

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

James Welch's Poetry

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9227x3q4>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 3(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Velie, Alan R.

Publication Date

1979

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

James Welch's Poetry

ALAN R. VELIE

I. Blackfeet surrealism

James Welch is Blackfeet on his father's side (Blackfeet say Blackfeet, not Blackfoot), and Gros Ventre on his mother's. He was born in 1940 in Browning, a town of 2000 in northwest Montana which serves as the headquarters and trade center for the Blackfeet Reservation. He attended schools on the Blackfeet and Fort Belknap Reservations, ultimately graduating from high school in Minneapolis. He attended Minnesota University and Northern Montana College before receiving a B.A. from the University of Montana. He went on to teach in the Creative Writing Program there for two years before leaving teaching to devote more time to writing.

Welch published his first collection of poems, *Riding the Earthboy 40*, in 1971. Earthboy was the name of a family from Welch's reservation; the 40 refers to the number of acres in their allotment of land. The poems are drawn mainly from Welch's Montana experiences.

The collection was reviewed favorably in the *Saturday Review* (October 2, 1971), but World Publishing Company allowed it to go out of print. Harper and Row has since reissued it, with seven new poems. Welch has attracted some attention in Europe; Roswith von Freydorf Riese, a German poet and critic from Heidelberg, has been translating his poems into German.

While some of Welch's poetry is perfectly clear, even to an unsophisticated reader, much of it is difficult to understand. The reason is that like many other American poets today—James Dickey, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, Robert Bly and James Wright, to name just a few—he has been influenced by surrealism.¹ The most

Alan R. Velie is chairman of the Department of English, University of Oklahoma.

important direct influences have been the poetry of his friend James Wright and the works of Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo.

Surrealism has its roots in earlier European movements like Dada and Symbolism, but as a self-conscious movement it began with Andre Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du Surrealisme*. The object of the surrealists was to free art from the logical, realistic way of viewing and depicting things. Surrealists wanted to create a new order of reality, a new way of seeing which merged dreams with waking perceptions, the real with the imaginary, the conscious with the unconscious. Wild association of ideas, linking seemingly disparate objects in striking images, became the distinguishing mark of their poems.

Breton had been a student of psychiatry before World War I, and as an intern practiced psychotherapy on the wounded during the war. After the war, when he shifted his interest from medicine to poetry, he retained his interest in Freud. He and the other surrealists attempted to draw on the unconscious as a source of art, primarily through the use of automatic writing, self-induced mental abnormality, and dreams.

The surrealists recorded and analyzed their dreams, and some of them, most notably Robert Desnos, were able to fall asleep and dream at will, then wake up and recall the images they had dreamt. These images were an important element in their poetry and paintings. Breton and Paul Eluard experimented extensively with the stimulation of mental abnormality. They imitated delirium and other forms of insanity with the hope of inducing their minds to see associations between objects which would serve as the basis of their art.

Automatic writing was, in effect, a form of self-administered psychoanalysis. As Anna Balakian describes it,

placing themselves in a state of stupefying attentiveness they tried to shut out all outside disturbances and to give free association to words and the images which these suggested.²

The *Textes Surrealistes* of Eluard and Tristan Tzara are examples of automatic writing which are remarkable for their bizarre and striking imagery.

If the use of the unconscious was one major innovative thrust of surrealism, the other was the radical change in use of language. Language was important not as a conveyer of ideas, for the surrealists believed that poetry should not convey ideas or emotions, but images—images which exist independent of a subject, and

make no sense from a logical standpoint. For instance, note these images from Benjamin Peret's "Quatre a Quatre":

And the stars that frighten the red fish
 are neither for sale nor for rent
 for to tell the truth they are not really stars but apricot pies
 that have left the bakery
 and wander like a traveler who missed his train at midnight
 in a deserted city whose streetlamps groan because of
 their shattered shades³

or this from Breton's "Tiki"

I love you on the surface of seas
 Red like the egg when it is green⁴

Surrealists also stressed the suggestive power of words—for instance these examples from Michel Leiris' *Glossaire*: "revolution-solution de tout reve" (revolution—dream solution); "humain—la main humide" (human—the damp hand.)⁵

There is often a playfulness and lighthearted absurdity to the writings of the first generation of surrealists, Breton and his confreres. In the Spanish and South American surrealists who followed them there is a grimmer use of the same techniques. As Robert Bly puts it:

One distinction between Spanish surrealism and French surrealism is that the Spanish "surrealist" or "leaping" poet often enters into his poem with a heavy body of feeling piled up behind him as if behind a dam. As you begin the Spanish poem, a heavy river rolls over you.⁶

In place of the lighthearted absurdity of Peret's apricot pies, we have images like this from Federico Garcia Lorca's "Little Infinite Poem"

I saw two mournful wheat heads made of wax
 burying a countryside of volcanoes;
 and I saw two insane little boys who wept as they leaned on a
 murderer's eyeballs.⁷

The South American who influenced Welch the most was Cesar Vallejo, a Peruvian poet (1892–1938) who spent most of his adult life in Paris, save for a brief exile in Spain when the French deported him for his Marxist activities.

Vallejo was a *cholo*—a man of white and Indian origin—and he incorporates his ethnic heritage into his poetry. As translator John Knoepfle says:

there is something very ancient in this Vallejo which gives his voice a force a reader seldom confronts. It is the authority of the oral poets of the Andes, those fashioners of the "harawi," a mystical, inward-turning complaint. Its tones can still be heard in lyrics sung in the mountains of Peru and played on the records in the homesick barrios of Lima. Born in the Andes of an Indian mother, Cesar Vallejo took this folk form in its essentials, discarding what was superficial and picturesque, and made it the echo chamber for a modern and surrealist speech.⁸

Vallejo published two volumes of poems before Breton's *Manifeste* appeared, highly imaginative symbolic poems, and he found surrealistic techniques congenial. In the thirties surrealistic poets came to the position that dreams were not poetry, and so rather than recording dreams they wrote dreamlike poems, poems which reproduce the atmosphere or ambiance of dreams, but which were composed by the same creative processes as traditional poetry. In these poems, as in dreams, objects change and undergo strange transformations, and normal everyday causality is suspended, but the works are carefully composed products of the conscious imagination.

It is difficult in a limited space to convey much about Vallejo's poetry, but these few fragments may give at least some impression of the nature of his work:

I know there is someone
 looking for me day and night inside her hand,
 and coming upon me, each moment in her shoes.
 Doesn't she know the night is buried
 with spurs behind the kitchen?

"Poem To Be Read and Sung"⁹

And what if after so much history, we succumb,
 not to eternity,
 but to these simple things, like being
 at home, or starting to brood!
 What if we discover later
 all of a sudden, that we are living
 to judge by the height of the stars
 off a comb and off stains on a handkerchief!
 It would be better, really,
 if it were all swallowed up, right now!¹⁰

What we have in Vallejo is a deep pessimism and sense of absurdity. He couples a passionate intensity towards life with a

fatalism that human effort is wasted, human life is hopeless. Although he often writes about God, he is essentially an existentialist: God is not dead, but he is in very poor health. "Well," he writes, "on the day I was born, God was sick."¹¹ God, like man, finds the universe a burden:

Spring returns; it returns and will go away. And God
curved in time repeats himself, and passes, passes
with the backbone of the universe on his shoulder.¹²

Welch came to Vallejo through James Wright. He read Vallejo chiefly in the translation made by Wright, Robert Bly and John Knoepfle. Although it is probably too strong to say that Wright and Bly discovered Vallejo for American poets, through their edition of his poems, and through Bly's magazine *The Seventies*, they did a great deal to bring him to the attention of the American poetic community.

Wright was born in 1927 in Martin's Ferry, Ohio, a coal mining town across the river from Wheeling, West Virginia. Like Vallejo he is from a working class family:

My father toiled fifty years
At Hazel-Atlas Glass,
Caught among the girders that smash the kneecaps
Of dumb honnyaks.

"Youth," *Shall We Gather at the River*¹³

Although Wright became a college professor and so, unlike Vallejo, was able to escape poverty, he retains an empathy for the lumpen—winos, whores, bums—and writes of them often and sympathetically.

Wright occasionally writes happy poems of open fields (e.g. "A Blessing," "Trying to Pray," "Today I was Happy, so I made this Poem," all from *The Branch Will Not Break*), but the dominant tone of his poetry is one of bleakness, and his works are full of the images of the coal mines—slag piles, ponds of creosote, and "open graves of stripmines" ("Two poems about President Harding" *The Branch Will Not Break*).¹⁴

Like Vallejo's poems, Wright's exude a defeated existentialism. God is not dead, or even sick, but he is extremely remote, unfeeling and unconcerned with man.

And my bodies—father and child and unskilled criminal—
Ridiculously kneel to bare my scars,
My sneaking crimes, to God's unpyting stars.¹⁵

The most striking religious figure in Wright's works is Judas. In "St. Judas" the fallen disciple tells how when he went out to commit suicide he saved a man from being beaten by hoodlums, and

Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms.¹⁶

Judas is the hopeless sinner and loser who appears in other guises in Wright's poems—drunk, murderer, prostitute—who does a final act of kindness, not out of hope of reward, for that is gone, but simply out of the goodness of his heart—"for nothing." God is not dead as far as these losers are concerned, but he has ceased caring about them.

Wright's surrealism wavers. Many of his poems are straightforward and realistic, with a surrealistic image here and there; others resemble the dreamlike works of Vallejo:

I am frightened by the sorrow
Of escaping animals.
The snake moves slowly
Beyond his horizon of yellow stone.
A great harvest of convicts has shaken loose
And hurries across the wall of your eyes.

("In the Face of Hatred," *The Branch Will Not Break*)¹⁷

Women are dancing around a fire
By a pond of creosote and waste water from the river
In the dank fog of Ohio.
They are dead.

("A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle That I
Threw Into a Gully of Maple Trees One Night at an
Indecent Hour," *The Branch Will Not Break*)¹⁸

In tone Wright's poems resemble the Spanish surrealists rather than the French. The passionate feeling, the bitter cynicism, the weary sense of defeat, and the feeling of anomie in an absurd universe that occurs in Lorca, Vallejo and Pablo Neruda is what comes through in Wright's verse.

Translated into an Indian context, Welch shares the existentialism and surrealism of Vallejo and Wright. Welch's existentialism is largely the product of the disillusionments of reservation life, and a tribal and personal habit of laughing at the absurdity of existence. Welch acknowledges his interest in Vallejo and Wright, and as their outlook was congenial to his, he borrows their surrealistic techniques.

"Magic Fox" is a good example of Welch's surrealism:

They shook the green leaves down,
those men that rattled
in their sleep. Truth became
a nightmare to their fox.
He turned their horses into fish,
or was it horses strung
like fish, or fish like fish
hung naked in the wind?

Stars fell upon their catch.
A girl, not yet twenty-four
but blonde as morning birds, began
a dance that drew the men in
green around her skirts.
In dust her music jangled memories
of dawn, till fox and grief
turned nightmare in their sleep.

And this: fish not fish but stars
that fell into their dreams.¹⁹

Explicating surrealistic poems is always a dubious business, and so I hesitate to say very much about "Magic Fox." T. S. Eliot once said that "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood,"²⁰ and so the poem may transmit something to the reader even if he doesn't know what it is about. However, there is also no doubt that one gets more out of a poem that he understands intellectually as well as intuitively, and so it is worthwhile to try to see what Welch is doing in "Magic Fox."

"Magic Fox" is about dreaming: it is a dreamlike description of dreamers. The rules that govern the poem are those of the world of dreams. The dreamers, "those men that rattled in their sleep," dream of leaves, horses, fish, stars, and a beautiful girl. The dreams are controlled by a magic fox, a sort of trickster figure, a being with power to transform things (not unlike a poet, in fact). The fox transforms the dreamers' horses into fish—or does he—the dreamers aren't sure, because the world of dreams is always uncertain, and images shift constantly.

The surrealist poem speaks through its images, and these must be apprehended by intuition rather than ratiocination. For instance, a girl "as blonde as morning birds" makes no sense logically, but is perfectly clear to anyone who is familiar with blondes

or songbirds. The image evokes the girl's freshness, her outdoors, dewy beauty—the girl draws the men in “green around her skirts.” Welch is not using green in any denotative sense, but the term makes sense poetically in that green is the color of blooming nature, and fits with the image of morning birds. The men swirling green around her skirts remind the reader of the green leaves in the first line. There is a connection between the leaves, men, fish and stars which fall and swirl throughout the poem.

Although Welch is not recording a dream the way the first surrealists did, his poem of an imagined dream imitates the processes of dreaming. His description is hazy, indefinite, a pastiche of fragments, full of familiar yet strange occurrences and transformations. In short, what Welch is doing is depicting a dream in language as vivid, indefinite and troubling as dreams often are.

In the first edition of *Riding the Earthboy 40*, “Magic Fox” was well back in the book, the first poem of the third section, “Knives.” The first poem in the book was “Day after Chasing Porcupines,” a straightforward, nonsurrealistic description of a scene from a Montana reservation farm. In the new Harper and Row edition, published in 1976, Welch has changed the order of the poems, moving “Knives” to the front, and “Magic Fox” is now the first poem in the book. Most of the poems in “Knives” are surrealistic, and by moving them up front where they are the first poems the reader encounters, Welch has indicated that surrealism has become the dominant mode in his poetic voice and vision.

Dreaming is a motif which runs through many of Welch's surrealistic poems. “Dreaming Winter,” also from the “Knives” section, reads in part:

Wobble me back to a tiger's dream,
a dream of Knives and bones too common
to be exposed. . . .

Have mercy on me, Lord. Really. If I should die
before I wake, take me to that place I just heard
banging in my ears. Don't ask me. Let me join
the other kings, the ones who trade their knives
for a sack of keys. Let me open any door,
stand winter still and drown in a common dream.²¹

Meaning is elusive in a poem of this sort, but it appears that Welch is contrasting the old Indian way of life, hunting and warfare, with the new uncertain world that the Indian faces. The tiger is a predator who symbolically stands for the Indian as hunter

and fighter, and the dream of knives is the memory of the old life. But this life is over, for better or for worse, and so the hunter must trade his knife for the keys to the new world. Welch's attitude towards this new world is ambiguous. The "Really" in the last stanza indicates that the prayer may be ironic rather than fervent. Whatever the tone, the door Welch mentions leads to life in the white world, and drowning in a common dream means participating dubiously in American mainstream culture. "Winter" refers not only to that fierce season which savages Montana, but also to the winter in the blood that is the subject of his novel.

In "Picnic Weather" dreams seem to stand for the unconscious, and art is the defense the subject of the poem erects against the frightening things that emerge from the unconscious mind.

I know the songs we sang,
the old routine, the dozen masks
you painted when we left you
alone, afraid, frightened of yourself
the day the bull snakes rose,
seething out of dreams, has made you
what you are—alone, afraid, stronger.

Here we go again. The same sad tune.
You knew you would die some night,
alone, no folks, and I, no face, alone,
weaker in the knees and in the heart.
Picture this as your epitaph:
the bull snakes rising against you,
you popping their necks with a clean jerk
and the sky the drab blue of spring.

Winter now: here your image dies.
I can't grab hold of you like the snakes.
I know the dream: you, alone, stronger
than the night I popped your neck,
left you squirming on the ground, afraid
you'd find your hole and disappear,
and me, my fingers strong around your head,
my head making clicking sounds—
nothing like the music in your bones.²²

The snakes that rise seething from dreams seem to symbolize dark, frightening sexual threats from within the mind itself. The songs and the masks the singer paints seem to represent art as a

defensive response to these frightening urges. But in "Picnic Weather" as in "Magic Fox," the images shift and change, as in a dream. In the second stanza the subject pops the neck of the snakes; in the third stanza the subject becomes a snake himself, and the poet pops his neck.

Although surrealism is French in origin, and Welch gets it from South America by way of a white American poet, there is an Indian connection—a reason why surrealism would be a congenial mode of expression to a Blackfeet poet—the importance of visions to plains Indian culture.

The vision quest was a widespread phenomenon among American Indians, but figures most importantly in the culture of the plains tribes. Generally a youth approaching manhood would go to a remote place on the prairie and by fasting and often self torture would seek to have a vision which would serve as the basis of the youth's spiritual life for as long as he lived.

Among the Blackfeet it was more common for mature men rather than young boys to attempt the quest, and many failed in the attempt to have the vision. The Blackfeet warrior was to abstain from food or drink for four days and nights, and was obliged to seek a place that involved some danger, either from terrain or predatory animals. The vision, if it came, was usually in the form of some animal, which advised the man on the course his life should take, and gave him power.²³

There is an obvious relationship between Blackfeet visions and dreams the way surrealists perceived them. Both are visual experiences outside (and above) waking reality, which give meaning to everyday life. In fact, the surrealists were aware of this themselves, and in the thirties some studied Indian cultures in North and South America which had rituals like the vision quest.

Welch is familiar with Blackfeet vision traditions, as he reveals in "Getting Things Straight."

Is the sun the same drab gold?
The hawk—is he still rising, circling,
falling above the field? And the rolling day,
it will never stop? It means nothing?
Will it end the way history ended when
the last giant climbed Heart Butte, had his vision,
came back to town and drank himself
sick? The hawk has spotted a mouse.
Wheeling, falling, stumbling to a stop,
he watches the snake ribbon quickly

under a rock. What does it mean?
He flashes his wings to the sun, bobs
twice and lifts, screaming
off the ground. Does it mean this to him:
the mouse, a snake, the dozen angry days
still rolling since his last good feed?
Who offers him a friendly meal?
Am I strangling in his grip?
Is he my vision?²⁴

The poem is an existential statement about Welch's search for meaning in the events and phenomena of his life. He wonders if the hawk he sees might be his vision. But the fact that the poem ends with a question rather than an answer indicates that he hasn't found any meaning—that the hawk has nothing to tell him. The part about the giant's vision quest indicates why.

The giant who undertook his vision quest on Heart Butte symbolizes the last Indian who was able to find meaning in the old culture. He was a giant while on his quest, but much reduced in stature when he returned to the white bar in town and drank himself sick. In Welch's Montana Indians drift in and out of white towns and bars, estranged from their traditional culture and the security and meaning it afforded them. Welch is saying that history ended for the Indians when their traditional way of life ended, and the days, which were once filled with meaning for them, are now meaningless. History is over, and the gods are dead; events continue to happen, but there is no pattern to existence, only dreams of the past.

II Welch's comic vision

Welch's poems obviously lack the playful humor of French surrealist verse, but a close look reveals a good deal of bitter, mordant wit and humor. Perhaps this humor should not surprise us, since Welch's novel, *Winter in the Blood*, is a comic novel.²⁵ But the tone of Welch's poems is less genial than that of the novel; the humor is fiercer, and the laughter it calls forth is a very uneasy sort. Welch uses humor as a weapon against white bigots in poems like "My First Hard Springtime" and "Harlem Montana: Just off the Reservation," but he also directs it against Indians because he seems to find men, red as well as white, ludicrous much of the time, and he believes that the only honest response is to lampoon them. Welch objects to the sentimentally romanticized portraits of Indians by white poets:

I have seen poems about Indians written by whites and they are either sentimental or outraged over the conditions of the Indian. There are exceptions . . . but for the most part only an Indian knows who he is . . . and hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance.²⁶

In essence, Welch's view of life is existential, and although he doesn't have as much of an absurdist perspective as Beckett or Ionesco, his heroes are anti-heroes too, floundering about in an meaningless universe. There is something of the fool or clown in many of Welch's characters, not only those in *Winter in the Blood*, *Lame Bull*, the *Airplane Man*, or even the protagonist, but also in the figures in the poems, *Earthboy*, *Bear Child*, *Speakthunder*, *Grandma's Man*, and most importantly, the persona of the poet himself in "Arizona Highways," "Plea to Those Who Matter," and "Never Give a Bum an Even Break."

Acquaintance with Blackfeet religion may shed light on why Welch so often depicts men as fools. Napi, or Old Man, the chief deity and culture hero of the Blackfeet, is also often depicted as a fool. Like most Indian culture heroes Napi is a trickster, a complex figure who is alternately creator and destroyer, savior and menace, prankster and buffoon. Although he is often creator of the world and all its inhabitants, he is also a saturnalian figure who breaks all the rules and mores of the tribe with impunity, to the delight of the audience.

In the stories in which Napi acts as creator, he is depicted in reverential terms. In the tales like those in which the coyote tricks him and eats all his dinner, or he is chased and almost killed by a big rock he has offended, he acts like an irresponsible fool. He is a footloose figure of enormous appetites, whose hunger almost results in the extinction of rabbits, and whose sexual exploits were notorious (these stories unfortunately rarely get translated into English).

Every Blackfeet Welch's age would naturally grow up with a steady diet of Napi stories, and the shape of the peripatetic god who is both a fool and philanderer lurks in the background of many of Welch's characters, like the figures in his poems, and the hero of *Winter in the Blood*.

To start with Welch's portrayal of himself, let us consider "Arizona Highways," a poem in which he explores his reaction to a young Navajo girl he meets while touring Arizona giving poetry readings.

I see her seventeen,
a lady dark, turquoise
on her wrists. The land
astounded by a sweeping rain
becomes her skin. Clouds
begin to mend my broken eyes.

I see her singing by a broken shack,
eyes so black it must be dawn.
I hum along, act sober,
tell her I could love her
if she dressed better, if her father
got a job and beat her more.
Eulynda. There's a name
I could live with. I could
thrash away the nuns, tell them
I adopt this girl, dark,
seventeen, silver on her fingers,
in the name of the father, son,
and me, the holy ghost.
Why not? Mormons do less
with less. Didn't her ancestors
live in cliffs, no plumbing,
just a lot of love and corn?
Me, that's corn, pollen
in her hair. East, south, west, north—
now I see my role—religious.
The Indian politician made her laugh.
Her silver jingled in her throat,
those songs, her fingers busy
on his sleeve. Fathers, forgive me.
She knows me in her Tchindii dream,
always a little pale, too much
bourbon in my nose, my shoes
too clean, belly soft as hers.

I'll move on. My schedule
says Many Farms tomorrow, then
on to Window Rock, and finally home,
that weathered nude, distant
as the cloud I came in on.²⁷

The title of the poem is an ironic reference to the slick paper picture magazine of the same name—the sort of chamber of commerce publication put out to encourage tourists to visit the colorful Grand Canyon State. Welch's sardonic outlook is the antithesis of the perpetually upbeat magazine.

Before discussing Welch's relationship to the girl, it is necessary to make an obvious point that when a poet depicts himself in a work, the "I" is a persona or character, an artistic creation, not a realistic self-portrait. There is, of course, a resemblance between poet and persona, and the poet is the basis of the characterization, but the persona that appears in the poem should not be confused with the poet himself. The picture we get of Welch in "Arizona Highways"—the pale, flabby poet with a noseful of bourbon—is an exaggeratedly comic portrayal of the man who wrote the poem, much as Chaucer, the "elvyssh popet" who tells the doggerel tale of Sir Thopas, is a caricature of the author of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The setting of "Arizona Highways" is a bar. Eulynda is talking to an Indian politician. She is darkskinned, with black eyes. She is poorly dressed, but wears turquoise bracelets and silver rings. She seems thoroughly at home not only in the bar, but in her cultural milieu. Moreover the imagery of the poem links her to the land.

The land
astounded by a sweeping rain
becomes her skin . . .

In one sense this means that her skin is red-brown like the earth, but in a deeper sense this suggests that the girl is still a part of the Indian culture which has its roots in the earth, and so to Welch she is of the earth, earthy in a way that he no longer is. Of course it must be realized that Indian culture in the 1970's consists as much of Levis, Coors and jukeboxes as it does in hogans and horses, and Eulynda is no more Indian genetically or by virtue of her upbringing than Welch, a fullblood born and raised on a reservation. But Eulynda is Indian culturally because she lives the way Arizona Indians live now, and Welch has been cut off from his ethnic identity by his college education and his profession as poet.

Welch feels out of place in the Indian bar, and an unfit companion for Eulynda. He feels white ("a little pale"), flabby ("belly soft as hers"), and overdressed ("my shoes too clean"). In short, he feels that he is too civilized—not man enough for a woman like Eulynda. Since he would not do as her lover, he ironically suggests alternative relationships: paternal (he would adopt her): spiritual (he would be Holy Ghost to her Virgin Mary, or medicine man putting pollen in her hair). But there is something very wrong between them. He is like a Tchindii to her. Tchindii are Navajo ghosts, the spirits of the dead, a malevolent and vengeful pack

who often bedevil the living. Welch is afraid that he seems alien, frightening, wraithlike, insubstantial, malevolent to Eulynda. In short, the persona that Welch depicts is a caricature—pale, pudgy, spectral, and overdressed. He realizes that there is no relationship that he can establish with Eulynda, and so decides to move on, down the highway.

In "Plea To Those Who Matter," Welch's caricature becomes a clown. Here Welch examines the question of ethnic identity from a very different standpoint. Whereas in "Arizona Highways" Welch wasn't Indian enough, here he is too Indian.

You don't know I pretend my dumb.
My songs often wise, my bells could chase
the snow across these whistle-black plains.
Celebrate. The days are grim. Call your winds
to blast these bundled streets and patronize
my past of poverty and 4-day feasts.

Don't ignore me. I'll build my face a different way,
a way to make you know that I am no longer
proud, my name not strong enough to stand alone.
If I lie and say you took me for a friend,
patched together in my thin bones,
will you help me be cunning and noisy as the wind?

I have plans to burn my drum, move out
and civilize this hair. See my nose? I smash it
straight for you. These teeth? I scrub my teeth
away with stones. I know you help me now I matter.
And I—I come to you, head down, bleeding from my smile,
happy for the snow clean hands of you, my friends.²⁸

The poem is difficult to understand until Welch explains the situation behind it. Before they were married, his wife, who is white, and teaches in the English Department at the University of Montana, was invited to a department party. Welch, who at that time was also in the department, was not invited. In the poem, Welch indicates that he feels that his Indianness has caused his exclusion. He feels his Indian past of "poverty and 4-day feasts" makes him inferior in the eyes of the white professors, and he pleads for a chance to change himself—to burn his drum, the symbol of Indianness, civilize his unruly hair, and straighten his nose, so that he will be welcome at their snow white hands.

The poem, like "Arizona Highways," is about identity, which

appears to be a matter of context: who you are depends on where you are and whom you are with. Welch sees himself as a paleface with Eulynda, but a savage to the Montana English Department. The experience is obviously painful, and Welch treats it with a mordant irony. The tone is fiercer than that of "Arizona Highways"; Welch again plays the buffoon in mock self-abasement, but the hyperbolic fantasies he depicts—"I scrub my teeth away with stones"—are savage in their intensity. This clown is battered—nose smashed, "bleeding from his smile." Although the pose is one of self-abasement, the poem is an attack on his fellow professors, the comedy a weapon.

This clownish persona appears again in last poem in *Riding the Earthboy 40*, "Never Give a Bum an Even Break." Welch speaks of leaving home with a friend, and then concludes:

Any day we will crawl out to settle
old scores or create new roles, our masks
glittering in a comic rain.

Persona is the Latin word for *mask*. Here Welch's persona speaks of donning a mask to face the comic (i.e., absurd) world, or put it another way, donning a comic mask as a way of coping with the world.

Welch applies the same mordant irony to others as well as himself. "Grandma's Man" is about a wise fool, a man who neglects his farm in order to paint.

That day she threw the goose over the roof
of the cowshed, put her hand to her lips
and sucked, cursing, the world ended. In blood
her world ended though these past twenty years
have healed the bite and that silly goose
is preening in her favorite pillow.

Her husband was a fool. He laughed too long
at lies told by girls whose easy virtue disappeared
when he passed stumble-bum down the Sunday street.
Baled hay in his every forty, cows on his allotted range,
his quick sorrel quarter-horse, all neglected for
the palms of friends. Then, he began to paint LIFE.

His first attempt was all about a goose that bit
the hand that fed it. The obstacles were great.
Insurmountable. His fingers were too thick to grip

the brush right. The sky was always green
the hay spoiled in the fields. In wind,
the rain, the superlative night, images came, geese

skimming to the reservoir. This old man listened.
He got a bigger brush and once painted the cry
of a goose so long, it floated off the canvas
into thin air. Things got better. Sky turned white.
Winter came and he became quite expert at snowflakes.
But he was growing wise, Lord, his hair white as snow.

Funny, he used to say, how mountains are blue
in winter and green in spring. He never ever
got things quite right. He thought a lot about the day
the goose bit Grandma's hand. LIFE seldom came
the shade he wanted. Well, and yes, he died well,
but you should have seen how well his friends took it.²⁹

The painter is known to us only as "Grandma's Man:" in the eyes of the narrator of the poem he's not man enough called "Grandpa," much less by his name. The narrator relates the first stanzas of the poem from Grandma's point of view, and so our introduction to the subject of the poem is as her husband, the fool. Before he started painting Grandma's Man neglected his farm to drink in town with his friends. He was a figure of fun, too much of a stumble-bum even for the women of easy virtue he lurched past on Sunday mornings. The narrator refers snidely to his "allotted range," the implication being that Grandma's Man is an Indian who has received his land as a dole from the government.

When he begins to paint he remains a fool in the eyes of his wife and friends, but the narrator implies that he gains a certain wisdom, and that he becomes superior to the people who ridicule him.

Grandma's Man finds his vocation suddenly, apocalyptically as it were: "The day she threw the goose over the roof of the cowshed . . . the world ended." It ended obviously not only for the goose, who is dispatched for biting the hand that feeds it; it ends also for Grandma and her man, for the incident provides the inspiration for his first picture. (Obviously like Welch Grandma's Man has a fondness for subjects which combine pain and comedy). Unfortunately, he isn't much of a painter, partially because of simple-minded approach to painting. He wants to paint LIFE. The capital letters stress the banality of Grandma's Man's conception.

Although beset with physical and conceptual difficulties, Grandma's Man perseveres until he achieves a measure of proficiency—"he became quite expert at snowflakes." More important, his painting makes him aware of the world to an extent that he has never been before. Painters, even bad painters, look far more closely at familiar things. To the average man a tree is a green mass; to a painter it is many different colors and combinations of light and shade. Grandma's Man's observation that mountains are blue in winter and green in spring may not seem startling, but he is one of the few people in his valley who looks at the mountains at all.

Like many artists, Welch concerns himself with the question of the artist as a misfit in the eyes of society. But he avoids a clichéd treatment of the subject here by making the artist a mediocre painter. It is not that some yokels are scoffing at a rural Picasso. Their critical faculties may be undeveloped, but by and large Grandma's Man's critics are right about the quality of his work. They might not recognize great art if they saw it, but here they aren't seeing it.

What makes the poem work is Welch's masterful use of irony. Two lines in particular are marvellous:

He laughed too long
at lies told by girls whose easy virtue disappeared
when he passed stumble-bum down the Sunday street.

and

Well, and yes, he died well,
but you should have seen how well his friends took it.

Grandma's Man never becomes a good painter—"LIFE seldom came the shade he wanted"—but that is not important. He is a drinker and dreamer, a fool in the eyes of his shallow wife and friends, but his art has given him a far greater wisdom and humanity than the people who laugh at him. In this respect he is a wise fool in the tradition of Don Quixote—a man who tilts at windmills, but is more human than the wiser citizens around him.

"In My Lifetime" is another poem about a wise fool, although unlike Grandma's man it contains very little humor.

This day the children of Speakthunder
run the wrong man, a saint unable
to love a weasel way, able only to smile
and drink the wind that makes the others go.

Trees are ancient in his breath.
His bleeding feet tell a story of run
the sacred way, chase the antelope naked
till it drops, the odor of run
quiet in his blood. He watches cactus
jump against the moon. Moon is speaking
woman to the ancient fire. Always woman.

His sins were numerous, this wrong man.
Buttes were good to listen from. With thunder-
hands his father shaped the dust, circled
fire, tumbled up the wind to make a fool.
Now the fool is dead. His bones go back
so scarred in time, the buttes are young to look
for signs that say a man could love his fate,
that winter in the blood is one sad thing.

His sins—I don't explain. Desperate in my song,
I run these women hills, translate wind
to mean a kind of life, the children of Speakthunder
are never wrong and I am rhythm to strong medicine.³⁰

Speakthunder is not only a fool, but a wrong man—that is, a man that the world considers wrong, or at least the white world, and those Indians who think like them. He is an ambiguous figure, simultaneously a saint and a sinner, a demigod and a man, a hero and a fool.

He is saint by virtue of his adherence to ancient religious rituals like the antelope hunt, and because he is incapable of deviousness ("unable to love a weasel way)." But he is also a sinner, a philanthropist. In this he is like his spiritual father, the Blackfeet god Thunder, a powerful deity with a dual nature. According to Blackfeet myth, Thunder is benevolent in that he brings the rain that makes the vegetation grow, but malicious in that he steals men's wives. Although Speakthunder is a man, he seems also to be more than human, in that Thunder shapes him directly from dust, fire, and wind. But although he is a demigod and hero, he is also a fool, a man who can only smile as others pass him in life.

Now Speakthunder is dead, and his children, traditionalist Blackfeet, "run the wrong man," that is, they keep his memory alive by celebrating the rituals he loved. Welch runs too. Composing his verse, the product and sign of his desperation, he ranges over the breast shaped hills in the belief that the children of Speakthunder are in tune with life, and that he can attune himself to their strong medicine.

In conclusion, James Welch is a poet with a comic way of viewing the world and a fondness for surrealism. Strange as it may appear to white readers, both of these traits can be traced to his Blackfeet heritage. The Blackfeet were able to take at times a comic view of their chief god, so they certainly were prone to see the foolish side of men as well. And, with the importance of the vision to their culture, it is not surprising that a Blackfeet poet would respond to the surrealist fascination with the world of dreams.

NOTES

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleague Madison Morrison for explaining Welch's surrealism to me.
2. Anna Balakian, *Surrealism, The Road to the Absolute* (New York, 1970), p. 128.
3. Quoted from Balakian, p. 151.
4. Balakian, p. 152.
5. Balakian, p. 145.
6. *The Seventies*, Number 1, Spring 1972, p. 30.
7. *The Seventies*, p. 11.
8. Robert Bly, ed., *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 175.
9. Bly, p. 247.
10. Bly, p. 263.
11. "Have You Anything to Say in Your Defense?" Bly, p. 217.
12. "The Weary Circles," Bly, p. 207.
13. James Wright, *Collected Poems* (Middletown, Conn., 1971), p. 154.
14. *Collected Poems*, p. 120.
15. "At the Executed Murderer's Grave," *Collected Poems*, p. 82.
16. *St. Judas* in the *Collected Poems*, p. 84.
17. *Collected Poems*, p. 114.
18. *Collected Poems*, p. 115.
19. James Welch, *Riding the Earthboy 40* (New York, 1975), p. 3.
20. T. S. Eliot, "Dante," *Selected Essays* (New York, 1964), p. 200.
21. *Riding*, p. 6.
22. *Riding*, p. 12.
23. George Bird Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (Lincoln, 1962), p. 192.
24. *Riding*, p. 53.
25. See my "Winter in the Blood as Comic Novel," *American Indian Quarterly* 4(1), (Summer 1978): 51-57.
26. *South Dakota Review*, 9(2), (Summer 1971): 54.
27. *Riding*, p. 18.
28. *Riding*, p. 34.
29. *Riding*, p. 64.
30. *Riding*, p. 27.