

A CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE K. STANLEY
Alexandra Zelman-Doring

LKS: SO WHAT DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT?

AZD: Well, I remember you telling me to read Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*...why do you teach that text?

LKS: Because I want students first of all to know that literature is not something that just got written for them within the last couple of years. In part when we go back in time we look for the things that are constant, in other words, you go back and sure, the language is old and even when it's translated it isn't the way we talk. But you realize that the things that make a good story then make a good story now. It also means getting outside your own skin, I'm not a Beowulf, I don't think anybody was ever a Beowulf, but it's a good story, and what constitutes a good story and what happens when you put that good story into the fairly restricted form of poetry? What I find is that if you talk about it in a certain kind of way and you read Heaney's translation (which is a very poetic translation, it's not as rigorous and literal as some) then you get to go there, you get to see: here's a world that didn't have all we have today, it didn't have all our electronic gizmos, it didn't have our belief structures, it was a much more stable world in terms of its beliefs, you could have some really bizarre stuff going on, like you're all in the Mead Hall and this monster comes in and eats guys.

AZD: I remember you calling my attention to the beginning, how Heaney translates just the word "So." What is it about that?

LKS: Yes, for me it sounded like somebody just going "so"—like you're right in the middle of a story. In fact it is a pretty good translation of the old English, I think he gets the spirit of that, so it's like you're sitting around the campfire or in the Mead Hall and you're the guy who tells the story, so you get this cool once-upon-a-time kind of thing; it also drops you both into the middle of the story and into the middle of the telling of the story. It gives a modern reader a much stronger sense of immediacy.

AZD: Say a little more about what connects the literature of the past with the literature of the present.

LKS: Well, language. And not just words but the way we put words together. Also narrative structures (a much bigger topic), but the fact that we have consistent characteristics and narratives...equilibrium, disequilibrium—it's there. And we can talk about it in those kinds of terms. It's also entertainment. We forget that literature is there as pleasure. It's something elusive, it's some sense of continuity that people who lived hundreds of years before us had a lot of things that made them different from us but also a lot of things that made them similar to us, the fears that we have, their fear of anything beyond a certain kind of realm, the fear of the dark, the fear of monsters, are all things that we share today. It takes some doing (reading the literature of the past) because it feels unfamiliar. But you also learn by reading and rereading something that it becomes familiar. You read John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and it doesn't matter whether you believe or don't believe what he's talking about, you read them often enough that they become familiar to you and yet not familiar to you.

AZD: Why does it not matter?

LKS: Belief? I don't think it matters because these are not doctrinal statements. Reading here is a poetic experience. I was listening to someone talk this weekend on the radio about Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. And it was wonderful listening to this man talk about it, because you could tell he felt the piece very intimately. At one point he said, "It does not matter whether people believe this, but at this moment just after Jesus' death, that sense of loss is a sense of loss that everyone has felt about something, and the way the music is composed, and the way the pace of the thing changes, all that becomes very experiential." I would also say conversely that you could have someone who believed all that stuff and felt nothing when they listened to the music. So what we're doing as people trying to teach people about literary language is cultivating the taste, the sensibility, the responsiveness. One of the hardest things to get students to think about is what Susanne Langer calls "the morphology of feeling," of a shape of feeling, not the feeling itself. I think that's what we get when we become responsive to, sensitive to, the way

something is actually shaped. She would say, It's not that Beethoven's symphony makes you feel sad, it's the shape of the feeling that matters.

AZD: Say more. What is the shape of the feeling—is it the structure?

LKS: It's easier to feel it than to describe it but, when I'm talking to students I say, let's say you're writing something about anxiety, well you can say, "This is what it feels like," or "This is what I went through," so that the writing communicates the idea of anxiety. But then you start structuring the sentences so that they take on the form and perform like anxiety.

AZD: Remember Eudora Welty's "Clytie?" You used to use a certain sentence to show us that idea of performance in writing, when she writes "The cursing was new, and she cursed softly, like a singer going over a song for the first time."

LKS: Yes. And then it becomes about trying to decide would it be a right branching or a left branching sentence? Do I build up to it and then release it, do I release it and then linger but linger with clauses and modifiers and phrases that somehow destabilize—

AZD: Which, of course, the author is not thinking about in the moment of writing?

LKS: A really good writer probably thinks about a lot of stuff that we don't think about because that's what they do all the time. We also need to figure out: What does the writer do in revising and editing? A lot of times the writer is making those kinds of decisions, though not in a first draft necessarily. Or you could take William Gass's notion of "constructed consciousness"—he uses a poem by Auden to illustrate what he's talking about, that he, Auden, would not have thought this way with his lover in his arms, but later on he's trying to construct something that conveys but also has that shape of the kind of uncertainty of the relationship.

AZD: So it's the notion that language can do, can perform, can be an active part not in *conveying* the story or the idea but in *being* the story and the idea?

LKS: Right. So you take a sonnet by Donne, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend." You know, it's all those sounds and those rhythms that are getting at what he wants to

do, which is basically in effect to be violated by God, that it would take a violent act to push him out of his current state, so the writing has to have that hammering effect, and it's relentless. It does it with its sounds, it does it with its rhythms, it does it with the way the rhyme schemes interchange and the way the lines don't end, don't complete the syntax, and so on and so forth.

AZD: I remember you teaching us to go out and see. To capture the rain, not as we wanted to see it, and to have the writing be the rain, so there is seeing on the one hand, seeing the world, but seeing the world objectively, seeing it through language.

LKS: Well it is seeing it objectively if by that I mean I'm seeing it as an object. But as Annie Dillard says, seeing is very much a matter of verbalization—I can't see without words.

AZD: Do you believe that? That we can't see without words?

LKS: As soon as I see something I have a word, and what I was trying to do was ask, "Can I get to the point where it's just sensation?" and sensation would be chaos. I think we probably have moments where we experience something without words, but they are usually evocative things like a fragrance. Part of it is how the brain functions, there's no language part of the brain that connects with taste or smell. Which is why we're always saying, "Well it tastes like," "It smells like" because literally the brain doesn't have that capacity. So if you're going out there and looking at the rain, you really have to go out there and just observe, see what you really see, I don't want to see "rain," because if I see "rain" then I've already labeled it, and then I stop knowing it. So I just have to keep trying as best as I can to see what's really there—this rain, not any rain. And then you say, Well, what's the rhythm of the rain, what's the rhythm of how I'm experiencing the rain?

AZD: So there's aesthetic cognition and intellectual cognition. And you teach travel writing. How does that genre fit into this?

LKS: Travel writing is great because I can do everything with travel writing. Everything. I can write about people, I can write about events, I can write places, I can write about history, I can write about anything. People say, "I went somewhere," but their writing is so I-centric that they never get the writing to be the experience itself. The last years I was teaching travel writing

I would not let the students use “I” for the first half of the semester. A lot of people don’t like that at all. But those who get it don’t want to go back to the “I” because it’s a crutch. They realize there’s so much more if I get myself out of the way.

AZD: What are some great travel writing texts?

LKS: William Least Heat Moon’s *Blue Highways*, Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*.

AZD: You teach the Romantics also?

LKS: I have always enjoyed teaching the Romantics and the Modernists for very similar reasons: that both movements had people who thought a lot about language and writing and that informed how they did what they did and how we read them. Put the Romantics in the context of a long literary movement, of formal writing and detached writing and trying to fundamentally reengage writing with being human, with feeling, thinking, responding—that’s what I liked about the Romantics, but what also could also be very cloying about them—okay, Wordsworth, get over yourself. In his revised preface to the lyrical ballads Wordsworth said that he was interested in the ways that language and the human mind acted and reacted on each other—that’s how he articulated it, and that’s pretty remarkable for late 1700s, early 1800s! It’s basically at the turn of this century that people could finally figure out that the mind is genetically made to have a very human kind of language and no other sentient being has anything like it. Their writing can still have a kind of presence I think today. Not all of it. The two odes that Wordsworth and then Coleridge wrote in response to each other, “Intimations of Mortality” and “Dejection,” feel very human—two poets really struggling with what it meant to live poetically, and Coleridge feeling that he wasn’t quite adequate to it—quite wrong!

AZD: And the Modernists?

LKS: By the time you’re in the twentieth century, writing just has to take on a different role, there’s no more belief that we’re all being held together by an intelligent being or whatever you want to call it. The similarities are there. Wordsworth’s objective is to use the “real language of men” rather than poetic diction—something he’s been criticized for but I think it’s just because people aren’t looking at the thing historically—he didn’t mean people talk

like that, but that he was drawing language more from life than from poetic traditions. I would say that modernist fiction was grappling with a very similar kind of thing, this was the language of people, not the fictional tradition. When you're reading Faulkner, or you're reading Welty, or you're reading O'Connor writing about writing, they're very much aware of language, not just making up stories or something. Even Hemingway when he wasn't being completely grumpy about it was very much aware of language.

AZD: Do you read postmodern literature?

LKS: Yes, I think John Barth's *Lost in the Fun House* is just fun. He starts telling a story then he interrupts you to tell you how he's telling a story—some people don't find that funny, I do. After a while he just says, "We're just never going to get anywhere," or, "The story's never going to end." And I enjoy Coover. *Noir* is just such a good novel, it's so much fun. If you read Cummings "anyone lived in a pretty how town (with up so floating many bells down)" as some critic trying to figure out what it all means, then you'll miss that it's just an experience. If you ask, "How does the text do this?" then you start getting it....

AZD: Do you read any contemporary writing?

LKS: I do. There's not too much I don't actually enjoy. The only time I don't enjoy reading it is when I think the writer hasn't figured out what writing is, when the writer is trying to tell me something rather than creating a story. I tend to be reading people like Lethem and Marcus and Shaben, not the marginal people although I do pick them up periodically, too.

AZD: What about poetry?

LKS: I read a lot of poetry. But I read it very very slowly.

AZD: Why?

LKS: Because it's not giving me a message, it's creating an experience for me and if I go through it too quickly I won't get that experience. It requires me to pay attention to sounds, to rhythms, to relationships that are created on the line. I think of the line as the duration of a perception.

AZD: Say more about that.

LKS: Well, in other words, it's hard to figure out why a line stops where it stops. And if I think of it as the duration of a perception, it isn't that it isn't going to keep on going, but that's the length of that perception. That's the way I like to think about it.

AZD: I'm thinking of when you called the writer the "knower," earlier. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

LKS: As a writer I get to know things differently from the way that I would know them any other way. I'm not writing to write what I already know, I'm writing to know in a new way. I'm intrigued by that writer who uses a pseudonym—Elena Ferrante—because there's the identity of the narrator who brings that text into being, and that being is also brought into being with the text itself. So there's this cooperative thing that goes on when somebody is really writing. It doesn't matter that this person wrote it, it outlives its historical moment. I think that does connect back to William Gass's notion of a constructed consciousness.

AZD: What do you think the role of emotion is in all of this for the writer?

LKS: As long as we don't think of emotion as "I feel good, bad, sad, angry"—that would be what it means to be human. I don't think that you can write significantly without having that psychological, emotional motivation, but I think it's hard to describe what that emotion is. In other words, I could be very angry about something political but it doesn't mean I would do anything more than just express my anger, but on the other hand if I just wrote dispassionately about that issue, I don't think the writing would have that human connection and energy that it needs. But that comes back to what we were talking about earlier—morphology of feeling, the structure, that's really trying to get at something a lot more complicated. And I think that "deeply" is where you would start getting into this emotional or what I would call aesthetic cognition.

AZD: Even in acting, people often think that it's all about emotions. But when you actually see an actor pumping their own personal emotions it becomes repulsive for an audience to watch. It's all about the craft in every sense, but it's just very interesting how widespread that misconception is, how attached people are to the idea that emotion is the core of everything rather than the

creation of something that has more space to it, that invites the audience to interpret and have their own emotions—they’re the ones who bought the tickets! Can you say something about the reader as receiver of the text?

LKS: You have to allow yourself to be created by the text. What reader do I have to become to be the reader of this text? This is something that I.A. Richards was grappling with in 1925, thinking about that, wondering, What do I have to become in order to be receptive to this text?—rather than treating this text as if it’s a commodity, like it’s my preference in ice creams or something like this. The argument of the art object is to experience the world the way this text is allowing you to experience the world. It’s hard for students to get that—they want to see an intellectual argument rather than an aesthetic one, so they’ll get put off by what they see as Hemingway’s misogyny rather than asking, What do I have to become in order to get into Hemingway’s world? I think that, to me, is why one has to read slowly and carefully and with very much attention to detail.

AZD: So if I understand you, comparing intellectual vs. aesthetic cognition, intellectual is ideas, a concept, and aesthetic is an experience, a way of living something. So that reading literature we’re actually living, not just getting ideas.

LKS: Right.

AZD: Can you give me some examples of theory as aesthetic cognition? Theorists you really admire?

LKS: The class I’m teaching right now, *The Poetics of Narrative*, has a very strong theoretical element. We read Todorov, Barthes, we read Culler, and what I’m trying to do is get them to see how these theoretical notions help them to see how things are structured, and if I see how things are structured, then I can see how they would affect me. Even something as simple as being able to say any narrative must have an ultimate equilibrium/disequilibrium pattern and then being able to understand what the structure of equilibrium—what makes something stable and what in that state is also vulnerable and therefore can be destabilized—that kind of theoretical thing which starts being something you feel rather than think about.

AZD: You're going to have to explain this equilibrium / disequilibrium thing a bit more.

LKS: Basically the notion is that if you have a story and nothing really gets destabilized in any kind of way, well it's kind of like a Beckett play, nothing really happens. As opposed to a Shakespeare play where Shakespeare clearly understood how one person speaking to another person could create instability. So the basic stuff of texts is to first of all see how they cohere—what are the repetitions, the patterns that come out of the repetitions, and how do they fit together? In music you have point, counterpoint, resolution. Something has to come into that music to unsettle it, and then something has to happen as a result of that.

AZD: So why does a Beckett play work?

LKS: Because we're intrigued by boredom. We're intrigued by how little could actually happen and still...there still are patterns in there, and whatever disequilibrium is there is just very subtle. How do I have to become the viewer of a Beckett play in order to experience a Beckett play?

AZD: I wanted to ask you why you think literature exists.

LKS: We need to tell ourselves stories. Campfires and mead halls....we just naturally tell ourselves stories. Berger talks about this, how you look up at the night sky and how once someone just sat there one night and started piecing the little dots together with stories. We tell ourselves stories to amuse ourselves, to scare ourselves, to make sense out of things. I think that's just a very fundamental human thing. You don't see any other sentient being doing it.

AZD: You said that it's a property in our brain?

LKS: Basically our brain is recursive. And no other creatures brain is recursive. My recursive capacity allows me to take units, combine them into larger units of meaning, and so on and so forth. So all I have to do is have the basic structure of a sentence, a noun phrase and a verb phrase, and just look at what I can do with that! That's the recursive function. And I think some of it is just the pleasure of making meaningful sounds.

AZD: Do you have a first memory of reading or writing?

LKS: I have no idea how old I was, I know what car I was in, I was in my parents 1943 Buick (and this was long before there was anything like concern for children's safety), and I was small enough to be able to stand up in the front seat. And all of a sudden we came to a stop sign and those four letters made a word and it was visceral, I was transformed. All of a sudden S-T-O-P became a word. I once asked my mother how I learned how to read and she said, "I don't know, you just read." But as much as I liked to do it, I never knew what to say about what I read. So a lot of my thinking has been, Well, how do you talk about this? I remember when I was a junior in high school, my parents took a vacation and I took *Crime and Punishment* and *Doctor Zhivago* and I couldn't put them down. I thought, What do I say about them? That was what was missing for me. Just to be able to talk about the themes didn't mean anything to me.

AZD: What keeps you going?

LKS: A vision of something larger than myself. The first person who really got me thinking about this was Benny Waters, a jazz musician. And I only learned about him right after he died at the age of 95. Right up until his death he was still working on jazz, still experimenting with jazz, still pushing himself, and I thought—that's it. You've got to have something out there that you're not satisfied with. Somebody once asked Arthur Fiedler where he gets all that energy, and he said, "The use of energy creates energy." And I think that's really true. The vision has to be bigger than you. That's why I read. The reading will always give me a vision of what's possible. I'm reading Coetzee's *The Child of Jesus*, and he just writes in a way that I wouldn't write but it's telling me, What could you do if you wrote in this way? Or Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*, it's doing all this wonderful stuff, and you just think about it. The thing about Chabon is he does his homework. So he knows all about 1987 Dodge Omni GLHs, knows about the displacement of the engine and the horsepower because the kind of person that would want that kind of car would know that sort of stuff, and it becomes a part of the text. He's got this one short passage, it's about a page, in which this jazz musician is performing an explication of "I don't Know How to Love Him" from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and it's just the most remarkable piece of music writing because the guy just takes this thing apart, and how he takes it apart kind of trivializes it

almost, and then he starts putting it back together again. To me, that's like getting inside the mind of a jazz musician for that duration, and it's so wonderful that you want to go out and listen to the recording, except that it's all fiction! There was never any such recording.

AZD: I don't know if you know how much you impacted my life and my work. Your students are very fortunate.

LKS: I'm very fortunate to have the kind of students I have. It took me a long time to figure things out and I hope I can make it a little more efficient for other people. I'm 68 years old, and people say, "Well when are you going to retire?" And I say, "Why would I want to retire?"

AZD: I see *Moby Dick* on your bookshelf. I'm trying to get through it right now....

LKS: It's funny because when I was teaching it, at the time we were living at the school where my wife was teaching. I was crossing the parking lot one day and one of the science teachers yelled something about being a chaperone on a boat or something, and I said, "No thanks, last thing I want to do is be a chaperone—" Then I turn and say, "Wait just a minute, did you say the Coast Guard Eagle?" And he says "Yes." "As in the Tall Ship?" "Yes." And I say, "Okay, I can deal with chaperoning." The Coast Guard Eagle is a steel-hulled sailboat, almost three hundred feet long. It's a training ship for the Coast Guard. Everything on that boat is work. If you put a sail up, it's work, but if you take it down, it's work. They were taking it from New London, Connecticut to Baltimore, Maryland. They had a skeletal crew so they said they could take some kids on. The great thing was we were out on the edge of Hurricane Opal. And it was wild. This thing was slamming down, and I grew up sailing on the coast of Maine. At one point when we were finally coming out of the storm, they had to go up and check on things. So the top yard arm is about 120 feet above deck. And they said, "You can go up there if you want to, but you don't have to," and I'm going, I can't live with myself if I don't. So I'm up there 120 five feet above deck, and there's nothing holding you in place, your feet are on this guy-wire, and you're hanging onto the yardarm and you're checking everything and if you let go you just die. I'm up there because I'm working with a Coast Guardsman and we're talking about all kinds of stuff.

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He said, “Are you afraid?” I said, “No, not particularly. I mean I don’t want to do anything stupid or anything.” And he said, “Okay, because you’re acting like you’re on a street or something.” So we’re up there talking about building buildings and blacksmithing and he found out what I did for a living and he goes, “Well what about the Lucy poems?” And that’s when I almost fell off. I’m in a department where I would guess there’s maybe one person that cares about the Lucy poems, a little collection of poems that Wordsworth wrote....I was on that boat while I was also teaching *Moby Dick* and that was when I understood *Moby Dick*. There are long long long periods of absolutely nothing happening on a boat like that. And that’s exactly what the book is. Well, you’ve got nothing to do, so you think about sperm whales, got nothing to do, so you just go on and on about tying knots!

AZD: What is that calligraphy hanging over your desk?

LKS: It’s Chinese characters for “Man Standing By Words.” So it has multiple meanings. It’s the character for writing, but it’s also the character for integrity. You stand by your words. And that’s a high ideal in this culture.

AZD: Are you afraid of death?

LKS: No.