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On James Welch's Poems

James Tate

It is interesting to see in these three new poems by James Welch that he has turned to the landscape of Greece the same eye for detail, the same insight and wit, that characterized his style in his first book. I have an irrational distaste for what might be called "Cretan Holiday Poetry," but Jim's poems here exist in human spheres, on a one-to-one basis, and avoid the cultivated sympathy for "the Glory and Suffering of Ancient Greece." In the small poem "Flies" he suddenly sees that a certain friendship of his is based on the notion of help. The brief, almost undeveloped way he presents this rather imposing idea keeps it lingering in the mind, echoing, as if he himself in the act of writing the lines were trying to memorize some newly discovered—though now that he sees it, it was obvious all along—law of human logic: *and didn't he help, that last time in Saronis, and didn't you help in Saronis?*

The other poem that takes place in Saronis (a small village 30 kilometers south of Athens on the coast where Jim spent last year) called "Birthday in Saronis" is, I think, the most ambitious and successful of these three. Even if the reader were not privy to the specific circumstances of the voice that speaks the poem, he still gets a clear picture of a man out-of-place, far from home, in a kind of progressively drunken-visionary way swallowing all the exoticism of his current surroundings and briefly visualizing in a dream the time when "the two roads meet"—meaning here, the Familiar that one loves and the Unknown which one loves also. Then the two roads "cross each other, on and on." And then, to make sure the point isn't missed:

November, another birthday—
ouzo man, where is your lover gone?

With that unanswerable question to all the drunks and wanderers of the world, the restless resignation of "on and on" is opened up. The artistry with which he builds the pillowy O-sounds throughout the poem—there are six O's and seven R's in those two brief lines alone—sensually envelops and seduces the reader with their atmosphere.

The third poem, "In the American Express Line," has a kind of self-declared inconsequential air to it; for all the verbal activity of the poem nothing much really happens: a moment's flirtation in an American Express line that could change the world is abruptly deflated by the arrival of the girl's boyfriend, "a nasal drip." It's a funny poem, full of flighty charm.

The publishers of Welch's book, World, have done everything in their power to make sure nobody knew about *Riding the Earthboy 40*. And then, when word leaked out due to the terrific readings Jim was giving more and more

around the country, World destroyed the whole lot, claiming to have no record of the book. The \$6.95 price was, alas, prohibitive to many who were lucky enough to find one in a bookstore. It is quite sad because I feel it is a unique and impressive collection.

The majority of the 46 one-page poems in this book deal through precise imagery with the vast, empty harshness of his native state, Montana. The poems are haunted with characters from his past, his Blackfoot heritage. Welch makes the personal statement in these poems not just for Indians but for all the disinherited. The poems are firm and serious, though never righteous. They would seem out of place in a Rothenberg anthology. They are more at home in the company of someone like E. A. Robinson.

Welch doesn't belong to any school of poetry. His poems are never obscure or modish. When they "experiment" it is with bold line-breaks and magnificent pauses. His studied but natural rhymes, rarely if ever in a pattern, are always there just in time to tighten up the argument. The individual lines are crafted to a musical hypnosis through his richly woven narratives. With never an extra syllable, he makes a feast.

James Welch's Response

This is the hard part. If Jim Tate had said, "Welch ought to take music lessons," then I could have said, well, you sonofabitch. . . . But to respond to a complimentary essay without sounding like a fool is very difficult. So I won't really refer to the poems except to say that I liked the way he talked about them. I particularly liked his statement that my poems ". . . would seem out of place in a Rothenberg anthology . . . are more at home in the company of someone like E.A. Robinson." That's mighty heady stuff, but in terms of what I have tried to do in "Indian poems," it is a good, sound statement. Briefly, I have tried to make Indians and their situation real, using myth and ceremony to contrast with what they have and are today. It is inevitable that the poems aren't celebrations of their lives.

I should mention here that Tate came down to Greece last winter for a visit (from Stockholm, where he spent the year). We had many fun-filled days and nights among the fun-loving Greeks of Athens, but we also managed to talk a little about poetry. Jim mentioned that he liked the way I kept my poems tight and controlled, but he also suggested (just to see what would happen) that I loosen up, try longer things, go to shorter lines, longer lines, break the pattern of "sameness" that my poems had fallen into. He suggested the old poem-a-day routine, writing about anything and everything, in order to free my imagination, make it more receptive to more images, different images. Well, it worked—I didn't exactly write a poem a day, but I wrote a lot of them, about subjects I wouldn't have touched previously with a ten-foot pole.

We also talked about the difficulty of being an "Indian poet." People expect

you to do things a certain way, their way. Members of the arts councils think it's nice that a young Indian can express himself so eloquently on "the Indian experience." They secretly know that most Indians have trouble writing their names in mud with a sharp stick and are hence ineloquent, or uneloquent, noneloquent. And the young Indians you meet at colleges and high schools wonder why you are wearing a bow-tie and smiling so much at the people who are oppressing them and paying you to dance. How can you tell the more militant Indians that some of your best friends are white? So you end up working both sides of the street and feeling a little foolish.

Funny as it may sound, Tate's advice and the difficulties of being an "Indian poet" connect. Although I had thought for some time of branching out, trying different subjects and themes, I always felt a kind of pressure to stay close to home, to write about "what I know." Well, I know a lot of new things now, how many pounds in a kilo, the difficulties of getting a car you brought into Greece out of Greece, how to tenderize an octopus by smashing hell out of it against the rocks. I could write about these things.