’s poems, lack of development and the uniformity they exhibit:

So the poems accumulate but they do not *grow*; they drift like snowflakes into a great and beautiful body of canceling work ... for Stafford is, in all of his determinations, minor...there are a great many poems of equal and enormous merit—but written at

different times cannot immediately say which was written first, cannot settle their chronology on the basis of the poems themselves. That is the world of minor poetry.⁵

Roger Dickinson Brown, on the other hand, reckons Stafford's poetic output as moral pronouncements, stating, "I see a man seduced by his own habit of being very simple and very wise ... that kills perception."⁶ While other critics like Paul Zweing considers Stafford's rhetorical simplicity as "strained simplicity" and "deliberate naiveté."⁷ In reply to these critical accusations about his dominated complacency or dull style, Stafford explains his style later in *You Must Revise Your Life* (a collection of essays and poems published in 1986):

People have told me that my way is spineless and slovenly...but there are considerations deriving from my way of writing. Each piece comes to me as crystallization of its own, and preferably without my thinking of its effect on others.⁸

It is irrefutable that Stafford's poems in general and those of the pacifist inclination in particular reflect a consistency in perspective, premise and methods all throughout his poetic production, a characteristic which made them "variously collected by editors according to theme or chronology or central concern."⁹ Whether this consistency is to be regarded as one of Stafford's poetic demerits or not, his unchanging sensibility with which his poems are characterized does exhibit richness of insight and flexibility in thought and literary form, both of which are rooted in his own individual and spiritual belief about living nonviolently. Like Robert Frost (1874–1963) before him, Stafford was a poet who wrote out of an experience of America and the American landscape within a serene style that is burdened with frequent colloquialisms and a sort of narrative folk tales. His many poetry volumes came naturally from exploring and contemplating his surroundings and ordinary things as well as responding to the immediate needs of his society. Linda Wagner attributes Stafford's plain style of poetry to his concern with "the way man is living, the way man has to become himself...because his mission is great to obscure pure art."¹⁰ In other words, Stafford's vocation as a poet and conviction as a pacifist meant to provide his readers a lucid spiritual

and pacifist trail to follow, which have gained the wrong impression from some scholars. In his short essay, "A Way of Writing," he states:

At times, without my insisting on it, my writings become coherent; the successive elements that occur to me are clearly related. They lead by themselves to new connections. Sometimes the language, even the syllables that happen along, may start a trend....This attitude toward the process of writing creatively suggests a problem for me, in terms of what others say... Writers may not be special or talented in any usual sense. They are simply engaged in sustained use of a language skill we all have.¹¹

Neither the complexity of language nor finding occasional or untried patterns was the means Stafford relied on to breathe meaning into his poems and gain sympathetic readers. He insisted on coherent language that is in itself capable of creating a literary canon of its own. Tom Andrews points to the fact that some critics and scholars have failed "to grasp how concentrated force of mind- a shrewd, energetic intelligence-is mobilized to support Stafford's mild soft-spokenness, those lines that would breathe a harmless breath."¹² To dive deep into human experiences and values, Stafford "has studiously avoided the appearance of being so esoteric or difficult,"¹³ employing a non-allusive approach that would serve the social and literary role he aspired to achieve:

If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me... By "standards" I do not mean "correctness" spelling, punctuation, and so on...I am thinking about such matters as social significance, positive values, consistency, etc....Working back and forth between experience and thought, writers have the whole unexplored realm of human vision.¹⁴

To write about the 'unexplored realm of human vision' Stafford developed "an act of deep listening. He was not only listening to the voices in his world. He was listening inwardly, to signals emanating from the deepest levels of his own being."¹⁵ He did not only reflect on his own vocation as a writer and his posture as a CO, but of all the modern American poets, "he brooded most about community—the 'mutual life' we shared,"¹⁶ as Robert Bly (1926-)¹⁷ exclaims in his introduction to *Down in My Heart*. Bly who was Stafford's close friend and collaborator,

similarly argues for the power of contemplative poetry to engage with political questions and delve into a nation's profound core, asserting in his 1980 essay "Leaping up into Political Poetry":

The life of the nation can be imagined also not as something deep inside our psyche, but as a psyche larger than the psyche of anyone living, a larger sphere, floating above everyone. In order for the poet to write a true political poem, he has to be able to have such a grasp of his own concerns that he can leave them for awhile, and then leap up into this other psyche.¹⁸

Under the influence of his spiritual affiliation to the Christian meditative tradition,¹⁹ his exposure to Quaker tradition of meditation through the Brethren churches,²⁰ and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, Stafford learned how to be part of the ongoing effort of humanity to identify and probe into the core of their striving for truth and then finding a way of reconciling this truth with the world. In his prolific prose memoir, *Down My Heart* (1947), which emerged out the fire of his war resistance experience between 1942 to 1945, Stafford states, "We had tried meditation. We had charged our spiritual batteries,"²¹ realizing that conscience was not merely an individual matter but an internal source of truth. Illustrating his radical pacifism and experience as a writer in terms of story and river metaphors, Stafford says:

My life in writing, or my life as a writer, comes to me as two parts, like two experiences; rivers that blend. One part is easy to tell: the times, the places, events, and people. The other is mysterious; it is my thoughts, the flow of my inner life, the reveries and impulses that never get known—perhaps even to me.²²

This passage explains his disinclination to follow an expected pattern of writing or life; the outline he followed was a blend of his instantaneous response to the outer events he witnessed and the overflow of his reflective perception of his interior world. Much of that blend came into real embodiment and articulacy by the time he made his untraditional decision to be a CO, a choice that put him under constant examination of his inner self and his moral conviction of peace:

My four years of “alternate service under civilian direction” turned my life into that independent channel of the second river—a course hereafter distinguished from any unexplained life, from the way it might have been in any of my hometowns.²³

What could have been more un-American and revered to the mainstream of the American culture but to be a pacifist! The alternate service under civilian direction was the turning point in his life, ‘the channel of the second river’ and the sparkle that moved the poet and the humanist in him. Like Robert Lowell and William Everson, his poetry emerged from “providing grounds of internment to change the landscape of American poetry, in part because of their nuanced struggle against the claims of state of absolute resistance.”²⁴ Yet, these pacifist poets did not protest above ground or withdraw from addressing the political or social issues of their nation, proving that they did not need to be soldier poets to grasp the dreadfulness of war. Their aspiration was not merely producing protest poetry as much as to articulate and argue for their spiritual zeal, for peace as resisters to war in poetry. Unlike Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), the English soldier poets of World War I, Stafford, Lowell and Everson were non-combatant; their engagement in actual physical and social nonviolent action in CPS camps as COs founded a war resistance poetry that critiqued American fictitious nationalism and its culture of war. For instance, Robert Lowell said of his rejection to participate in World War II as “the most decisive thing I ever did, just as a writer...I cannot honorably participate in a war whose prosecution, as far as I can judge, constitutes a betrayal of my country.”²⁵ William Everson, on the other hand states that their stance as COs and their anti-war poetry was not “pacifist propaganda, but the ideology of pacifism, its conception of human nature, its values and attitudes which are being drawn upon and exhibited in [their] work.”²⁶

Stafford’s War Resistance Poetry

When Stafford applied to be a CO in the fall of 1941 as World War II was looming, he was asked about the reasons for registering as a conscience objector. He answered the questioner, the head of the draft board who happened to be one of his Sunday school teachers that “he had come to this stance because people as his questioner had taught him not to kill. “It was a lesson,” he said, “I never forget.”²⁷ This lesson of never killing came to be a prevailing motif in Stafford’s early and later poetry in which he exposed America’s deceptive cultural, social and political notion of World War II as a model of ‘the good war’.²⁸ The war was assumed as just one that has brought a profound social, political and cultural progress to the United States of America. Philip Metres argues that the so-called assumption of ‘the good war’ has become “a nostalgic cultural myth of a country united by a common cause...[which] willfully forgets racial segregation, the abject of working classes, and the lamentable position of women in American society at the time.”²⁹ Stafford repelled this notion, which was extensively accepted by the American culture even after the attack on Pearl Harbor.³⁰ After this horrible attack more than 50.000 American repudiated military service and registered as COs, a matter which deeply implanted in Stafford and other pacifist poets a definite fact that they were neither made to carry arms nor run away but stay and serve with pens in their hands to write a new chapter of American history. In his memoir, he chronicles what it like was to refuse to serve and defend one’s country through military service, preferring to preserve loyalty and union to one’s community via pacifist ways: “What spirit had we by now in our hearts? And what was the power thereof? We were together to start another chapter under conscription....We were starting a home again, but in a way, by this time, we were carrying a home with us.”³¹

The first decade of his poetry recorded his intuitive retreat from the insidious violence of World War II and its aftermath. The four hundred poems he composed between 1937-1947, which Fred Marchant collected those of high value in *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-1947* reveal a distinctive image of America, infused with a humanist and poetic voice that went far beyond the limits of lyricism. With no tone of despair or self-righteous fervor, though melancholic,

Stafford's early poems inflame the reader's imagination with a desired culture of peace that is juxtaposed with a manifestation of a world of violence. "White Pigeons," Stafford's first poem, written in spring 1937, renders an image of an 'aching land' where a little boy is startled by 'a wild goose':

What's that —
 The trumpet call, the haunting cry of aching land —
 A wild goose passing?
 From down what violet sky —
 The looming winter night now edging frozen land —
 Come circling home
 White pigeons?
 This is the aching land,
 The bleak and desolate.
 This is the plains.
 On this blank loneliness in huddled clump
 A house, a barn, and fences.
 A boy, foreshortened, small, wind-buffeted,
 His pigeons watched come home.
 Hard sky, hard earth.
 Soft pigeons.³²

The white 'soft pigeons' obviously kindle a sense of peace in the reader, which is contrasted with the 'hard sky' and 'hard earth' where seems no substance of security. The alarming 'wild goose' as a sort of wild bird of prey, suggests danger as it passes over the 'edging frozen land.' However, the boy sees his white pigeons returning, 'His pigeons watched come home' despite the haunting cry of threat. The way the pigeons are seen 'circling home' symbolizes the need of these innocent birds to survive and preserve their unity as a small community. "White Pigeons" might be read either as an example of Stafford's prophetic vision of the beginning of World War II, or his pacifism in simple narrative form. But it obviously shows his meditative approach and insightful vision of the desolation and bleakness a land may stumble upon once it loses its sense of sanctuary.

During World War II and in the face of human cruelty, Stafford tried to listen to the voices of humanity but the voices of war seemed very

overruling. In “Their voices were stilled...,” he expresses how the sound of war at war time becomes the only thing heard across the land that looks like a ‘lush desert’ (AWI,p.24):

Their voices were stilled across the land.
I sought them. I listened.
The only voices were war voices.
Where are the others? I asked, lonely
in the lush desert.
One voice told me secretly:
We do not speak now, lest we be misunderstood.
We cannot speak without awakening the dragon of anger
to more anger still.
That’s why you are lonely.(AWI,p.24)

Stafford seems to create an ahistorical space, “where a single lyric voice explores the mysteries of existence and imparts some hard-won wisdom.”³³ Speaking of his experience as a CO, the speaker’s narrative reveals the intensifying sense of alienation and anger at his American society that refused to acknowledge conscientious objectors. At the same time, he reveals a noble sense of affection to his fellow COs who are silenced and stilled by ‘the dragon of anger,’ the violent power of war. He lays bare the reality and complexity encountered by COs and pacifists during World War II who were misunderstood and alienated as they tried to nurture a community that was in direct clash with war. They were lonely in their struggle for peace against the enforced regimentation of violence. They actually strove to find “down in [their] hearts,” a common bond of fellowship and peace, “something more important—something prerequisite to—any geographical kinship or national loyalty.”³⁴

To enforce this protest against war, Stafford uses the lyric ‘I’, which was often assumed by his contemporary critics as a sort of unpragmatic poetic object to escape reality, or as Theodore Adorno states in “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” that it is an expression of “the dream of a world in which things could be different.”³⁵ Stafford always revered the traditional and objective attitude towards history that considered objectivity as the only authentic way to explore historical facts. His use of the lyric ‘I’,

which is considered as a romantic orientated poetic object, served Stafford to individualize his own war experience and rebel against a hostile culture that alienated every individual of a pacifist nature. Though he displayed subjective reality that was somehow not contained entirely by the present, he never abandoned the real situation of the collective 'We'. In "CO's Work on Mountain Road," the first person speaker merges with the marginalized voices of COs:

Like bay trees on the edge of La Cumbre Peak,
liking with wistful scent the swooping world below,
We few dreamers
on the edge of new savage years, jagged beyond sight,
audaciously lean, suspending a few cold messages from
the old earth still under our trustful feet.
The pines have left us and are marching;
the sycamores fly angry tints;
the oaks present overworked postures, extreme.
Who cares in a big country for a few agent trees,
on one cliff, on an edge, leaning far out,
on a scent like a memory? (AWI,p.36)

The fact that the COs' communal resistance to the structure of war was ignored has set them apart from their own society, for who would care 'in a big country' for 'a few dreamers,' 'a few agent trees.../ leaning far out' and exiled 'on one cliff'? Those who objected for reasons of conscience were situated at the point and considered tearing in the social and the national unity of America. Such a task seemed to be a doomed project, yet their faith struggled to remain alive. In an angry world, their work served a purpose still, keeping their 'trustful feet' faithfully attached to their land, justly standing and dreaming of 'another world instead/ Where easy wind flows river over head' ("Exile", AWI,p.24).

Stafford's constant depiction of the image of the 'earth' or 'land' emphasizes one of the essential problems he faced as an American citizen and poet, which was to orient himself with a landscape that literally and spiritually distorted by violence. He knew that World War II was a profound shock to the future path of American history. Basically, it changed how the non-combatant COs thought of themselves and how they

thought of the world around them, as Stafford points out: “The country we had known was gone, had completely disappeared, was wiped out in a bombing that obliterated landmarks which had stood for years—since long before we were born.”³⁶

In another poem, “From the Sound of Peace,” written around the fall of 1941, the time Stafford was registered a CO, the speaker expresses a dismal picture of ‘tomorrow’ that is dark and so vulnerable like ‘a glass and an egg,’ with no promise but ‘a bomb ticking’:

Now is glass and an egg and gossamer in the wind.
Tomorrow is darkness and a bomb ticking.
But peace and yesterday are a still pool.
Peace and yesterday are a shadow quiet on the
wall.(AWI,p.12)

The lyrical plain language and running sentence rhythms Stafford uses here, manifest a dreary atmosphere where the speaker sees the ‘serious faces’ and ‘shadowy eyes’ of the COs torn between obeying their moral conscience and the price they had to pay if they did not:

I saw their serious faces, in the dark,
In the night,
By shadow-fled lightning.
I saw their faces lifted in questioning silence.....
The shadowy eyes, the poignant throats...(AWI,p.13)

The speaker confronts the fragility of the world and human nature, indicating the spiritual dilemma the COs went through, the dilemma of resolving their role as pacifists and fighters against the attraction of violence.³⁷ It was the ethical crisis they faced when some COs feared the failure of CPS service specially as they found themselves torn spiritually, isolated in neglected areas, underemployed, largely forgotten, and mostly forced to do meaningless tasks. In this regard, Stafford says: “The social fabric rent by war presented itself as thousands, as millions indeed, of broken fellowships, of alienations. Continually the forces of war incited frustration and enmities that led to easily personal rebellion.”³⁸

However, before “From the Sound of Peace” closes, the speaker exhibits a potentiality to preserve some trace of peace in the face of an

imminent hostility. It comes from an act of deep listening to a prophetic voice, coming from ‘the sound of peace’ as well as from the brink of war:

And from the sound of peace I heard a voice,
 A man who raised before the wind of steel
 A wispy tapestry of wondering:
 "Why follow half-way saviors, men who kill
 Or lie or compromise for distant ends?
 Marauders come; but no man dares cry ‘Wolf!’
 The wolves look too much like our guardians ..." (AWI, p.12-13)

A voice of another man is heard, a man that ‘raised before the wind of steel,’ not only does it imply a promising or upcoming spiritual resurrection but also warns the speaker of the lying voices of war, the ‘half-way saviors’ and ‘Wolf’ that mistakenly look ‘much like our guardians’. The biblical images of the ‘wolf’ and the ‘half-way saviors’ are meant to highlight the falsity of the generals and leaders of war who are compared to the alluring Antichrist or false prophets, deceiving poor spirits about some sort of fake kingdom for which they have to kill and die. The poem ends with the speaker’s statement: ‘But out of the sickness of a haunting vision/ I would cry for them,’ even if it was ‘only a little cry’.

The ‘only little cry’ is relentless and persistent in the hearts of those who devoted themselves to proclaim the vainness of violence. “The one who said ‘No violence’...,” a poem exemplifies Stafford’s diligent venture to be part of building and repairing the damage World War II caused:

The one who said “No violence”
 Said “mountains,”
 And they are here, storm-violent, of stone.
 Whoever looks across their peaks and wonders
 Will feel the friendly men are all alone.
 That all alone they speak to one another,
 That all alone they build or they repair.
 They stand and look, unmoved, beyond the
 mountains (AWI, p.60).

Though peace makers are alone in their social and political inclinations, they share each other a deeply rooted friendship which is described in terms of the solid earth. They might have no power to stop the brutality of war but they ‘stand...unmoved,’ upholding their faith in the ‘rich plains’ that lie ‘beyond the mountains’. Often, the rock like- stability of nature and the land is at hand in Stafford’s poems, alluding to the healing power in nature’s ever present lesson of courage, wisdom and hope.

Nature’s ever present lesson of forbearance and strength is in total support with Stafford’s anti-war poetics and its assertion on his never forgotten lesson about not killing. In “Inspirational Talk” he exposes the fictitious and mythical story of patriotism that was told over and over to American people and dictated to soldiers:

“We must dedicate our lives!” The speaker views
 The men all smothered in muffling phrase.
 “Give, give, be hurt, even to death!” he says.
 Teasing his guilt with candy soldiers use.
 With this hate-called-love for human kin,
 I meanwhile lolling in amoral ease
 From loud guilt- frenzied saints take refugees- (AWI,p.21)

With a mild sarcasm, Stafford mocks the so-called virtue of loyalty to one’s country for which soldiers are promoted to kill on basis of love that is actually hate ‘for human kin’. The ironical title of the poem, “Inspirational Talk” refers to Stafford’s absolute opposition to the distorted concept of nationalism or patriotism, which is constantly preached by political leaders, the ‘loud guilt-frenzied saints’.

In stark contrast to the poetry of English soldier poets, most known for their idealistic war sonnets written during the First World War, Stafford’s poetic output lacks any sentimental out look at war or the visual aspect it might explicitly convey. Though English soldier poets came to be disillusioned by the horror of war, their poetry remained in the tradition of focusing on their war experiences with much sentimentality. For Stafford, war was not about bravery and sacrifice, but about a place where “the flies don't care who wins.”³⁹

His growing resistance against war is heightened by the time the United States launched the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki

during the final stages of World War II in 1945. In “The Sound Summer, 1945,” Stafford envisions the atomic bomb as a rising snake out of its target:

Not a loud sound, the buzz of the rattlesnake.
But urgent. Making the heart pound a loud drum.
Somewhere in dead weeds by a dry lake
On cracked earth flat in the sun.
The living thing left raises the fanged head,
Tormented and nagged by the drouth,
And stares past a planet that’s dead,
With anger and death in its mouth. (AWI,p.82)

The speaker sees the rising of the mushroom cloud as the epitome of an evil and monstrous being that annihilates life, turning it into a ‘cracked earth’ and threatening every living thing ‘with anger and death in its mouth’.

As the Vietnam War came a long, Stafford reiterated his belief in pacifism and expressed his fear of the cold war that was fostering a strong sense of paralysis and divisiveness, which made it “very hard to maintain the sense of community” that seemed to him “necessary for the health of the country or in a society when we are torn.”⁴⁰ The lack of unity and harmony between man and his nation, man and nature shatters the possibility of reconciliation and peace. It is striking to know that most Americans thought that the American involvement in the Vietnam War was not wrong, a fact that instilled Stafford’s emergent protest against illegitimate and mass destructive wars. His poetry of the 1960s and 1970s prevailed in the conviction of arguing against America’s chauvinistic tendency and plastic values, which drifted other nations to nuclear ruin. But it also came to be more burdened with a deep felt love to humanity and a stronger belief in the possibility of a peaceful and better culture.

The failure of the American history and American culture to preserve this unity is implied in “At the Bomb Testing Site,” one of Stafford’s famous lyric poems of war resistance, published in *The West of Your City* (1960). It uncovers the inhumanity man can cause to man and man to nature rendered within a surprising animalistic imagery:

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,

watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.
It was looking for something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.
There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.⁴¹

The bomb testing site has turned the world into a desert, a bare landscape where a lizard, a weak creature and “a most primitive form of life. Ugly. Expendable-like those laboratory animals” is tense, panting and “stuck in inside in a maze under the bright lights.”⁴² Stafford, strikingly chooses, a lizard to testify for the lie of war. In this regard, he is unlike the English soldier poets of World War I whose poetry varied between the mixed realism, compelling sense of compassion, and the disturbing illustration of what battle truly looked, smelled, and sounded like to showing the bitter-beauty of war. Stafford’s war resistance poetry is not the embodiment of battle trenches, addressed to an audience hitherto lulled by patriotic propaganda or a romanticized reflection of false glorify.

Instead of exemplifying an experience of a soldier in a battle field, the poet makes the lizard an actual witness to brutal history and “one of the significant moments of in the Cold War: the test of the detonation of a nuclear warhead,”⁴³ as Donald Ball puts it. But it is also anxious, ‘looking for something farther off/ than people could see’. It is so ironical that this creature “with its history of change and evolution, knows more about ‘the flute consequences’ than man, with his foolish need to dominate the world.”⁴⁴ Out of anxiety, the lizard grips the desert with the need to preserve its existence as the nuclear annihilation tends to invade the continent and leaves not ‘much on it/ under sky that never cared less’. Stafford portrays the universe with an apocalyptic cycle of destruction in which man stands indicted before an innocent lizard.

“Boom Town,” likely, meditates on the blind progress of civilization and its growing bestiality and senselessness to people and the natural world:

Into any sound important
a snake outs its tongue
so at the edge of my home town
every snake listened
And all night those oil well engines
went talking into the dark;
every beat felt through a snake,
quivering to the end (WOYC,p.46)

The reality of the atomic rockets and the nuclear weapons becomes the emblem of destroying every living thing. Within the use of animalistic imagery, Stafford expresses fear of this imminent destruction and draws the attention to the snakes, those living creature, which listen to every 'sound important' coming from the speaker's home town with their tongues out. They 'quiver to the end' by the oil engines that keep 'talking into the dark' and kill a snake with every beat. But when the oil is depleted by the time the speaker visits his home town,' he realizes 'how late it was,' for 'the snakes, forgetting away through the grass/ Had all closed their slim mouths' (WOYC,p.46). With an elegiac tone, Stafford displays a sad image of these helpless animals, melting away in the wilderness by the unthinking violence and sterility of modern civilization.

Though there is no indication of the historical event behind this poem, in "Watching the Jet Planes Dive," the speaker attempts to invoke history into the present within the use of "the metaphor of the trail and the journey to symbolize our arduous journey toward the self"⁴⁵:

We must go back and find a trail on the ground
back of the forest and mountain on the slow land;
we must begin to circle on the intricate sod.
By such wild beginnings without help we may find
the small trail on through the buffalo-bean
vines.(WOYC,p.37)

Though Stafford, here, seems to use a didactic tone, he calls upon a journey for 'wild beginning' and 'the forest...on the slow land,' as a form of simple and primitive life , which is juxtaposed with the new and fearsome power of the new technology of militarism. The tension that the poem discloses is augmented through "the regular meter and slant

rhyme” that “establish a veneer human artifice with the longings for wild beginning.”⁴⁶ But this need for withdrawal from this modern technology and civilization is replaced later by a deep thirst for human connection that aims at building paths and going beyond map borders to cut down the far distances among peoples. The need to create paths echoes the COs alternative service in CPS camps during World War II when COs actually built bridges and maintained damaged roads in an attempt to cure the wounded souls and hearts that were damaged by war:

We must go back with noses and the palms of our hands,
and climb over the map in far places, everywhere,
and lie down whenever there is doubt and sleep there.
If roads are unconnected we must make a path,
no matter how far it is, or how lowly we arrive.
We must find something forgotten by everyone alive,
and make some fabulous gesture when the sun goes down.....
The jet planes dive; we must travel on our
knees.(WOYC,p.36)

In the uncivilized spaces of America, the speaker sees in “rural Mexico something that has been missing in accounts of history...resources, not for capitalist development but for a future freed from the oppression of war.”⁴⁷ Stafford’s use of the ‘jet planes dive’ is meant to juxtapose ‘travel on our knees,’ an image that implies a symbolic, spiritual and religious act to resist both, technology and warfare. In the light of spiritual resistance, this image seems to be an apt choice, employing “the disparity of power presented by the juxtaposition of the final line [which] renders the jet planes as obscenely, inhumanly phallic”⁴⁸ and enforces the way of living that has been ‘forgotten by everyone alive.’ Sustaining relationships between man and man, man and the wilderness, the individual and his country seems to be an answer to Stafford’s yearning for peace.

The atomic rockets is also the subject of “Our City is Guarded by Atomic Rockets” first published in Stafford’s *The Rescued Year* (1966), in which the speaker fears the growing horror of the steadfast path of the rocket: ‘Breaking every law except the one/ for Go, rolling its porpoise way, the rocket/staggers on its course.’⁴⁹ Stafford broods over the way the world is hard-pressed into a state of sterility being ruined in such a

senseless way by nuclear weaponry: ‘the world goes wrong in order to have revenge./Our lives are an amnesty given us’(TRY,p.20). Nonetheless, in this wilderness and total numbness there seems to be ‘concerned cat,/ saved by its claws’ that is ‘ready to spend/ all there is left of the wilderness, embracing/ its blood’ (TRY,p.20). The speaker sees in this helpless but defiant animal a will to proclaim and ‘spit/ life at the end of my trial where I smell any hunter’(TRY,p.20).

In *An Energy Field More Intense than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Culture* (1995), Michael True seems to echo Stafford’s outlook of America and its reputation for growing violence and its inaccessibility to conceive the importance of teaching a nonviolent culture: “Violence is so much a part of American culture in the late twentieth century that one is likely to think of it as the dominant characteristic. People from abroad who know the United States only through its aggressive foreign policy and its popular culture-including gangster/ counterinsurgency/ war films-certainly-perceive us as a violent people.”⁵⁰ True also notes that “most Americans grow up ‘illiterate’ regarding nonviolent conflict resolution and active peacemaking. Most of us are all but helpless in dealing with conflicts.”⁵¹ The acknowledgement of one’s wider spiritual existence is another aspect in this quest for peace as Stafford implies in “Allegiances,” the title poem from his 1970 volume. This spiritual existence lies first in people’s belonging and integration to their land or wherever one would locate himself; second, it lies in their connectedness to each other: ‘It is time for all the heroes to go home/if they have any;/ time for all of us common ones/to locate ourselves by the real things we live by’.⁵² Expressed in terms of the collective ‘we,’ the speaker addresses all people, calling them to find allegiances in the simple things of the earth: ‘strange mountains and creatures/ elves, goblins, trolls and spiders,’ things that evoke ‘dread and wonder.’ He also speaks to the unacknowledged ‘heroes’ of the world, those who are attached to their homelands, though might have no home of their own:

But once we have tasted far streams, touched the gold,
found some limit beyond the waterfall.

a season changes, and we come back, changed
 but safe, quiet, grateful.....
 we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love
 where we are, strong for common things.(AL,p.77)

When Synthia Lofsness asked Stafford in the course of an interview in 1972 whether there is “any pattern of ideas recurring” in his work, Stafford replied: “Well, one of the elements is not a pattern of ideas, but a feeling of oneness or a feeling of being at home. It’s like the delight of having a shelter in a storm or it’s like the feeling of becoming oriented where you’ve been temporarily disoriented.”⁵³ The immersion of man into communal relationships with his surroundings is, for Stafford, the transforming power of peace, the constructive value of love and the mystery of an infinite oneness with a world that ‘speaks everything to us’ (“Earth Dweller,” AL, p.79).

For Stafford, recognizing the power of this spiritual harmony with one’s land and universe will not only make the individual realize the necessity of peace, which many tend to ignore, but also pursue it. In “Peace Walk,” a poem published in Stafford’s *Stories That Could Be True* in 1977, the speaker portrays how resisters of wars and nuclear weapons are in a devoted quest for peace, though totally overlooked by their own people:

We wondered what our walk should mean,
 taking that un-march quietly;
 the sun stared at our signs— “Thou shalt not kill.”
 Men by a tavern said, “Those foreigners . . .”
 to a woman with a fur, who turned away—
 like an elevator going down, their look at us.⁵⁴

The peace walkers seem to wonder ‘what our walk should mean,’ whether to them or to their people, but they realize that their own untraditional ‘quiet walk’ is an ‘un-march’ that passes unnoticed by others. Stafford juxtaposes the military term ‘march’ with ‘un-march’ pointing up to his readers that this word ‘should undo an act of language as much as an act of war.’⁵⁵ It actually means nothing to the men at the tavern who said ‘Those foreigners.../ to a wealthy woman with a fur,’ who ‘turned away-/ like an elevator going down, their look at us,’ (STCBT,p.24) refusing to

acknowledge their existence. Though their peace walk is set against nuclear arms and based on a spiritual and moral creed, 'Thou shalt not kill,' those pacifists are seen as foreigners and perhaps, a bunch of rioters to the American people. Stafford reveals the cultural and social attitude of the American society that appears unresponsive to nonviolence endeavors, yet the peace walkers held their 'poster up to shade [their] eyes/...by the park, under the autumn trees/it said that love could fill the atmosphere(STCBT,p.24). If these pacifists are unable to change anything around them or get people's support, they are able to spread love that 'fills the atmosphere' and likely shine under the sun and the 'autumn trees.'

In some ways, it can be said that the one grand issue of Stafford's poetry is to show how to live in a world with much hostility and how to be a survivor under extreme conditions. His pacifism and poetry found a way to experiment and sustain this survivor and advocate peace, though they might have not been powerful enough to prevent wars. In 1969, Stafford wrote in his journal: "Is it possible to be a pacifist if you think war is inevitable? I think it is likely. But I am a pacifist to postpone it, shorten it, de-escalate it. I do not think militarists make wars, or stop wars. People do."⁵⁶ His words resonate even more now, and his recognition that warfare does not solve the problem would persistently strike a chord in 21st century, reminding us that 'Every war has two losers' and that 'the wars we haven't had saved many lives.'⁵⁷ His statement during an interview with Thomas E. Kennedy in 1993, the year of his own death, interestingly exhibits his solid refusal of the gulf war, saying:

I was appalled by this war. Like many others. I thought they did the wrong thing. I mean incinerating all those people. Riling up the whole world. A colossal failure of understanding, of the possibilities. Failure of imagination....It's better if you can begin to make it happen by millions of intricate little adjustments. But every now and then someone sees a short trip, thinks "well, we can neglect the secondary effects of this, and we can decisively win this war, so let's do it."⁵⁸

At this point, Kennedy asked him; “So you are opposed to war. All wars? Even a good war? After a period Stafford said, “Show me a good one.”⁵⁹

It is interestingly to note that Stafford’s later poetry carried on its critique against America’s lust for war, specially the one it launched against Iraq in 1991. His “Old Glory,” a poem stemming from the horror of the Gulf War, published in 1992, ridicules the U.S. government’s empirical tendencies to invade other countries:

No flag touched ours this year.
Our flag ate theirs. Ours cried,
“Banner, banner,” all over the sky—
We fear no evil. Salute, ye people.
That feeling you have, they call it glory.
We own it now, they say, under God,
in the sky, on earth, as it is in heaven.⁶⁰

With a satirical tone the speaker exposes America’s false pride associated with the American flag that seems as a monster, eating other countries’ flags. The final line, ‘on earth, as it is in heaven,’ resonates the words of the prayer of Jesus Christ, in an attempt to juxtapose the glory of God and the arrogant “glory” of the United States. The statements made by the speaker about war have gone from the soldier crying out on the battlefield to the civilian calling out from the home front, questioning the righteousness of war itself.

As societies grew tired of the violence and frivolity of war over the course of a century, Stafford’s poetry and that of other modern poets of the same pacifist conviction continued and will continue proposing alternative paths of resistance, shaping poetic articulations of civilized nations both in terms of cultural and literary building substance. Devoid of any childish ideals of military heroism, ideals that American culture still believe in, such pacifist poetics has made a new historical point and changed remarkably America’s fiction of war with a sporadic anti-war mood even within the limitation of the lyric . It might not include much practical advice, but Stafford’s poetry invites readers to probe into and reconsider their long established assumptions about the various social and political issues of our times. At the same time, his plain style and the matter-of-fact tone are inspiring aspects to lead readers of various

backgrounds to explore subtle truths concerning crucial moments of decision-making of untraditional paths that lead to responsible social and pacifist action. Although his pacifism seems to be drowned out by the machinations of wars and the tide of history, it “is like a message in a bottle, an anti-epic, waiting for someone observant enough to notice it,”⁶¹ a message to lodge in the human heart.

Notes

¹Conscientious Objectors (COs) are civilians during the World War I and World War II who refused to fight and chose to be serving in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps and not be part of the armed forces. The program was a kind of a compromise project between pacifist organizations, the Historic Peace Churches, and the U.S. government. For further information consult Albert Keim, *The CPS Story: An Illustrated History of Civilian Public Service*. Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 1990.

²Kim Stafford, ed., *Every War Has Two Losers: William Stafford on Peace & War* (Minnesota: Milkweed, 2003), p.5.

³Philip John Metres, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry in the United States, 1940--2000* (Iowa: The University of Iowa Press, 2007), p.5.

⁴Stephen Corey. “Lives on Leaves”, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 57:4 (1981-Autumn), p.735.

⁵Richard Howard. *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, v. 2, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1974), p.605. pp.605-612

⁶Dickinson-Brown, Roger, “the Wise, the Dull, the Bewildered: What Happens in William Stafford,” *Modern Poetry Studies*, No.6 (Spring 1975), pp.34-35.(pp.30- 38).

⁷Quoted in Metres, p.63.

⁸William Stafford, *You Must Revise Your Life* (University of Michigan Press, 1986), p.17.

⁹Judith Kitchen, *Understanding William Stafford* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina press, 1989), pp.12-13.

¹⁰Linda W. Wagner, “William Stafford’s Plain Style,” *Modern Poetry Studies* 6 (Spring 1975):p.26.

¹¹Stafford, “Whose Tradition?” *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), pp.19-20.

¹²Tom Andrews, ed., *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995), p.38.

¹³Kitchen, p.29.

¹⁴Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl*, pp.18, 20.

¹⁵Fred Marchant, ed. “Introduction” to *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-1947* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2008), p.xxiv.

¹⁶Robert Bly’s “Introduction” to *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p.xiii.

¹⁷Robert Bly (1926-) a close friend and collaborator with poet Stafford, is an American poet, activist and Bly co-founded American Writers Against the Vietnam War, and went on to lead much of the opposition to that war among writers. For further information on Bly see Harris, Victoria Frenkel. *The Incorporative Consciousness of Robert Bly* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University: 1992).

¹⁸Robert Bly, *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (Harper Perennial, 1991), p.249.

¹⁹Christian meditation is a form of prayer in which a structured attempt is made to get in touch with and deliberately reflect upon the revelations of God. See F. Antonisamy, *An introduction to Christian spirituality* (Bandra, Mumdar: The Bomboy St. Pauls Society, 1999), pp. 76-80.

²⁰ Quaker tradition of meditation is a kind of worship in silence and an attenuated openness to the inspiration of God or the Spirit in silent. For further information consult Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness: the Quaker Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), pp.67-100.

²¹ Stafford, *Down in My Heart: Peace Witness in War Time* (Swarthmore: The Bench Press, 1985), p.46.

²² Stafford, *You Must Revise Your life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), p.3.

²³ Ibid., p.11.

²⁴ Metres, p.17.

²⁵ Ibid., p.30.

²⁶ Ibid., p.75.

²⁷ Marchant, p.xv.

²⁸ The notion of 'the good war' can be defined as worthwhile or justifiable wars are the ones which fought against countries headed by supposedly "evil" or dictator regimes. For further information see Mark Weber, "The 'Good War' Myth of World War Two" http://www.ihr.org/news/weber_ww2_may08.html (Accessed 2/5th/2012). and Studs Terkel, ed. *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp.146-49.

²⁹ Meters, "Behind the lines: War resistance poetry in the United States, 1940--2000" (Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 2001), pp.41-42.

³⁰ The attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters and the Battle of Pearl Harbor was a surprise military strike conducted by the Imperial Japanese Navy against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, which caused the death of thousands of marines and navy. "Pearl Harbor attack." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/448010/Pearl-Harbor-attack> (Accessed 2/10/2012).

³¹ Stafford, *Down in My Heart*, p.70.

³² Marchant, p.7. All quoted lines of Stafford's early poetry of the 1940s are taken from the same reference, unless cited. Numbers are placed next to the quoted text.

³³ Metres, 2007, p.64.

³⁴ Stafford, *Down in My Heart*, p.8.

³⁵ Quoted in Metres, 2007, p.65.

³⁶ Stafford, *Down in My Heart*, p.7.

³⁷ It is true that the United States government allowed sincere objectors to serve in noncombatant military roles, but those draft resisters who refused any cooperation with the war effort often sentenced to federal prisons, others were considered traitors to the American military principles, and most of them almost lived on less than a dime a day. See Albert Keim, *The CPS Story: An Illustrated History of Civilian Public Service* (Pennsylvania: Good Books, 1990), pp.2-8.

³⁸ Stafford, *Down in My Heart*, p.8.

³⁹ Kim Stafford, p.60.

⁴⁰ Cynthia Lofsness, "An Interview with William Stafford," *The Iowa Review*, No.3, Vol.3 (Summer 1972), p. 103 (pp.92-106).

⁴¹ Stafford, *West of Your City* (Los Gatos, California: The Talisman Press, 1960), p.31.

⁴² Andrews, p.219.

⁴³ Donald Ball, "I Take My Stance With Care in Such a World": Pacifism, Quakerism, and History in the Works of William Stafford" (Ph.D.Diss., University of Florida, 1996), p.194.

⁴⁴ Kitchen, p.48.

⁴⁵ Malovika Mukerji, "The Forgiving Landscape: The Poetry of William Stafford" (PhD. Diss.: The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1981), p.131.

⁴⁶ Metres, 2007, p.67.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Stafford, *The Rescued Year* (Harper & Row, 1966), p.20.

⁵⁰Michael True, *An Energy Field More Intense than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Culture* (Norway, Sweden: the Netherlands, 1995), p.xx.

⁵¹Ibid., p.128.

⁵²Stafford, *Stories That Could Be True* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p.24.

⁵³Lofness, p.100.

⁵⁴Stafford, *Allegiances* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p.77.

⁵⁵Erland G. Anderson, "Un-marching through poetry: peace walking with William Stafford." *The Explicator*. Vol.66. No.3 (Spring 2008), p130.

⁵⁶Cited in Kim Stafford, p.32.

⁵⁷Ibid., p.8.

⁵⁸Kim Stafford, p.142.

⁵⁹Ibid., p.143.

⁶⁰Stafford, *The Way it Is: New and Selected Poems* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1998), n14.

⁶¹Metres, 2007, p.71.

اللاعنف في شعر وليام ستافورد

"على أرض المعركة، لايهمه الذباب من يفوز." وليام ستافورد، 1986

د. عنان يوسف

في عصر يدعم ثقافة الحرب والايمان بالحلول العسكرية لحسم الصراعات الاجتماعية والسياسية، يتخذ ويليام إدغار ستافورد (1914 - 1993)، شاعر اللاعنف والحائز على جائزة الكتاب الوطني ولقب الشاعر المتوج للولايات المتحدة الامريكية، يتخذ مكانة مهمة في الشعر الأمريكي لسعيه الدؤوب لتوضيح رؤياه لمفهوم اللاعنف ، ومناهضته للحرب. ظل إيمانه بالسلام وقناعاته بعدم جدوى الحروب راسخة دون تغيير منذ الحرب العالمية الثانية حتى وفاته في عام 1993 . وكرافض للخدمة العسكرية ، التحق ستافورد ضمن دعاة اللاعنف مع كل من روبرت لويل (1917-1977) ووليام ايفرسون (1912-1994)، أولئك الشعراء المدنيين الذين لعبوا دورا أساسيا في تشكيل وتمثيل الشعر المناهض للحرب العالمية الثانية. عرف ستافورد انه لا يستطيع وقف الحرب، ولكن من خلال أدبه كان يسعى لتفعيل ثقافة السلام، وبناء بلد جديد، وعالم يستند على الاخاء حيث يختار افراد الحفاظ على الحياة بدلا من وضع حد لها، واستعادة صورة الأرض الجميلة التي دمرتها الحروب. طوال الخمسين سنة لمسيرته الادبية ، دعم ستافورد مبدأ السلام والمصالحة ، معتبرا إياه موقفا مستقلا لمواجهة أساليب العنف والقوة في القرن العشرين. كيف واجه ستافورد من خلال شعره تاريخ ما يسمى بحروب لا مفر منها، وقوى الحداثة والنزعة العسكرية، والدعاية للحرب، وكيف تحدى التصوير التقليدي للوجه القبيح العذب للحروب من خلال مفهومه الشعري للسلام، هي أسئلة رئيسية تحاول هذه الدراسة بحثها والاجابة عليها. وتهدف هذه الدراسة ايضا للتأكيد على أن شعر ستافورد لم يكن طرحا رومانسيا لايمانه بالسلام بل واقعا في دفاعه عن مبدأ بناء عالم حر خال من النزاعات.