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William Edgar Stafford

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William Edgar Stafford
"Getting Our Language Back"
May 1, 1974
Portland State University

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, and may I ask if Celeste O'Dell is in the audience, by the way? Celeste O... [laughs] Can we suspend the ceremonies for a moment while I speak to one of our winners? Thank you.

Welcome to the tenth annual Nina Mae Kellogg awards and lecture on language. I will now present acting president E. Dean Anderson, who will make the awards. The girls will come up on the stage when the awards are announced. [applause]

E. DEAN ANDERSON: I would like to ask Celeste O'Dell and Laurie Boxer if they would come up here. They are both very shy, modest young ladies, very befitting to English majors, but we do want to show them off for just a minute.

Later this month, here at the school, we will have a whole evening devoted to the bestowal of various kinds of academic awards, recognition for scholarship achieved by a large number of students in the course of this year. However, the awards that we're presenting today are so outstanding that we have to have a special occasion for that; we don't want to tuck them into awards night, and so they form the first part of the Nina Mae Kellogg awards and lecture program. The two whom we are honoring today because of their work are Celeste O'Dell first, who is the senior winner for excellence in the English language; this excellence having been demonstrated through grades and writing in literature. You can guess what that GPA is, I think,

without much trouble. But that isn't her only proficiency, because after that 4-point, she only fell off point 0.6 for the total GPA, so she must do well in something besides English.

And I suppose that members of the English staff who are here can cite that as an example of the use of English in achieving excellence in other courses as well. Mrs. O'Dell is a registered nurse, the mother of four children; she's become now enamored of the subject of English and hopes to go on to graduate school. It says here that she is a native of Baker; I'm glad she came west to Portland. Mrs. O'Dell. [applause]

The other winner is Laura... Laurie Boxer, who is receiving the sophomore award for demonstrated excellence in English. She was chosen the best of those who submitted essays, one of which was prepared and one impromptu. We really ought to give each of them a chance to try some impromptu here, but we're not taking that time. I talked about grade point earlier, and I can assure you that hers is right up there as well, and almost the same figures. However, she's a native of Los Angeles, where she attended both Shimer and Los Angeles City Colleges and came north. I mention all that because right at the moment, some people think Portland State isn't attracting enough students, and that may be true, but here are two examples that we are at least attracting the right kind.

She's an English major and has certainly achieved an outstanding record in that study here. Now, the reason I am not handing them their awards, which happen to be checks and should be in envelopes, is that among other things I haven't got the administration of this school completely organized. And while yesterday I asked to have those checks prepared for today, there's a lot of difference between asking and receiving. So, I don't have them to deliver, but I'm going over to get them shortly. I want to welcome all of you here on behalf of the university today, and Bill Stafford, our poet laureate. I think this may be just about his second public appearance, counting as the first one the one when the governor bestowed that recognition on him, and we are very happy to have him come off that hill down to the flat lands and honor us today.

MODERATOR: And I think Laurie Boxer should stand also, shouldn't she? [applause] Oh, oh, I'm sorry, pardon me.

ANDERSON: It isn't only checks that go astray.

MODERATOR: [laughs] Would you like to go back to your seat? Feel free, not if you don't want to.

If I may say so, I think the attractive figures on their GPA don't exhaust that phrase. [laughs] Congratulations to both of you. There are only two ways to introduce a man like Bill Stafford, I suppose: one way, the sort that lesser talents are entitled to: long-windedly, and the second way is simply to say, now I welcome William E. Stafford, Oregon's new poet laureate—and more than that, I think, a great poet and a great and good man—and I am happy to say my friend. Mr. Stafford. [applause]

WILLIAM STAFFORD: Thank you. News of the telephone to talk and hear from far, excited a boy back home. My father, who climbed to the roof of his house in Kansas and called and called out into the world. Later he worked for American Bell. He took me along, once by buggy and then in a Ford, by back roads, troubleshooting those country lines. Now, he has sent me on, and I am here halfway across the country, troubleshooting in Oregon. To you out there I say, "Hello, do you hear us?" I dedicate this lecture to him; half of his world was sky. Well, I want to go to my lecture called, "Getting our Language Back," and I start like this.

Talking along in our not-quite prose way, we all know it is not quite prose we speak. And it is time to notice this intolerable wavering, innumerable touching before we sink. It is time to notice, I say, the doubt like snow hesitating toward us from other people's gray heaven. Listen: they are falling not-quite silently, and under them still you and I go walking. Maybe there are trumpets in the houses we pass and red birds watching from the evergreens. But nothing will happen until we pause to flame what we know, before any signal is given.

These lines flirting along among uses of language: talk, prose, verse, and maybe some other ways, intend to start a sequence of attempts to tease out helpful aspects of our main topic today, "Getting our Language Back." The title locates an attitude that I intend to give full play in what follows: getting our language back. My hope is that definite assertions on my part will spread some issues before us, but recognizing here are many persons whose experiences and insights will provide correctives, should I indulge in disproportionate claims. I take comfort from the quality of language that enables each of us to go into arias and assertions without danger of stopping that lifelong interchange that language affords. My words will launch forth, then, as part of a sustained communication sought amongst us. I intend to do my part here from the podium, but I'm sure I'll have much interchange with some people here on some of these issues. So not finality by any means, but some opening of issues, is my goal.

One means at hand is thought experiment; and this procedure I recently discovered or at least identified with a name by reading about Galileo, who could imagine a weight falling freely, then divided into two, then attached by some link, then allowed in thought to continue to fall either faster or slower or the same, as the parts retarded or pulled each other along or drifted side-by-

side in their plunge. This kind of economical laboratory, I hope to use in the cheap, flexible, enjoyable—I hope—medium of language. Using what we have in common, I hope to turn an effort toward creating in language using sound and meaning, turn an effort toward certain social issues in relation to language, turn an effort toward a distinctive bonus effect in language, and finally, turn an effort toward a realization of the quiet fortune we all share day after day in our talk and writing.

A reason for starting with ideas about the creative use of language is that language can do what it can't say. And without some kind of salute in this direction, I can't be sure of bringing to this occasion anything distinctive from my own life. For the one sure difference I want to claim here is just the commitment of many hours, many days, many years to swimming in the medium of language. And some of the accumulated insights and puzzles will be grounds for my first sequence of thought experiments. A glimmering of the strangeness in language that enables poems and stories may be hinted by something said by Saint John of the Cross. This is a quote: "Who would be sure of the road must close eyes and walk in the dark." This paradoxical glimmer I relate to a certain innerness felt by those who compose in language.

I was visiting recently on a campus, by the way, where the chairman in English is blind. I was there for two weeks. We would go around the campus together; some places he would take my arm so as to guide me. I would start down the wrong path and he would say, "No, this other one." I thought of that quote from Saint John of the Cross when that was happening. I want to say that doing a poem, a story, a novel, a play, is like doing a journey in which the traveling creates the goal. Not all who launch into that strange journey would say it as I'm saying it, this I know. Many would assert their craft, their deliberation, their clear intentions, and their mastery of means toward a selected end. But even among such persons, I have found strange phrasings that indicate to me that their procedure is more like a trance than a formula.

I have collected sayings of many writers, including student writers and professionals. Sayings that reveal a strangeness in the procedure. Sometimes, they say something like this, "This is a poem I had to write." I've heard this several times. Or, "This is a story it was impossible for me for a long time to come to grips with." On February 18 of this year, at Reed College, I jotted down on the spot the exact words used by Diane Wakoski about a poem she was preparing to read. Quote: "A poem it was necessary for me to write." End quotes.

I say there is a strangeness about some of these things; it doesn't sound the same as it would be... well, it just, there's something different. Imagine someone saying, "Well, I guess I could say this is a tree that was necessary for me chop down." Or, "This was a garden that for a long time I wasn't able to plant." And so on. But I believe the idea would be a little bit different from what

these people are saying about writing, about the arts. Maybe for some others here, such sayings will not have the strangeness in them, but implications touched on here, well, I believe help in the thought experiments to come. Let me heap in a few more odd glimmerings.

Just last week, at a literary gathering, Stanley Kunitz was rowing his way carefully forward in responding to questions. And I, with this occasion in mind, kept track of several of his eerie and significant phrasings. I say “eerie” partly because Mr. Kunitz’ standing as a scholar and critic would tend to identify him with clear formal approaches, but he said about writing creatively, not critically, but creatively: quote, “The will is always the enemy of the poem.” End quotes. I jumped when I heard him say that. I liked to hear it, but I didn’t know he was going to say it. So, I wrote it down. And then he said, quote: “Innocence is something important to have, we should not at the time of composition be sicklied ore with a pale cast of thought.”

Another person present spoke of writing the first part of anything creative as himself, and the rest of it as a scholar. I think he meant by this that while he could, he accepted leads that came as bonuses and unforeseen turns going into an enriched future. And that he then had to relapse onto his training for the inferior and left over portion of the process. Presuming on convergent interests here, as we meet in a university room, I will refer to an encounter that illuminates this thought experiment. The encounter was at another university where writers were on a panel to talk about composing and language. One of the panelists was Jesse Hill Ford, one of whose books I just saw over on the bookstore remainder shelf. One of the panelists was Jesse Hill Ford, novelist and short story writer. In defining his role as helper and teacher, he spoke of being ready to receive a student’s story and then through conference to, quote, “Correct the story toward publication.” End quotes. The effect on me of this phrasing was like a shock. The assumptions behind correcting someone’s story hurt my picture of what writing is, the picture sustained by those remarks like Mr. Kunitz’. As a teacher/writer myself, I felt the two separate parts of the falling weight. The conceptualizing of language as practice was put under a strain. Images are inexact, I know; I feel baffled about explaining my disquiet, but maybe a narrative approach will indicate something of the emergency that looms back of the correcting theory of composing and language.

I will imagine a group of us learning how to do something intricate in language. Say we are learning how to compose a sonnet; we learn to count down fourteen lines. We learn about iambic units and we count them off by fives. We may factor down the task into composing the octave and the sestet, thus bolstering the human attention span by a nudge at a crucial interval. We put together all we learn in this sequential orderly way, and then we are ready to write a sonnet. It seems reasonable, but I want to back out and raise a question. How about the first person in the world who ever wrote a sonnet? The steps that appear to be so reasonable for us,

are not available to that person. The originator, the finder. What was left out of the formula for writing a sonnet?

It occurs to me that too many of my reflections use poems for examples. My pursuit is of language in general, and this afternoon is an occasion for me to affirm, as I am going to do later in the text, a preference for prose. I hope it's all right for a new poet laureate to turn against his title so soon. It's been coming on for years. Anyway, my pursuit is of language in general, but for some reason when language is put under the greatest pressure for thought purposes, we often turn to poems. I prefer prose, myself, and of course we all speak more of that and read more and write more. A strange thing, though; and the next thought experiment is this: even in discussions where there is antipathy for poetry, the assumptions almost always accord poems greater quality than prose.

I'm disassociating myself from this now. It is assumed that a failed poem lapses into prose. This is a strange idea if you think about it, and in order to get our language back in this certain way, reclaiming the kind of language we mostly use and mostly value, I propose a thought experiment. You look at someone's writing and give a judgement; you say for instance, "Oh, you poor student, you tried for high achievement here, but you haven't made it. I hope you will pardon me for mentioning it, but this attempt is only a poem." Consider another thought experiment: besides *commedia dell'arte*, there might be poems *dell'arte*. You would have a trajectory in mind, but you would improvise anytime you went through the presentation. But that would assume that only main ideas are *the* idea. Whereas it is millions of little separate touches and hints that make the experience we associate with art, isn't that so?

Why is it strange to think of poems *dell'arte*? Or an efficient, succinct bible. Sometimes, I've puzzled myself by thinking about unconscious parody. When I try hard, the language objects that loom under this label verge toward research papers done by the rules, or poems done by the trend of the current style. I find myself dizzied by encounter with verbal objects created by correct language. And I feel acutely deprived of an element needed if we are to get our language back.

And I believe the main deprivation comes from a cavalier attitude some craft people in language have toward a richness that hovers for us all. Which brings me to consider the bonus effect in language that takes us beyond the world of means and formulas. Karl Popper, in an article called "Indeterminism is not Enough," in *Encounter* in April of 1973, can provide a way into the next thought experiments. He identifies three worlds for us human beings: 1) the physical world, 2) the psychological world—feelings, all subjective experiences—and 3) now I'm quoting from him: "a world that only begins with the evolution of specifically human language," end

quotes. He says that, and this is quoted, "Linguistically formulated human knowledge is most characteristic of world three." And he goes on to say this, "I assert that human language and human thought evoke together in mutual interaction. There is an immensely powerful feedback effect between human language and the human mind." There are several thought experiments, I want to suggest, in relation to this claim; one relates just to sounds. There are sounds in the voice that carry others along apart from word meanings. As I started that sentence, I thought *I wish I could make my voice sound utterly persuasive*, and then I thought of all sorts of things in the air around us now. Like transcripts of tapes, as the equivalent of tapes and so on. The intonation can make so much difference; listeners and readers who pick up the implications from the page are partly influenced by elements that do not fit into the category of word meanings.

We can overcome the influence of these sound elements, but just partly, and it is an effort to overcome them, and we never fully escape these irrelevant, so-called, influences. For a thought experiment, try this. Imagine someone untouched by these influences of tone: you have imagined a monster. A being who could not even think right, a person who would have tried to achieve independence or objectivity by becoming a stone. My dog knows better than that. Being available to language means being available to the shimmering elements that make it up. And these elements do not track along precisely for each use and emergency. Syllables pick up meaning from pure sound and from associations in words that lamentably huddle together without regard for the pure uses logicians would yearn after.

Of course, I do not really mean to lament this living and changing characteristic of language. The gain available for us in using language comes partly from these runaway sequences of alive effects. John Wisdom, in *Paradox and Discovery*, glimpses "Freedom values in language this way." This is a quote from him. He teaches down at Eugene, by the way, in the philosophy department. It is with words, mainly, that we delineate the conceivable, and if we never allow words to be a little eccentric, never allow ourselves to apply a word to any state of affairs, actual or conceivable, to which it would not customarily be applied, we are without means to refer to any state of affairs for which there is not a word, any possibility undreamt of in our philosophy.

And the power alive in the language jumps out at us with a more frightening aspect in some of Franz Kafka's ideas as reported in conversations with Kafka in *Encounter of August of '71*. These are fragments, but all quoted from Kafka. "Words are magical, they leave finger marks behind on the brain, which in the twinkling of an eye become the footprints of history. Swearing is something horrible. Swearing destroys man's greatest invention, language. It is an insult to the soul and a murderous offense against grace. Words involve a decision between life and death.

Language is only lent to the living for an undefined period; all we have is the use of it. In reality, it belongs to the dead and to those who are still unborn. An offense against language is always an offense against feeling and against the mind. A darkening of the world, a breath of the ice age." Few passages in my reading have made language in its misuse this frightening. But many disquieting glimpses come to mind.

Two summers ago, I heard a young author read from his novel called *Thumb Tripping*, in which the human experiences of drug taking were mentioned in bouncy terms like, "trip," "high," "freak-out," "groove," "speed," "cool." To come back from such terms, I looked up a medical report called "Marijuana: Report of the Indian Hemp Commission," a fairly favorable report on the whole, but the terms used brought a much changed sense of reality. The vocabulary for some of the same experiences was like this: "delirium," "frenzy," "symptoms," "mania," "anatomical lesions," "neurotic diathesis," "dependence," "addiction," "rehabilitation," "therapy," "withdrawal," "character disorders." For many of us, the social consequences of certain evasions or habitual short-circuits in language are an important part of our modern packet of worries.

"Truth is a linguistic question"—that's a quote—says Dwight Bolinger in *Language* for September 1973. He mentions the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Public Doublespeak: that's the title of the commission. And he points out how some common terms embody cultural value judgements in disguise. The language we use prolongs the survival of attitudes we consciously deny. Human beings are cross-wired for accompanying effects and experience. The consciousness may calculate and still be overwhelmed by booby traps in the language. Orwell, in "Politics in the English language," provided one of the best-known discussions of euphemism and its place in allowing us to live comfortably while doing unspeakable acts in war and in neglect of situations around us. The NCTE commission mentioned is named from that Orwell article.

A complexity in language may be allowing us to indulge our outrage in such articles, however. Even while we are being fooled about how our minds work in the presence of fact and in the naming of fact, we find it easy to give a negative assessment of our neighbor's duplicity in language. And I want to be on guard; I want to be on guard against too easy a citing of Orwell, doublespeak, and the politicalization of language. Without the time here or the ingenuity to pursue this side glance, let me mention that as a writer, I find pacification different from killing, and rectification of frontiers quite different from uprooting the populace. The thing mentioned is not the meaning. And the meaning of euphemism may be the incipience of civilization.

In the face of an admittedly powerful trend and current practice, I want to say a word for civility in language; but this topic calls for discussion rather than my continued alluding to it. I want to come back to simple views and perspectives, and my prepared relapse into a more congenial stance is this: something I concocted called, "A Lecture on the Elegy." An elegy is really about the wilting of a flower, the passing of the year, the falling of a stone. Those people who go out: they just accompany many things that leave us. Death is only bad because it is like sunset or a long eclipse. If it had a dawn for company or came with spring, we would need laws to keep eager people from rushing into danger and depopulating the world. So, I would turn the occasion for such sadness around. Those graceful images that seem to decorate the poems; they are a rediscovery of those elements that first created the obvious feelings, the feelings that some people cannot even sense until they are built up from little losses and surrounded with labels. War, catastrophe, death.

What I'm seeking now is that direct sense of the fortune we all share in the language. We can find our way back from language on stilts from riches available only to those who have claimed dominion over our values. I remember a few years ago being down here at Portland State at a meeting of English teachers, and reading something called the "PML bibliography as limited to certain printed works." And I want to refer to that here just as a way of glancing aside from the academy to other things. The "PML Bibliography" is limited to certain printed works; there are others, and manuscripts, and then talk, and the animals, and the leaves. And the taciturn sand.

So here is an unlisted item. Beach grass and company, Agate Cove Oregon, a windy day, 1974, the title, and all the content, *shhh*. The way into the language for many of us is direct and easy; we need not be intimidated, we now learn, by those who claim dominion within the very center of our lives. In some strange way, we have the most powerful claim on the center of our lives by means of the language that comes naturally to us. Instead of gaining a double value by learning two languages, we might cut in half our quick native ability. And three languages in mind might still further divide their power. A wistfulness about moving into this center of culture, along with a quirk or two of irony, comes in chapter two of *Dracula* where Count Dracula is speaking to Jonathan Harker.

I like both of these names. Jonathan Harker is listening and Count Dracula is telling him: this is the passage. "I love to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the world and the rush of humanity. To share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is. But alas, as yet, I only know your tongue through books. To you, my friend, I look to know how to speak.' 'But Count,' I said." This is Jonathan Harker's response. Of course Count Dracula has his own ideas in mind. "'But Count,' I said. 'You know and speak English thoroughly.' He bowed gravely. 'I thank you, my friend, for all your too-flattering estimate. But

yet I fear that I am but a little way on the road I would travel. True, I know the grammar and the words. But yet, I know not how to speak them.' 'Indeed?' I said. 'You speak excellently.' 'Not so,' he answered. 'Well I know that, did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger. That is not enough for me. Here I am noble; but a stranger in a strange land, he is no one. Men know him not. And to know not, is to care not for. I am content if I am like the rest. So that no man stops if he sees me or pauses in his speaking if he hear my words.'"

Well, that yearning to be invisible, to blend into the culture around you, is something we now cherish and extend to each other. We find that we do own our language. It is something bequeathed to us. To all of us, not just through education, but through our common life. An educated speaker must take care, lest, like Count Dracula, he become marked, and never join with full congeniality, our society. The language exactly joins our needs and our surroundings. We can be cheered by a linguist motto, now common, that would never before have been considered a reasonable statement. Now we can take heart from it. And I'll end my part in this occasion today by this quote, which I may hereby make my motto, and look forward to arguments with my friends: "It is impossible to make a mistake in your native language."

[applause]

MODERATOR: Well, I think I can say we have been traveling through the light. And I thank you. I should perhaps have mentioned earlier that Mr. Alfred Sugarman is chairman of the selection committee. I thank you all for coming. It's been certainly for me a delightful experience. I think we are all proud of Mr. Stafford. Thank you very much.

[program ends]