1982

High Performance Imagery : The Use of Prose Poetry in James Welch's Riding the Earthboy 40 and Winter in the Blood

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HIGH PERFORMANCE IMAGERY: THE USE OF PROSE POETRY IN JAMES WELCH'S *RIDING THE EARTHBOY 40* AND *WINTER IN THE BLOOD*

BY

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A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts
Major in English
South Dakota State University
1982

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Charles Woodard _____ Date _____
Thesis Advisor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began this thesis with what I considered to be a very academic viewpoint. I presented the introductory statement to my thesis advisor, and he made a statement concerning "voice" that has been a major influence upon this effort. He said "you have articulate things to say about this subject when we sit and talk, but your writing voice is very different. It sometimes seems stilted and jargonistic, and you hold your personal experience at arm's length." The depth of my respect and liking for my advisor, Dr. Charles Woodard, led me to re-think my position on this thesis, and to employ a more personal approach. I appreciate his assistance and encouragement.

I have also spent considerable time thinking about my life on and off the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and about the influence of James Welch, the man, and James Welch, the author, upon me. A love of and apprehension about Indian ways, a dual upbringing in white society and on the reservation, and the experience of living in two worlds are things I think James Welch and I have in common. Northrop Frye has said "Society only has reality when its artists begin to imagine it."[1] James Welch's research into the history he and I share represents the most significant imagining I am aware of that originates from the Montana Indian experience. The content and process of James Welch's writing, especially when the form opens up and the

associations deepen, give me insights into a nearly lost Indian world and into the present; I have hope that this may serve as a guide for my future. James Welch has contributed greatly to my understanding of my own identity, and to my self-confidence, and for this I am also grateful.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was raised by my extended family in the Milk River Valley of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which is the setting for Winter in the Blood and The Death of Jim Loney and for much of the poetry in Riding the Earthboy 40.

When I was small, it was not chic to be Indian and although there was always a strong sense of pride in heritage, it was stressed to me that I should know the white way of life and try to "better" myself. As a result, when my mother relocated off the reservation, I lived with her during the school year. However, I returned to Fort Belknap during the summers.

After graduating from high school, I attended college in Havre, Montana. The quarter I was to graduate, I experienced a deep sense of confusion about who I was and what I was doing, and I dropped out. Some of the feelings and experiences I had during this time seem very similar to the narrator's in Winter in the Blood, and to James Welch's reflection about the period in his life when he began the book. He has said: "I was feeling distant from the world around me back then."[2]

I subsequently returned to college, graduating in the summer of 1972. The chairman of the English Department at

Northern Montana College then encouraged me to take an assistantship at South Dakota State University and work toward a Master's Degree. I did so. That winter, James Welch's novel Winter in the Blood was distributed across the country. James Welch and I are cousins, we had lived in the same house at different times, the setting for the novel was the same ranch and the same reservation. I recognized much of the material and I was delighted with the book. So much of my own discontent as well as my recollection of pleasant experiences was reflected and examined within the pages of Winter in the Blood that it became a significant event in my life.

Later that spring, Dr. Ruth Alexander informed me that there was a small amount of money available to pay a speaker, and asked me to contact Jim and invite him to Brookings. I did so and he accepted, and an enthusiastic audience enjoyed his reading. His selection from Winter in the Blood was lighthearted, almost joyous, and somewhat in contrast to the poetry he had read. He began reading the poetry slowly, almost noncommittally, but the tone changed as he read "In My Lifetime," a poem from the section of Riding the Earthboy 40 called "The Renegade Wants Words." By the time he got to "Dreaming Winter," in the surrealistic "Knives" section, he was reading with an intensity and conviction that passionately underscored the ethereal images in the poem.

To see such passion suddenly emerge in an individual who had to that point been extremely relaxed was very moving. James Welch is kind and unassuming, yet very forceful. I think it is this duality, in part, that gives such depth to his personality and to his work. He can be almost reticent, yet by his own admission, "A lot of my poems end up--I don't know if you can say they were bitter or angry, but--they end up very intense when I didn't really mean them to be that way when I started. I guess I do have this sense of injustice of the whole thing."[3]

There is a duality as well in Welch's writing style. Much of his poetry and prose is readily accessible. A poem such as "Day After Chasing Porcupines" presents accurate everyday images of rain, slough, dog, and weathered shed. Winter in the Blood describes in detail a housefly walking through a small pool of sneaky pete wine until it falls over drunk. On the other hand, a poem like "Magic Fox" says "He turned their horses into fish, or was it horses strung like fish, or fish like fish hung naked in the wind?"[4] In Winter in the Blood, the dream-image of the man rolling in the manure of the corral, "from time to time washing his great pecker in the tub of water"[5] also takes the reader into the world of the surreal, the less accessible dimension of James Welch's writing.

The bipolarity of this style has resulted in a masterful combination of poetry and prose that conveys to the imagination much more than external reality. Originally a poet, James Welch's movement into the novel form seems to allow him to be both a highly abstract word weaver and a conventional mason. Interested in the past and its influence, as well as in surrealism and surrealistic writers such as Cesar Vallejo and James Wright, he seems to accomplish what Jung called "a translation of the primordial image into the language of the present," by creating images out of the phrases and incidents of the recognizable present. This is evident initially in the "Knives" section of poems in Riding the Earthboy 40, and later in Winter in the Blood. Most of the "Knives" poems are surrealistic and have a dream-like quality. They are reminiscent of the half-consciousness of a just-awakened person trying to integrate dreams into reality. But these images may seem shapeless and fragmentary to one unaccustomed to dealing with deep responses, and as a result, they can be difficult to understand.

Not all of Welch's work is abstract, however. As a conventional craftsman, he is a student of technique, and he recommends that individuals interested in learning to write study with someone familiar with mechanics, as he did. He also emphasizes the value of becoming familiar with simple yet

effective stylists such as Elio Vittorini, an Italian writer who Welch says "originally led me to believe that I could write a novel."[6]

James Welch's combining of two art forms has resulted in a prose poetry style powerful in its use of imagery. The compression of poetic images shortens his novels but gives in return poetic intensity. This also allows the reader to make associations beyond the literal text. Conversely, as the poetry shortens the novels, the novels lengthen the poetry, and the reader is treated to an extended series of vivid word pictures that greatly enhance the telling of the stories. Winter in the Blood, the novel that I will discuss in this context, is affected in such a way that the narrator's struggle is elevated to a level of tragicomic art not often attained by modern writers.

Attempting an understanding of Winter in the Blood is a large task that demands careful study of a number of elements. The literal meaning of speech and actions must be followed carefully, but the reader is also obligated to note excursions into myth and legend. One example of this is the flashback to the history of a small band of north Montana Indians. Outwardly a simple, brief story of hunger and deprivation, this segment is also a rich bit of history that provides a major clue to understanding the character development of the narrator later in the novel. Other incidents also lead into the dream world of the

narrator's subconscious. A closer look at the use of images in Riding the Earthboy 40 and Winter in the Blood is needed to help illuminate the brilliant nuances of James Welch's prose poetry.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER 1

[1]Mark Czarnecki, "The gospel according to Frye," MacLeans, 5 April, 1982, p. 41.

[2]James Cotter, "James Welch: Profile of a Montana Writer," The Independent Record, Helena, Mt., December 15, 1974, col. 1, p. 33.

[3]James Welch, "American Indians Speak for Themselves," The South Dakota Review, (Autumn 1973), Vol. 11, Number 3, p. 40.

[4]James Welch, Riding the Earthboy 40 (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), p. 33.

[5]James Welch, Winter in the Blood (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 52.

[6]From remarks made by James Welch at South Dakota State University Writer's Conference, Brookings, South Dakota, 24 September 1981.

CHAPTER II

SELECTED POETRY

James Welch's writing begins with his poetry. His parents, Jim Sr. and Rose, provided me with mimeograph copies of "Birth on Range 18," and "Getting Things Straight," when I expressed to them my early interest. "Birth on Range 18" was the first poem I read.

> His great thighs nosed the pebbles;
> his head rolled in the socket
>
> of the earth; he became the sky
> with one quick jerk. The green of spring
>
> came hard and the mother, bearing
> easy, one two three, caught our stare
>
> and stared our eyes away. Moon
> eclipsed the night. We rode the wind
>
> the only distance we could muster--
> quick paces and a space of mind.[1]

This is an early poem, and the simplicity of its construction is evidence of that. It has an easy quality that allows the reader to move from the beginning to the end with the sense that something has happened, but at the same time the poem forces the reader to wonder what it was. After some time, this poem came to mean for me the life cycles--land, cattle, people--of

the vast grazing land that comprises most of the Montana Indian Reservations.

More literally, the title of the poem has to do with the structure and organization of the land. At the time of allotment, land along the Milk River was divided into small parcels of forty acres because it could be irrigated. These parcels took the names of their original owners for purposes of reference, for example, "Earthboy 40." The prairie land south of the river, practically useful only for summer cattle forage, was divided into larger portions of up to 360 acres. The government organized this area into range units, some larger than others according to the quality of the land, and fenced it in for the use of individual cattle operators. The units were numbered, and "Range 18" refers to an area south of our family ranch.

James Welch's father and my family used 76 and 89 at different times, and these places came to have character for those of us who rode over them horseback for many years. Range 22 was fairly poor land, and as a result, large in area. Over the years it acquired a legendary quality because of the difficulty of keeping track of cattle in such a large space, and because of the opportunity it afforded to "skin" outside cattlemen who contracted with Indian operators to run cattle on it in the summer. The Bureau of Land Management in later years determined that only a

certain number of cattle, called animal units, would be allowed to graze a given area, according to what they determined the area could support. Range 22, because of its size, had a large animal assignment that was always fully utilized whether grass was good or not, and especially by Indians running cows for outsiders. It was also possible to illegally run a few cows on 22 and to steal from it, again because of its size. I think that all these bits of information and history are the reasons why a piece of land comes to have a character that a poet would want to write about. This is the importance of Welch's range poem. It is a recording of a place where there was birth, life, and death.

James Welch's parents were also instrumental in my obtaining a copy of the original World Publishing Company hardcover edition of Riding the Earthboy 40. The later Harper and Row edition is different in that the surrealistic "Knives" section is placed in the front, rather than toward the back, as it was in the original. Alan Velie suggests that this change indicates that surrealism eventually became Welch's dominant mode of expression. The author's autograph in the flyleaf of my copy reads "I know the countryside will be familiar to you and I hope these poems have captured that."

There are three poems in Earthboy (Riding the Earthboy 40) that I consider to be the most accessible, in addition to

being some of the most skillfully written reproductions of a particular setting I have ever read. The first one is "Day After Chasing Porcupines."

> Rain came. Fog out of the slough and horses
> asleep in the barn. In the fields, sparrow hawks
> glittered through the morning clouds.
>
> No dreamers knew the rain. Wind ruffled quills
> in the mongrel's nose. He sighed cautiously,
> kicked further beneath the weathered shed and slept.
>
> Timid chickens watched chickens in the puddles.
> Watching the chickens, yellow eyes harsh
> below the wind-drifting clouds, sparrow hawks.
>
> Horses stamped in the barn. The mongrel whimpered
> in his dream, wind ruffled his mongrel tail,
> the lazy cattails and the rain.[2]

The beginning of the poem, "Rain Came," describes a time of peace, tranquillity, and prosperity for those who work dry land. Rain in summer was a time of joy for hayhands because it meant a respite from the broiling sun and screaming machinery. As raindrops began to fall consistently, a pickup truck would race around the fields loading the haying crew members, who would gather in the ranch house to eat, visit, and relax.

The magnificently powerful thunderstorms that spent themselves quickly always came from the west, with boiling purple-green clouds and wind that drove rain horizontally before it. I heard many times when thunderheads began to build in the west that during times of drought, these storms would split at

White Bear Creek, three or four miles west of the ranch, and go north and south, leaving our land parched. My grandmother told me that the bones of many Atsina lay at White Bear, where a band starved to death one winter, and she implied that this had something to do with the rain.

Gentler southern winds from the Gulf of Mexico would often bring rain that fell softly for days. During these rains, somnambulence would overtake the country and there was time to read and sleep. "No dreamers knew the rain"[3] captures the feeling of this--the inhabitants of the land lulled by rain rhythm listening to the language of their dreams, words and images speaking from the subconscious. In the poem, all the creatures of the land sleep. Only those of the air are active, birds representing spirits communicating to dreamers, something that becomes very important to the process of the more difficult writing.

Much of the hypnotic effect of the poem is achieved through repetition. It begins and ends with the word rain. Chickens watch chickens while, watching chickens, there are sparrow hawks in the clouds. There are porcupine quills in the mongrel's nose, the mongrel whimpers, wind ruffles his mongrel tail. The language is soothing and causes sleep to come easily.

"Going to Remake This World" is as literal as "Day After Chasing Procupines," especially if the references are understood:

> Morning and the snow might fall forever.
> I keep busy. I watch the yellow dogs
> chase creeping cars filled with Indians
> on their way to the tribal office.
> Grateful trees tickle the busy underside
> of our snow-fat sky. My mind is right,
> I think, and you will come today
> for sure, this day when the snow falls.
>
> From my window, I see bundled Doris Horseman,
> black in the blowing snow, her raving son,
> Horace, too busy counting flakes to hide his face.
> He doesn't know. He kicks my dog
> and glares at me, too dumb to thank the men
> who keep him on relief and his mama drunk.
>
> My radio reminds me that Hawaii calls
> every afternoon at two. Moose Jaw is overcast,
> twelve below and blowing. Some people...
> Listen: if you do not come this day, today
> of all days, there is another time
> when breeze is tropic and riffs the green sap
> forever up these crooked cottonwoods. Sometimes,
> you know, the snow never falls forever.[4]

The setting is the Fort Belknap Indian Agency, twenty miles west of the ranch. At times, Jim's parents lived and worked there, and his father commuted to his cattle. In my mind's eye, I can see their trailer house that had a view of the old tribal office. The poem takes the reader into winter and I can imagine Jim perhaps home from the University of Montana at Missoula, Montana, for Christmas. "Morning and the snow might fall forever. I keep busy,...My mind is right, I think, and you will come today for sure, this day when the snow falls."[5] The happy

laziness of summer has become the sheer boredom of forced inactivity. Jim's future wife, Lois, might be on her way from Missoula, or maybe anyone will come to visit and relieve the monotony of being snowbound.

Horseman is a tribal name at Fort Belknap, and Horace is one of the walking wounded who populate this place, kicking and glaring their ways through a polar existence. As I remember it, the picture is bleak as dogs chasing dilapidated cars packed with Indians on their way to the tribal office. A trip to the tribal office in the dead of winter represents want—of food, or an advance on next year's grazing lease to buy stove oil or wine. Sometimes there is assistance, but sometimes there is not, and the Indians drive slowly back into the hills to wait.

A small winter diversion of the time of this poem was radio station KOJM of Havre, Montana, forty miles west of the agency. In the winter, KOJM aired a program named "Hawaii Calls" every afternoon at two o'clock. It is one of the most bizarre pieces of programming I can think of, and in the poem there is frustration with weather, with life, and with the kind of thinking that offers reservations and Hawaiian music to people faced with problems that require much larger solutions. The poem evokes bittersweet feelings and memories, but also and more importantly, it leaves me finally with the signature emotion of most of James Welch's writing: "there is another time when breeze is tropic and

riffs the green sap forever up these crooked cottonwoods. Sometimes, you know, the snow never falls forever."[6] There is hope here, and James Welch, in this poem, has done much to help remake a world much in need of a movement back to dignity.

The last of the literal poems I will discuss is "Day to Make Up Incompletes."

> Because the day came (and now,
> why not, because I am older)
> that people fell dropping
> not hard or fast, but soft
> like the cottonwood snow
> in my mother's yard, and the soft grasses
> of my father's fields swarmed
> before a thickening wind
> out of the north,
> I came (why not) to the conclusion
> of rain beating the shingle roof
> above my bed, and this day
> like all my days
> found me badly in need
> of encyclopedias
> and moths to tickle the itch
> from my burning feet.[7]

The supporting reference to college exists like a flying buttress over the interior structures of the poem, which take us back to the land, into the poet's mind, then back to books. There is transition, a movement into individuality that surpasses home and family. This comes into consciousness in bed, like awakening, and seems a logical culmination of the dream-thought process. Welch points out time and again that many things take place in bed: birth, dream experiences, sex-creation, and death.

The signature emotion of James Welch's writing appears again in the middle of the poem, as childhood is discarded "not hard or fast, but soft like the cottonwood snow in my mother's yard, and the soft grasses of my father's fields swarmed before a thickening wind out of the north...."[8] Although growing away from his parents and their home, Welch is careful to regard them with love.

The conclusion is interwoven with an image of rain falling on shingles. Rain is a familiar image in Welch's writing that he uses very effectively to establish a mood of contemplation, out of which comes dreams and conclusions. The closing lines of "Incompletes" communicate an urgency to get on with life, and speak ironically of the "need of encyclopedias"[9] to help guide the way. In advanced writing, encyclopedias are considered too general for serious use. The reference to them as well as the words enclosed in parentheses, "why not," indicate that perhaps it takes more than books to gain understanding.

Analyzing abstract writing is difficult because of its oftentimes highly-personalized content, style, and language. James Welch communicates extensively in an abstract manner, and even the straightforward "Day After Chasing Porcupines" urges the reader to see beyond the eyes, to associate wind and birds with spirits communicating through dreams. Spirits exist, and we

recognize them in the solitary mind at night and in the feelings of anyone cognizant of a time or place filled with history. For example, I remember standing in the middle of the Battle of the Bear's Paw Battlefield on a quiet summer morning when suddenly a gust of wind literally moaned through the surrounding hills and was gone. The ensuing stillness was eerie, and I was left with the feeling that the place had communicated to me. The process of writing about such feeling has generated a form of poetry that Robert Bly has termed "associative," a "leaping about the psyche...the corridors to the unconscious, which were open in ancient poetry, for example in the Greek plays drawn from the mystery initiations...."[10]

To attempt some understanding of "associative" writing in James Welch's more difficult poetry, I feel it valuable to consider the possible influences of the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, Surrealism, and certain Modern American open form poets.

Open form poetry has existed from the time of ancient Chinese poets, and persisted through Blake in England, the Spanish poets Lorca and Vallejo, France's Mallarme and Verlaine, and Whitman in America. Jung, Pound, and Eliot, among others, have studied the process of open form and commented on the validity of its influence upon the creation of a new direction in modern poetry.

Alan R. Velie has said that Welch "has been influenced by surrealism. The most important direct influences have been the poetry of his friend James Wright, and the works of Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo."[11] Surrrealism is an outgrowth of earlier European movements such as Dadaism and Symbolism that attempted to move out of the restrictions of verse structure in hope of enhancing content. According to The Princeton Encylopedia of Poetry and Poetics:

> In its beginnings (Surrealism) was presented by its chief spokesman, Andre Breton, in his first Manifesto (1924) as an attempt to give expression to the "real functioning of thought" through pure psychic automatism, by means of the spoken or written word, or by any other means available... The study of dreams, of hallucinations, the practice of automatic writing under the dictation of the subconscious are considered by the surrealists as the true means of knowledge...
>
> The main themes of surrealist poetry are love, revolt, the marvelous, freedom, the exaltation of desire, "black humor" and the universe of subconscious thought. The love of woman, of a frankly erotic character, is considered as a form of liberation. Revolt, for the surrealists, is directed principally against logic, social morality, and conventional norms...
>
> Surrealism has exercised an undeniable influence on poetry during the last thirty-eight years. The poem is no longer considered merely as a vehicle for aesthetic pleasure but as a springboard for metaphysical knowledge, and this transformation is, in great part, due to the surrealists. The experimentations in language have left their mark on poetic language in France and in other countries as well.[12]

Cesar Vallejo, considered a surrealist, was a Peruvian poet born in Santiago de Chuco, Peru, in 1893. Vallejo was of mixed Indian and white blood, a cholo, who was persecuted by members of the Peruvian community with whom he lived his early life. He spent most of his later years in Paris in poverty and hunger, except for a year in exile in Spain, where he fled after falling into disrepute with the French over Marxist associations. John Knoepfle, a translator of Vallejo's poetry, says:

> There is something very ancient (in 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...The art of Vallejo is a way of making disparate things live with each other: a young girl nurses the hour, a man points with God-murdering finger, a man drowns the length of a throat, a stone walks crouched over in the soul. His ability to astonish with metaphor is matched by a talent for shifting from idiom to idiom. In poems like "Agape," the idiom has a primal simplicity:
>
> Today no one has come to inquire,
> nor have they wanted anything from me this
> afternoon.
>
> I have not seen a single cemetery flower
> in so happy a procession of lights.
> Forgive me, Lord! I have died so little!
>
> This afternoon everyone, everyone goes by
> without asking or begging me anything.
>
> And I do not know what it is they forget, and it is
> heavy in my hands like something stolen.
>
> I have come to the door,

and I want to shout at everyone:
--If you miss something, here it is!

Because in all the afternoons of this life,
I do not know how many doors are slammed on
a face,
and my soul takes something that belongs to another.

Today nobody has come;
and today I have died so little in the afternoon![13]

In "The Weary Circles," the voice rises to piercing surrealistic metaphors, and then suddenly drops into tough, blunt colloquial language:

There are desires to return, to love, not to go away,
and there are desires to die, fought by two
opposite waters that will never become isthmus.

There are desires for a kiss that would shroud life,
that withers in Africa of a fiery agony,
suicide!

There are desires to...not have desires. Lord,
at you I point my god-murdering finger.
There are desires not to have had a heart at all.

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.

When my temples beat their mournful drum,
when that sleep etched on a knife hurts me,
there are desires not to move an inch from this poem![14]

Although extremely abstract in places, Vallejo's work begins with and usually returns to common images of everyday life; eating, dressing, pains in the bones, the weather. His most grave poetry is seeded with the words and phrases of common speech that

all men use to attempt to define that which they have difficulty comprehending.

James Welch and Cesar Vallejo are similar in their ability to make disparate images live together in writing, their effective use of colloquial speech, and their gift for finding meaning in simple things. Perhaps this similarity is partially attributable to the fact that they are both mixed-bloods and have both lived among native cultures and in white society. As a result, they see things with a duality that adds to traditional Western perspective.

Certain Modern American Poets who work in open form poetry I think help explain the process of James Welch's more difficult writing. Welch has acknowledged the influence of his friend, the poet James Wright. Wright, along with Bly and Knoepfle, practically "discovered" Vallejo for American writers by translating his poetry. It is logical that Wright borrowed from Vallejo's technique, and that James Welch was subsequently influenced by Wright's poetry and by Vallejo, primarily through Wright.

James Wright has said that Vallejo is "a great poet who lives neither in formalism nor in violence, but in imagination."[15] I see this trait in both Welch and Wright--an effort to create and record society on paper as it is, no more, no less.

The subject matter of Welch's and Wright's poems is oftentimes similar. For example, in Wright's "Stages on a Journey Westward":

> ...Near Mansfield, enormous dobbins enter dark barns in
> autumn,
> Where they can be lazy, where they can munch little
> apples
> Or sleep long...
>
> ...The only human beings between me and the Pacific Ocean
> Were old Indians, who wanted to kill me...
>
> ...I came in last night, drunk,
> And left the oil stove cold.
>
> ...It sounds like the voices of bums and gamblers,
> Rattling through the bare nineteenth-century whorehouses
> In Nevada...[16]

In this poem is found the predominantly rural setting and some of the favorite subject matter of James Welch--horses, sleep, Indians, drunks, and bums. I think this is common ground for Wright and Welch--a consideration for the ordinary man and his environment and an "empathy for the lumpen--winos, whores, bums...."[17]

Denise Levertov's term for open form writing is "organic form," and she says:

> ....experience, a sequence or constellation of
> perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the
> poet intensely enough to demand of him their
> equivalence in words: he is brought to speech.
> Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a
> dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper
> flying through the sky, the sound of music from his

> radio, feelings of anger and love and amusement roused by a letter just received, the memory of some long thought or event associated with what's seen or heard or felt, and an idea, a concept, he has been pondering, each qualifying the other; together with what he knows about history; and what he has been dreaming--whether or not he remembers it--working in him...[18]

This reminds me very much of James Welch and the overall feeling I get from much of his poetry--some of the present, some of the past, and some of the subconscious all tied together to create a vehicle of feeling that stops only when the imagination wants it to.

"In My Lifetime" is a poem I have read a lot, and I feel I have gone through the transformational process with it, in the linguistic sense of reading something, having it lay in the subconscious for a time, reading it again, etc., then having it reappear at some point with new shades of meaning. I think it is a rare opportunity to be close enough to an artist to presume that some of his thoughts and experiences parallel my own. "In My Lifetime" does this for me. This is also a piece I have heard James Welch read, and his oral interpretation enhances it considerably. Denise Levertov Says:

> I heard Henry Cowell tell that the drone in Indian music is known as the horizon note. Al Kresch, the painter, sent me a quotation from Emerson: "The health of the eye demands a horizon." This sense of the beat or pulse underlying the whole I think of as the horizon note of the poem. It interacts with the nuances or forces of feeling which determine emphasis on one word or another, and decides to a great

> extent what belongs to a given line. It relates the needs of that feeling-force which dominates the cadence to the needs of the surrounding parts and so to the whole.[19]

This was very much the case with Welch's reading of the poem. The horizon note was established in the first stanza; it was disturbing, the rhyme was an intense cadence like singers at a sun dance; it was a shrill, primal soprano with word images running alongside. It was insistent in this quality, and inflections were syncopations like treble strings sounding melody among the steady, walking base of a guitar player.

The poem itself is expansive, a kind of mini-autobiography:

> 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 woman hills, translate wind
> to mean a kind of life, the children of Speakthunder
> are never wrong and I am rhythm to strong medicine.[20]

I think that "The Children of Speakthunder" suggests a whole, a body of people inclusive of the poet who have found a representative, or perhaps he has found himself in his greater awareness, for them. The selection has been made and he is in the race, a political race, a footrace, a run for meat, for the way out, the way back, it does not matter; he is in the hunt, a people is symbolically up on its feet. He feels inadequate because the complexity of the situation is such that no man can presume to deal with it; those who have have died young. He must be slyer than the weasel. No weasel ever had to be kind-cruel, dumb-smart, white-Indian, Indian-white, Christian-pagan, tough-sensitive, aware- unaware, or to combat the forces of flesh and spirit inherited from two separate ways of life.

He smiles and says nothing. It is his lot to smell the wind for a sense of what might come of this for the whole, and to save his own life; he must consider this carefully while so many others have the simple luxury of impulsive physical action. When he does speak he tries to do so with consideration of the past, the present, and the future.

By placing my own experiences alongside some of the feelings expressed in this poem, I can recognize some of the frustrations of my own life. I envy cowboys and farmers their simple, physical ways of life, but am powerless in the face of my need to know about them rather than be one of them. I am a pagan with a good understanding of Christianity and what it has to offer. I have paid dearly to attain a part of what the poet has attained--the power of words that leave me from time to time, that speak like cannons occasionally, and that almost never pay the rent. I have chased the antelope of this small achievement until it dropped, and what I have gained is a kind of instinctual knowledge that I am somewhat suspicious of.

The first stanza ends with moon and woman. The incongruent images here, trees in the breath, the odor of run in the blood, and cactus jumping against the moon, may be confounding and could be considered detrimental. These images are examples of surrealism, which experiments with the subconscious and the hallucinatory, and uses language as a springboard to metaphysical knowledge. "Trees ancient in the breath," and "the odor of run quiet in his blood" are good examples of disparate things living together--the effect is one of history, and history communicated by words. An over-stimulated or over-sensitive mind might see cactus jump against the moon in the split second required for a

retina image to reach its appropriate brain center. This image is consistent with a night person, one who lives alone at night frequently, and thinks, and is surrounded by the things of night, a unique field from which to construct images.

Cecil Day-Lewis, in The Poetic Image, addresses the problem of broken, or incongruous images in this way:

> There are many serious-minded and puzzled people who, while admitting that in theory no object need be un-poetical, feel that in modern practice only too many objects are. Faced by the incongruity of image in some contemporary verse, they are dumbfounded and perhaps feel an inclination to laugh. The incongruous is indeed the source of all humour, and therefore fatal to most kinds of poetry: but not everything that is incongruous is funny. We may imagine ourselves confronted by a gentleman clad only in top hat, football jersey, and sock-suspenders. Do we laugh? No: because we have also noticed a carving knife in his hand and a homicidal maniac's gleam in his eye. That gleam carries off, so to speak, those garments: in fact, it gives them a certain appropriateness... whether we are facing up to a surrealist poem or a person in top hat, jersey and suspenders, do we see that gleam in the eye, do we feel that single-minded imaginative passion which alone gives significance to the incongruous, the unexpected or the seemingly irrelevant?[21]

It seems to me that in James Welch's more difficult poetry we do experience an intensity of feeling along with an underlying seriousness that helps to carry the surrealism.

The first stanza of "In My Lifetime" ends with moon speaking woman to the ancient fire. Moon is a thing of the night, as is the physical relationship between men and women, and fire is

their passion. Women appear consistently in Welch's writing, and they have the frankly erotic character considered liberating by surrealists.[22]

Welch's women are unabashedly sexual -- liberated by the general standard of a counterpoint provided by the author. The liberation I see here is from Catholic Christianity, an institution that also appears frequently in James Welch's writing, and one that pervades modern Indian life. Welch's characters do not try to exceed the physical relationship, in contrast to the Christian impulse toward transcendence of the physical, or the ego desire to become God. This recognition of sexuality is a denial of one of the unnatural, anti-life rules brought to humanity by the later structure of religion and to Indians by the black robe Catholic missionaries. Welch's writing conveys an opposite sense of associating sexuality with life, and a restoring of the power contained in this basic drive to men and women.

The second stanza of "In My Lifetime" alludes to a mortal, imperfect man again, a man who has done wrong in the eyes of Christianity, a man who worships from buttes, not churches. His father has shaped the dust, the land, with a plow and love, has provided a home fire, and has tumbled with the wind to spawn an individual who exists somewhere between the past and the present. It is a foolish feeling not to know who you are, or who

you should be, but this confusion has been eliminated. The fool is dead and in his place is one who has discovered himself, again largely through knowing his past. The man has been lucky. He now feels congenial toward his fate, but the price has been high and there is a residual feeling of winter in the blood, a sadness for all the fools remaining.

In conclusion, the poem promises no more explanations. The man will live closely to the rhythms of the land and his body and feel no more guilt about it. The switch to first person ("I run these woman hills, I am rhythm to strong medicine") indicates the poem is autobiographical, and there is an urgency to proceed with life, to run woman hills, and to listen to wind and not priests. The resolution of the last two lines is powerful: "the children of Speakthunder are never wrong, and I am rhythm to strong medicine."[28] In my own life, I am one with James Welch in having the confidence of knowing that I, one of the children of Speakthunder, have strong medicine.

"Blue Like Death" is similar to "In My Lifetime" in its revelation of the thoughts of one who lives in his head much of the time, and of one who has recently spent a long night in a bar with a case of the blues.

> You see, the problem is
> no more for the road. Moon fails
> in snow between the moon

and you. Your eyes ignite
the way that butterfly
should move had you not killed it
in a dream of love.

The road forked back
and will fork again the day
you earn your lies,
the thrill of being what you are
when shacks begin to move
and coyotes kill the snakes
you keep safe at home in jars.

The girl let you out. She prized
your going the way some people
help a drunk to fall.
Easy does it, one two three
and let him lie. For he was blue
and dirt is where the bones meet.

You met his eyes
out there where the road dips
and children whipped the snake
you called Frank to death
with sticks. Now you understand:
the way is not your going
but an end. That road awaits
the moon that falls between
the snow and you, your stalking home.[23]

Everybody has the blues sometime, and alcohol is a traditional means of dealing with and exploring the depths of this state of mind that can feel like death. Drinking is not as big a problem as stopping drinking, and the poem begins with this, with closing time in a bar, no more for the road. Moon, the guiding light of night people, is blocked out by snow. The situation is bleak going home on a dark winter night drunk and feeling bad. There is a term among Indian people for the sad, solitary,

introspective drinking bout. It is called being on "a high lonesome," and those who have been there will not bother one in this state of mind. The you in this poem seems to address this person, that part of the self that is first person but which is spoken of impersonally as if it is someone else. The way the butterfly should move is the way the drinker should be: colorful, animated, happy; possessed of qualities destroyed immediately by seriousness, especially the deadly seriousness of one dreaming or suffering from love.

The second stanza is contemplative, as if the drinker has been reviewing his life. The road of life has forked, has changed, taken a new direction, and will do so for anyone coming out of obscurity into sudden prominence, perhaps as a poet. In depression the poet's words are seen as lies, but there is a thrill in replacing shacks with comfortable dwellings, and in letting go the things, snakes, of a life past.

In the third stanza, the poem itself forks and the reader must travel two roads at once. The girl, the bartender, also seems to be a person from the past. She lets the drinker out of the bar, makes him leave, actually. Easy does it, she helps him out suavely, a feeling that lasts only until the door is closed and locked. She is glad when he is finally gone. He can then fall in the snow and freeze to death for all she cares.

He was blue, sad, opposite of the boisterous big spenders who can uplift her for a time.

Bones meeting dirt suggests death. Death's eyes are met on the road. It is the road of life, or perhaps the road home from the bar on a freezing night. After this contemplation, the poet doubles up. It seems as though a girl from the past released a snake, and it was subsequently killed. This is something the imagination can work with. This snake, like others in Welch's writing, can be literal, a pet named Frank kept at home in a jar, or symbolic. In bar talk, snakes represent extremely unpleasant hallucinations brought on by too much alcohol and malnutrition. The image of snakes being let out fits in the poem. The associations with them are partially sexual—a woman let the snake out—and partially an allusion to the life cycle of the poet. Snakes could represent things of the past or the subconscious.

The resolution of the poem comes with an acceptance of death as the ultimate answer to life questions. These questions cannot be answered by the living because there are no answers to something so relative. "Now you understand: the way is not your going but an end. That road awaits...."[24]

These poems are doubly difficult because of their abstract, surreal technique, and because they require that the reader have extensive background in living. Possibly the most

difficult thing about understanding James Welch's writing is not its abstractness but the fact that he has such an extensive range of experience. He has lived and travelled in so many places, and is such an astute observer of details, that it is hard to keep up with his synthesis of all of the material.

"Snow Country Weavers," for example, is a poem that contains specific experience essential to an understanding of it:

> A time to tell you things are well.
> Birds flew south a year ago.
> One returned, a blue-wing teal
> wild with news of his mother's love.
>
> Mention me to friends. Say
> wolves are dying at my door,
> the winter drives them from their meat.
> Say this: say in my mind
> I saw your spiders weaving threads
> to bandage up the day. And more,
> those webs were filled with words
> that tumbled meaning into wind.[25]

The poem is similar to a letter in form, and early on the reader is told that things are well, a year has passed, birds have returned, one wildly, raucously happy. Say hello to friends. It has been a tough winter. These are things easy enough to live with, but the last stanza departs significantly into a specificity of spiders. Further, there is an allusion to spiders in a positive sense, to the value of using their webs as a bandage. I have heard a friend who tends to live in old houses and under bridges speak of spiders as being beneficial to a

dwelling, and this exploded somewhat my own negative feelings toward them, but I still did not have a good realization of what was going on in the poem. One day I was driving along an obscure road betwen Anaconda and Missoula, Montana, and I saw something that caused me to snap to the poem instantaneously. It was a bright sunny day deep in the mountains and the road wound through a small valley of hayfields. I suddenly noticed something had filled the air with a kind of glistening. I stopped my vehicle and stepped out onto the road to discover that the air was literally filled with spider webs and spiders spinning more webs. This was startling, thousands of spiders spinning webs as if they were trying to bandage up the day, and the sight gave me access to the poem. I cannot help but think that James Welch may have seen something similar and incorporated it into "Snow Country Weavers." I also think that without specific spider experience the ending of the poem is almost inaccessible.

"Magic Fox" is the first piece in the "Knives" section of Riding the Earthboy 40 that is comprised largely of surrealistic poems:

> 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.[26]

> Velie says:
> Magic Fox is about dreaming: it is a dream-like 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.[27]

The comments about the dream-like quality of the poem are valid, and the trickster figure is a part of Indian oral storytelling tradition. Among the Blackfeet this figure is called Napi, among the Plains Cree, he is called Wi-Sah-K-Chah-K. This figure served as a kind of comic moral safeguard against excess, however, and I don't believe he fits into the context of this poem. The fox here represents medicine, a power symbol that functions as part of a warrior's spiritual preparation against danger.

Furthermore, surrealism does not alone explain the method of this poem. James Welch is more than simply a

surrealistic writer. He is a man of a certain race from a certain place, looking at the world in a certain way and coming to certain conclusions. What is unique in his case is that he draws these conclusions "from non-Western traditions and from current techniques, expresses the visions of people very creatively alive in this modern world."[28] There is surrealism, then, but there is more, a special perspective that incorporates also non-Western tradition as well as an acute perception of modern reality.

In addition, it seems to me in the first stanza there are dead men who do not rest easy. The truth of the end of the Plains nomad way of life is nightmare to the spirits of warriors who often took their final rest in the arms of trees. Their fox, their spiritual representative, their means of gaining control over chaos, was not strong enough to keep their horses, their way of life, from being turned into fish. Fish cannot be ridden in freedom or after buffalo, and symbolize poverty, a return to mud and scavenging. The last lines of the stanza convey the image of horses, freedom, hung out on a stringer like trophies of the forces of anti-freedom.

In the second stanza, there is woman, the hope of regeneration nagging the dreams of the unquiet that exist in the wind and the subconscious of their descendants. If dreams are the minds' or the spirits' means of resolving things, it is not hard

to feel conflict in this poem. Its nightmare quality, finally, is an effective recreation of an atmosphere of dark destruction consistent with the irrational demise of a part of the universe.

In summary, I think it is fair to say that James Welch is both a reticent and passionate man, and that his writing style, as a possible extension of his personality, is accessible yet abstract. He has developed a prose poetry style rich in its use of image.

Within this style he utilizes elements of the past, the present, and the dream-world of the subconscious. This utilization of dreams, the author's frank treatment of sex and religion, and certain other non-conformist elements in his writing indicate the influence of surrealism.

It is interesting to see how these elements become functional in the novel form, how they are carried over from poetry into prose. A closer look at Winter in the Blood demonstrates that.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II

[1]James Welch, Riding the Earthboy 40 (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), p. 8.

[2]Riding, p. 3.

[3]Riding, p. 3.

[4]Riding, p. 22.

[5]Riding, p. 22.

[6]Riding, p. 22.

[7]Riding, p. 47.

[8]Riding, p. 47.

[9]Riding, p. 47.

[10]Robert Bly, "Looking for Dragon Smoke," in Naked Poetry, Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc., 1969), p. 161.

[11]Alan R. Velie, "James Welch's Poetry: Blackfeet Surrealism," mimeographed paper, delivered at MMLA Meeting, Fall, 1978, p. 1.

[12]Alex Preminger, ed. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 821-823.

[13]James Wright, Cesar Vallejo, Twenty Poems Chosen and Translated by John Knoepfle, James Wright, and Robert Bly. Introd. John Knoepfle. (Madison, Minnesota: The Sixties Press, 1962), p. 8.

[14]Knoepfle, p. 25.

[15]James Wright, Cesar Vallejo, Twenty Poems Chosen and Translated by John Knoepfle, James Wright, and Robert Bly. Introd. James Wright. (Madison, Minnesota: The Sixties Press, 1962), p. 10.

[16]James Wright, "Stages on a Journey Westward," in Naked Poetry, Recent American Poetry in Open Forms, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 279-280.

[17]Velie, p. 4.

[18]Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," in Naked Poetry, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc., 1969), p. 141.

[19]Levertov, p. 145.

[20]James Welch, Riding the Earthboy 40 (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), p. 17

[21]Cecil Day-Lewis, The Poetic Image (London: Jonathan Cape LTD, 1969), p. 90.

[22]Preminger, pp. 821-823.

[23]Riding, p. 36.

[24]Riding, p. 36.

[25]Riding, p. 5.

[26]Riding, p. 33.

[27]Velie, p. 6.

[28]Alice B. Kehoe, North American Indians, A Comprehensive Account (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 546.

CHAPTER III

WINTER IN THE BLOOD

One of the reasons Winter in the Blood is so tightly developed is that it is structured in images that supersede the organizational effects of chapters, sections, or time periods. The images are presented in a variety of voices including an everyday, local reservation mode of speech, semi-formal conversation, and interior monologue that reveals personal stream-of-consciousness.

James Welch's detailed, extensive use of colloquial, everyday speech common to the north Montana reservations is a very effective means of projecting individual imagination into the narrative and of establishing setting. This language expresses much wit or humor that is central to the esthetic level of the novel--a level of sophisticated relativity that attempts to portray a total picture of the narrator's life.

Although it uses poetic images extensively, Winter in the Blood is a linear novel. It is uniquely linear, in fact, in that it employs a kind of serial technique that allows the author to backtrack, to lead the reader, and to stalk him. There is much mobility in this book, combined with a tendency toward brevity. There is no need for long passages when communication is

accomplished in lines and short paragraphs. For example, there are more than twenty places in the novel where the author utilizes birds and fish in a manner that evolves into a foundation for much of the novel. The name of one of the main characters, a horse, is Bird. The narrator's recollection of Bird's training as a cow pony is powerful in its sensitivity, and reveals understanding for the animal who played a part in his brother's death:

> Now, old machine, I absolve you of your burden. You think I haven't noticed it. You don't show it. But that is the fault of your face. Your face was molded when you were born and hasn't changed in a hundred years. Your ears seem smaller now, but that is because your face has grown. You figure you have hidden this burden well. You have. But don't think I haven't seen it in your eyes those days when the clouds hide the sun and the cattle turn their asses to the wind. Those days your eyes tell me what you feel. It is the fault of the men who trained you to be a machine, to react to the pressure of a rein on your neck, spurs in your ribs, the sound of a voice. A cowhorse. You weren't born that way; you were born to eat grass and drink slough water, to nip other horses in the flanks the way you do lagging bulls, to mount the mares.[1]

The underpinnings of the novel consist of these philosophizing, observation-discussions of animals and nature. It is surprising what even one or two lines in this mode can accomplish, as in: "Her hands, small and black as a magpie's feet, rested limply in her lap,"[2] or "The magpie floating light-boned through the afternoon air seemed to stop and jump

straight up when Lame Bull's fist landed."[3] These brief image comparisons are very effective; many authors might treat them at length, utilizing extended metaphor, much background material, and careful explanation of the association between animals and humans. James Welch lets the animals do the work for him by carefully using highly recognizable images; a startled bird is an excellent action image, bird's feet an excellent detail image. A more extended bird image also reveals children caught in the act of growing up via the power of a gun resulting in the awful realization of death:

> ...Even Mose had had to admit it was a good shot. Resting the .22 on the wheel of an old hay wagon, I squeezed the trigger the way First Raise had shown me, exhaling, a steady pressure and bang! the hawk tumbled down in an erratic spin. He gained his feet as soon as he hit the ground. Mose and I ran whooping and stumbling through the plowed field. We stopped a few feet short of the tree. The hawk squatted low to the ground, his wings spread for balance, the tips of them brushing the weeds, yellow eyes alert, flashing. He bent his head forward and opened his beak to reveal a small pale tongue. He seemed to be hissing at us although he made no sound. The feathers on his breast were red and matted.
>
> It must have been the tongue. We had not considered that a hawk might have a tongue. It seemed too personal, private, even human. The hawk opened his beak wider, the tongue moved slightly, then the head grew heavier and began to sink. We stood motionless, quiet, and watched him die. The weeds held him in the position he had taken up after falling,

> but his head lay limp on his breast, the feathers on his neck ruffled and jutting toward the sky. I ejected the spent shell and turned, but Mose had already walked away.[4]

The two boys recognize the perversion of killing the hawk immediately. They had not considered it to be a living thing, to the point of being surprised that it had a tongue. "The weeds held him in the position he had taken up after falling" is, in addition, an excellent example of attention to detail. Later, in a drunken repetition of this scene, the narrator gives up guns entirely after shooting a dog for no reason.

Fish also carry conversations and entire situations at various points in the novel. Like talking about the weather, talking fishing is safe ground in bars and in the narrator's early, strained communication with his new stepfather, Lame Bull. The fish dialogue with Lame Bull is an effective characterization:

> "Ho, you are fishing, I see. Any good bites?" Lame Bull skittered down the bank amid swirls of dust. He stopped just short of the water.
>
> "I lost my lure," I said.
>
> "You should try bacon," he said, watching my line float limp on the surface. "I know these fish."[5]

Lame Bull is a tough, cocksure individual who is "crafty" in the way of people who have no real feeling for anything but immediate, material things. The narrator remembers his own father differently, remembers that First Raise loved his

children, loved making people laugh, and loved the thought of hunting elk in the fall much more than Teresa's land and cattle, Lame Bull's main interest. As for knowing fish, not even the government scientists have that privilege, and Lame Bull is revealed as a braggart:

> The white men from the fish department came in their green trucks and stocked the river with pike. They were enthusiastic and dumped thousands of pike of all sizes into the river. But the river ignored the fish and the fish ignored the river; they refused even to die there. They simply vanished. The white men made tests; they stuck electric rods into the water; they scraped muck from the bottom; they even collected bugs from the fields next to the river; they dumped other kinds of fish into the river. Nothing worked. The fish disappeared. Then the men from the fish department disappeared, and the Indians put away their new fishing poles. But every now and then, a report would trickle down the valley that someone, an irrigator perhaps, had seen an ash-colored swirl suck in a muskrat, and out would come the fishing gear. Nobody ever caught one of these swirls, but it was always worth a try.[6]

This is not only one of the funniest pieces of writing in the novel, it is also a statement of condition. Fish are poor meat for buffalo hunters, and the existential manner in which Welch pursues them in the book reflects the basic condition of life on the reservation: how to exist in a world where the buffalo are dead, where old ways of life are dead, and where the white Christian God is deadest of all somewhere in a parish house just off the reservation boundary.

I remember fish, fish strategy, and fish stories abounding at Fort Belknap. Spring floods wash schools of carp and suckers onto the hay flats of the Milk River Valley, and one of the most surrealistic sights I have ever seen was a huge dried-out carp staring at me from the fork of a diamond willow at nearly eye level as I was riding through the brush horseback rounding up cattle.

I think that fish stories are good examples of the way myth and legend are created—a kind of unstoppable whispering among people that springs from some primeval need. The best fisherman I ever heard of was Boo Kirkaldie, who supposedly had dynamite. It was told that when he was hungry for fish he would go to one of the stock reservoirs the BLM plants fish in every spring as part of government strategy to keep Indians from starving to death, and blow the entire population out of it. Supposedly there is an old wooden boat at one of these places with the stern missing, the result of one of Boo's early trips, and people who had no dynamite were gratified he had exploded himself out of the water. All this, I think, because he ran a firecracker stand up by the agency.

In the novel, it is the medicine man Fish who warns the band of Blackfeet of the coming of the long knives. Welch notes throughout the novel that fish or perhaps Fish's medicine have not yet returned to the reservation.

James Welch also effectively utilizes one of the tools of prose poetry, a variety of voices, in Winter in the Blood. As previously mentioned, part of the foundation of this is colloquial speech, in this case, the speech of north central Montana. This changes from time to time, and mood, tone, and direction change with it. In his discussion of prose poetry, Michael Benedikt says: "The use of a wide variety of tones of voice, matter-of-fact or not, suggests a highly relativistic relation to any idea of a 'given' reality (as linguistic theorists such as Levi-Strauss and Chomsky have observed, one's reality derives from one's language)."[7]

As suggested by changing speech patterns and surreal interjections in Winter in the Blood, it seems as though James Welch's notion of reality is relative. This is not surprising considering the recent fragmentation of the Indian world, but it also applies to the modern world in general. Joseph Meeker has noted:

> The real world is composed of astonishing patterns of complexity which shade and grade into one another in endless and random configurations. Its boundaries are fluid or permeable at all levels from the sub-atomic to the cerebral. Time, matter, energy, and mentality interact to create whatever exists with little regard for what is needed or appropriate. The vast majority of evolved organisms, for instance, prove to be inadequate and are doomed to extinction; only about one

> percent find suitable niches and survive for relatively long periods. That is not to say that reality is necessarily chaotic, but merely that its processes are overwhelmingly complex and intricate. Reality is a wilderness.[8]

For example, in Winter in the Blood, James Welch has the narrator accept change pretty much as it comes. He does not spend much time trying to control it; he rather seeks to understand, as suggested near the end of Part One of the novel when the straightforward presentation to this point is interrupted by a striking surrealistic dream image that takes the reader into the subconscious of the narrator:

> I awoke the next morning with a hangover. I had slept fitfully, pursued by the ghosts of the night before and nights past. There were the wanted men with ape faces, cuffed sleeves and blue hands. They did not look directly into my eyes but at my mouth, which was dry and hollow of words. They seemed on the verge of performing an operation. Suddenly a girl loomed before my face, slit and gutted like a fat rainbow, and begged me to turn her loose, and I found my own guts spilling from my monstrous mouth. Teresa hung upside down from a wanted man's belt, now my own belt, crying out a series of strange warnings to the man who had torn up his airplane ticket and who was now rolling in the manure of the corral, from time to time washing his great pecker in a tub of water. The gutted rainbow turned into the barmaid of last night screaming under the hands of the leering wanted men. Teresa raged at me in several voices, her tongue clicking against the roof of her mouth. The men in suits were feeling her, commenting on the texture of her breasts and the width of her hips. They

> spread her legs wider and wider until Amos
> waddled out, his feathers wet and shining,
> one orange leg crocked at the knee, and suddenly
> lifted, in a flash of white stunted wing, up
> and through a dull sun. The wanted men fell on
> the gutted rainbow and second suit clicked
> pictures of a woman beside a reservoir in
> brown light.[9]

The broken images of a girl slit and gutted like a rainbow trout and of a duck being born from a woman are especially effective. The characters, in addition, are present in enough force from the past and the night before that the reader can fit them into a context, but the passage's real power comes in its communciation of a desperate search. The reader gets the feeling that the narrator, with the help of his dreams, is trying to find his way through his personal life and the confusion of the modern world.

I feel that James Welch means to impress the idea of a search upon the mind of the reader, and one of his methods is the unusual use of images—a kind of shock treatment. In addition, his exploration of the fragmented world of the narrator puts him into the role of the bricoleur. Claude Levi-Strauss has formulated the concept of "bricolage" as a major mode of human thought. The bricoleur (French term for an inspired handyman, with no good English equivalent) is the student, teacher, or craftsman who creates useful things from cast-off odds and ends which others have found to be useless. In the context of James Welch and

Winter in the Blood, "Bricolage is the mentality of synthesis, a technique for creating, learning, and expressing human understanding, using whatever is present and what remains from the past to achieve an integrating form."[38] This is also a part of James Welch's method that cannot be attributed solely to surrealism--what he has to work with is fragmented, therefore his writing sometimes appears fragmented as well.

In Part Three, the narrator's voice changes again, into a semi-formal conversational mode that enables him to hobnob with a college professor who gives him a ride home from Havre.

> The sudden slowing of the car jarred me awake. We pulled off the highway onto a dirt road and stopped. Before the man could shut the motor off, the girl was out and running. She disappeared behind a stand of chokecherry bushes.
>
> "It's the water," the man said. "She's quite delicate."
>
> "This is White Bear," I said. "My house is five miles down the highway."
>
> "She has pills but she neglects them," said the wife.
>
> "She's never been healthy."
>
> "Good health is of prime importance," I said. "Maybe I could walk from here."[10]

"Good health is of prime importance." This line is an excellent example of an intelligent, aware individual communicating in the vernacular of people totally outside his normal circle of communication, in this case a well-educated, upper-middle-class family. Except for the child, however, they are

not as sensitive in return, and ignore the narrator's words to inquire if "you Indians" eat turtles, and then:

> "Can I take your picture?"
> "Yes," I said, and stood beside a gatepost. He pointed a small gadget at me; then he turned a couple of knobs on the camera, held it to his face and clicked.[11]

This is a realistic insight into the situation and feelings of an invisible man. The narrator is trapped in the role of a cigar store Indian, and he even begins to utilize dramatic poses, leaning against a gatepost for effect as his picture is taken. This role has caused him to turn away from a lucrative position at a veteran's hospital, and drives him deeper into himself. Welch's allusions to movies reinforces role-playing a number of times in the novel in such a way that the reader senses the narrator's frustration at being type-cast.

Interior monologue is another voice in the novel, and perhaps its strongest statement is presented in Part Four:

> Goddamn you, Bird, goddamn you. Goddamn Ferdinand Horn, why didn't you come in, together we could have gotten this damn cow out, why hadn't I ignored her? Goddamn your wife with her stupid turquoise glasses, stupid grape pop, your stupid car. Lame Bull! It was his cow, he had married this cow, why wasn't he here? Off riding around, playing the role, goddamn big-time operator, can't trust him, can't trust any of these damn idiots, damn Indians. Slack up, you asshole! Slack up! You want to strangle her? That's okay with me; she

> means nothing to me. What did I do to deserve this? Goddamn that Ferdinand Horn! Ah, Teresa, you made a terrible mistake. Your husband, your friends, your son, all worthless, none of them worth a shit. Slack up, you sonofabitch! Your mother dead, your father--you don't even know, what do you think of that? A joke, can't you see? Lame Bull! The biggest joke--can't you see that he's a joke, a joker playing a joke on you? Were you taken for a ride! Just like all the rest of us, this country, all of us taken for a ride. Slack up, slack up! This greedy stupid country---12

This showdown has been coming for a long time, and is a true catharsis wherein the narrator cleanses his emotions, relieving the terrible tension he has been living with by bringing represssions to consciousness. In one clean sweep the animals that caused Mose's death, Teresa's coldness, Lame Bull's opportunism, and the obtuse Indians suffer the narrator's rage. Hopefully this will liberate him from his life of drifting and restore him to autonomy. It is an excellent example of prose poetry, a vivid twenty-one line series of images utilizing extended colloquial speech, variety in tone of voice, and wit or humor with esthetic effectiveness. Anyone who has ever been stuck in the mud in an automobile can recognize the pure frustration of struggling with overwhelming physical forces. In this scene, the narrator shifts from rage to consideration of entirely unrelated matters, and this is humorous in its incongruity.

James Welch's extensive use of local speech patterns helps provide details to establish setting, and enables the author

to project individuality into his writing. The bar scenes in Winter in the Blood, especially the one set in Beany's in Part Two, are excellent examples of this technique. Beany's is a legend around Fort Belknap. Beany, who I am sure is dead now, was a tall white man who made a lot of money running a bar on the edge of an Indian reservation. Although the money is good, it is a physically rough and potentially dangerous life, and it takes a rare attitude to stay with it as long as Beany did. Beany was reputed to have been a professional baseball pitcher at one time, thus his nickname. I have owned three bars in Montana, one of which was located in Havre, and never have I read such faithful recreations of these places as James Welch's:

> Lame Bull was sitting in Beany's. Beany himself was tending bar. He was very old and very white. Also very rich. Lame Bull was telling him about the hardships of being an owner. Beany nodded all the while, his fingers caressing the change on the bar. "It ain't easy," he was saying, "oh, it definitely ain't easy."
>
> Lame Bull insisted on paying for our beers, his arm around me, telling Beany how he was trying to be a good father.
>
> "What I want you sure as hell ain't got, you old fart."
> Lame Bull laughed and squeezed my neck again.
> "You want to go in the back room and take an estimate?"
>
> Musty came up to us and asked for a quarter. He was wearing a red-plastic hunter's cap.

> Larue Henderson gave him a handful of change and he went away.
>
> "Hey, Beany!"
> He brought her a shot of whiskey and a glass of water. "A little snake oil for the little lady," he said.
>
> "Okay, if you must know, I never worked day one as a secretary. Trained for two years at Haskell, learning how to squiggle while some big nuts shot his mouth off, and never even worked the first day.!" There were tears in her eyes. She was drunker than I thought.
>
> "It's a lousy world can do that to a girl!" "It's not great." I was getting depressed myself.[13]

Beany, the bartender, talks without saying anything, a habit of neutrality bartenders often acquire with experience. He caresses the money on the bar, revealing his motivation. His reference to whiskey as "snake oil" is specialized bar language, a form of insider communication that evolves out of great familiarity with a situation. Bar language is colorful, usually humorous, and oftentimes very ironic. Hard drinkers refer to themselves as "booze fighters," to the places they drink as "the bucket of blood," or "the office." This romanticization and rationalization of potentially destructive behavior seems to indicate a strong need among many people for an alternative lifestyle that is more supportive of basic emotions than "normal" everyday life. A saying such as "I would rather have a bottle in

front of me than a frontal lobotomy" is a sophisticated, ironic statement of this condition.

Welch presents the inevitable drunk begging change in a cameo description that gives him the name "Musty," and outfits him in a spiffy red-plastic hunter's cap. The name alone captures the decadence of the individual.

Finally, there is the quasi-courtship of the woman at the end of the bar, a pathetic creature tough on the outside but dissillusioned with life and the education she has received at an Indian business college. There is oftentimes a fine line between laughter and tears in bars, and the author has captured this as well as a good sample of local color.

Bar reality seems to me to correspond roughly to comedy of manners behavior. There is high fashion, exaggerated manners, highly sophisticated, artificial interaction among characters who are usually types rather than individuals and who fail to conform to conventional attitudes and behavior, and usually illicit love. One example of this is Agnes--wearing a dress cut low in the back in the manner of an evening gown, complete with white graduation shoes--drinking in a honky tonk bar in the skid road section of Havre.

In early literature, Marlowe and Shakespeare utilized tavern scenes for relief and to flesh out their dramas, and this

technique has persisted into modern times. In the early part of the century, the Dadaists took up residence in bars and theaters in a manifestation of freedom and rebellion against convention. Malcolm Cowley, in remarks concerning the history of Dada in Exile's Return says:

> Tristan Tzara says that Dada was born in 1916, at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. There is some dispute about this place and date, but Tzara's word ought to be final: after all, he founded Dada. He is a Rumanian, small and graceful, who belongs to a family of formerly rich merchants; educated in France and Switzerland, he adopted French as his native tongue. It is wholly fitting that this new school of art and letters should have founded in a cabaret....[14]

The Dadaists sought audacity that would correspond to the behavior of the "aggressive madmen" running the world. Utilizing bars as headquarters was a part of this, but I feel there was more: bars are a loosely structured, natural gathering place for intense, wild, verbal individuals who may not be genteel, but who have proven to be brilliant in more than one instance. This tradition was very much with Ernest Hemingway, and has surfaced again in James Welch, perhaps the best chronicler of bar life in modern literature.

There is an element of comedy in Winter in the Blood that does not detract from the work, but that is instead a part of

James Welch's highly sophisticated relativity, a part of his method of "telling the whole truth" in the novel. Comedy is said to:

> deal with man in his human state, restrained and often made ridiculous by his limitations, his faults, his bodily functions, and his animal nature. Comedy has always viewed man more realistically than tragedy, and drawn its laughter or its satire from the spectacle of human weakness or failure. Hence its tendency to juxtapose appearance and reality, to deflate pretense, and to mock excess. The judgment made by comedy is almost always critical.[15]

The comedy in Winter in the Blood is central to the esthetic level of the novel, a level that includes drama and comedy in an effort to present a complete picture. Esthetics derives from the Greek word meaning "perspective" and is also the study of beauty, especially in art. The study of esthetics is thought to heighten perception. Philosopher Susanne Langer believes:

> The function of art is to transmit inner experience. Art expresses what is inexpressible; it gives shape, form, and meaning to feelings. It puts us in touch with ourselves and the world around us.[16]

In this sense, Winter in the Blood is visionary. It very effectively puts the reader in touch with a part of the world heretofore unexplored, and in this lies a large part of its artistic value. The vehicle for much of this is comedy--deployed

in the form of abbreviated, sophisticated images. For example, Lame Bull, who has suddenly been elevated to the status of an Indian petit bourgeois, is brought back to reality in this description of his actions during a drinking session:

> Lame Bull's hand was in a sling made from a plaid shirt. The more he drank the more the sling pulled his neck down, until he was talking to the floor. The more he talked to the floor the more he nodded. It was as though the floor were talking back to him, grave words that kept him nodding gravely. Teresa sat beside him, glaring at the bandaged hand.[17]

Lame Bull is a caricature of a drunken man here, but there is more--James Welch seems almost unable to resist playing on words,and here the double entendre is a cameo of a man who has been indulging in excess literally brought low.

The narrator is a very human character, oftentimes at the mercy of other people. For example, he needs transportation from the usurper Lame Bull. The tone of this passage is brilliantly, hilariously pitiful:

> Lame Bull had decided the night before to give me a ride into Dodson. From there I could catch the bus down to Malta. We left early, before the gumbo flat could soak up enough rain to become impassable. The pickup slipped and skidded through the softening field as the rain beat down against the windshield. There was no wiper on my side and the landscape blurred light brown against gray. Patches of green relieved this montony, but suddenly and without form. I had placed a piece

> of cardboard in my side window--the glass had
> fallen out one night in town last winter--to keep
> out the rain. I could have been riding in a submarine.[18]

This ride is like the narrator's life. He is dependent upon Lame Bull to drive him to town in a vehicle that is rightfully more his than Lame Bull's, and his side of the truck has no windshield wiper or window. The comparison of not being able to see, the water, and the monotony to riding in a submarine is funny--a kind of Charlie Chaplin lamentation.

The spectacle of human weakness is amplified by drink, and this description of a hangover focuses upon this condition in a way that draws laughter from self-imposed suffering:

> I swung my legs over the edge of the bed,
> sat up and waited for my head to ache.
> A quick numbing throb made my eyes water,
> followed by a wild pounding that seemed
> to drive my head down between my shoulders.
> I closed my eyes, opened them, then closed
> them again--I couldn't make up my mind
> whether to let the room in on my suffering
> or keep it to myself. I sat for what seemed
> like two or three nauseating hours until an
> overpowering thirst drove me to the sink.
> I drank a long sucking bellyful of water
> from the tap, my head pounding fiercely until
> I straightened up and wiped my mouth. I gripped
> the sink and waited. Gradually the pounding
> lessened and I was able to open my eyes again.
> I stared at my face. It didn't look too bad--
> a little puffy, pale but lifelike. I soaked
> one of the towels in cold water and washed up.
> My pants were knotted down around my ankles. One
> shoe and one white sock stuck out beneath them.
> Above them, the vertical scars flanking my left
> kneecap and the larger bone-white slash running
> diagonally across the top. Keeping my head up,
> I reached down and slowly pulled up the pants.[19]

The physical description of a man, pants knotted around his ankles, gingerly awakening into a full-blown hangover, is effective in its use of detail. The reader can nearly feel the headache that drives the narrator's head down between his shoulders. The most effective line, however, is again a demonstration of a unique perspective. "I couldn't make up my mind whether to let the room in on my suffering or keep it to myself." Suddenly the room is made a part of the situation and the incongruity is amusing.

Juxtapositioning incongruous elements in language can be very funny and is a popular pastime among Indian people, who have a very complicated sense of verbal humor. This incongruity is common to bar talk:

> "I don't mind a guy raising a little hell, but when he starts tuning up my customers... Well, I have to draw the line somewhere, don't I?[20]

The image of someone being "tuned up" as if he were an automobile combined with the sense of being physically beaten surprises the reader into laughter.

I find the narrator's ability to be self-deprecating delightful. He has no illusions about himself, and this innocent quality is very appealing. In a bar in Havre, as attention is brought to the narrator by the bartender, actually the swamper, nature makes a statement:

> The swamper ran the pencil through his hair, scratching his scalp with the point.

> "I'm just the swamper," he pouted. And he began to draw a column of fives, which at first leaned to far to the left, then to the right. He pushed the pad at me.
> "How are you at arithmetic, ace?"
> A fly lit on my forehead.[21]

As the swamper labors over the figures, which lean first to the left, then to the right, the reader realizes he is illiterate. He passes the job on to the narrator, a minor flattery that is destroyed when a fly buzzes in and lands on his forehead.

Students do not have a good image among working people, and they do not go untreated in the novel

> "Eight ninety-five--a real steal," said the salesman. He looked like a student from the college up the hill. His white shirt was a couple of sizes too big.[22]

and:

> Hey, Warren," a man called from the doorway, "something seems to be going on out here."
> The bartender ambled down to the window. He was wiping off a glass. "Ah, hell, probably picking up one of them transvestites..."
> The customer giggled.
> "Nope, I don't think so, Warren. There was a man with a shiny suit who went in with them."
> "Another one of them morphodykes from the college...."[23]

Anti-intellectualism is a popular pastime in many places, and predominantly rural, working-class Montana is a classic example. Opinions of students range from considering

them wet behind the ears to downright perverted--transvestites or "morphodykes." These cosmopolitan aberrations are actually rather rare in Montana, but in many minds if they do exist, it will surely be within the colleges.

One of the funniest lines in the novel and also one of the best examples of the incongruity of comedy comes immediately after the narrator's cathartic experience with the cow in the mud, where he finally, dramatically, vents his anger at all the frustrations of his life. After an epic struggle to get the rope around the cow, the narrator, by now one-legged again, literally drags himself from the mud, lies down on the bank of the slough to rest, and thinks:

> My arms began to tingle as they tried to wake up. I moved my fingers. They moved. My neck ached but the strength was returning. I crouched and spent the next few minutes planning my new life.[24]

With all his inconsistency, the narrator is still at his core practical, sincere, and extremely sensible. He cannot let the cow die in the mud, and in this the reader sees the common sense that will, combined with sheer stubbornness, allow the narrator to find the way through his own life. "Frustrated, hurting, maybe failing to save the hateful cow, he again goes through his obsessive, desperately comic litany of curses and cries of self-pity. Yet, as his strength returns, he says he crouched in the stinking mud and, with a lovely non-sequitur, 'spent the next few minutes planning my new life!'"[25] The

narrator is no quitter, and the bit of humor here is also a means of bringing unbearable tragedy back down to a reality that can be dealt with.

This common sense approach is evident again in the final funeral scene. Lame Bull and the narrator are out of character in their suits and their roles as shaman-like or priest-like buriers of the dead. Lame Bull botches any ritual feeling they may have been able to create by lowering himself into the grave of the grandmother and jumping up and down on her coffin, which is too long to fit in the hole properly. The indifference, the seeming coldness of making fun of tragic situations is a means of leavening the unbearable.

Charles Larson, in the section of his book on American Indian fiction entitled "Survivors of the Relocation," says:

> The style and the tone of Welch's Winter in the Blood are more relaxed than the work of most of his Native American contemporaries. In spite of the underlying seriousness of the story, many of the activities engaged in or witnessed by the narrator are suffused with a gentle, carefree quality. At its extreme, this lightness approaches the ridiculous, often juxtaposing a sense of absurdity with the more serious implications of his story. During the funeral scene, for example, Lame Bull discovers that the grave for the old woman's coffin is too short: "Lame Bull lowered himself into the grave and jumped up and down on the high end." I have already noted several of the more absurd incidents in the novel, and the slapstick to it. So ubiquitous are these comic and ridiculous overtones that I cannot help believing that Welch is even lam-

> pooning his main character's accident (wounded knee?), or at least pulling the reader's leg.[26]

This sense of humor is definitely alive in Winter in the Blood, but it is wise to remember, I think, that humor should not be taken lightly. Man is often more believable in his comic state than in his tragic state, and I feel that James Welch's use of comedy is sophisticated enough to suggest that he uses it as a vehicle to create a more rounded picture as well as for slapstick value.

The picture presented in Winter in the Blood is an accurate, realistic one. The history, characters, setting, and situations are based closely upon real life. In this respect the novel is closer to folk literature than to being an intellectual literary construct, or the type of novel that might avoid the use of localized humor. In his discussion of American Indian authors, Mick McAllister has said:

> ...if we compare House Made of Dawn, Seven Arrows, Jim Welch's two novels (Winter in the Blood and The Death of Jim Loney), Ceremony, and The Man Who Killed the Deer stylistically, forgetting for a moment the authors themselves, it is House Made of Dawn, not The Man Who Killed the Deer, which seems out of place--a novel whose excellencies, aspirations and ends are esthetic, mingled with five novels all emphatically simple in style and intent; a novelist whose methods are baroque and artificial with four who all adopt the directness characteristic of folk literature (a mode Momaday himself adopts superbly in his second book. The Way to Rainy Mountain); a novel whose resources and

> referents are literary and academic with five whose referents are personal and religious.[27]

Winter in the Blood is one of five novels McAllister mentions as being simple in style and having a directness characteristic of folk art. I believe a large part of this is created through the use of personal, often humorous, highly accurate vignettes of people, places, animals and situations that are in essence a means of recording and perserving a place in time for posterity.

Winter in the Blood was recognized immediately as a superior novel, and many critics have touched on parts of its method in an attempt to explain how such a short work could contain such an impact. The superb use of images as connectives between the prose that comprises the larger structure of the novel is perhaps its strongest point. There is also, however, the tremendous ability to "shoot and move," that gives the novel such a variety of voice, tone, and perception. Finally, there is the classic use of wit and humor that allows the reader to have an overall frame of reference to the whole. This is a method that James Welch has mastered during a long writing apprenticeship, and one that he is obviously comfortable with.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III

[1]James Welch, Winter in the Blood (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 144.

[2]Winter, p. 34.

[3]Winter, p. 29.

[4]Winter, p. 130.

[5]Winter, p. 7.

[6]Winter, p. 6.

[7]Michael Benedikt, The Prose Poem, An International Anthology (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p. 49.

[8]Joseph W. Meeker, "Fields of Danger and the Wilderness of Wisdom," The North American Review, (Spring, 1978), Vol. 263, p. 1.

[9]Winter, p. 52.

[10]Meeker, pp. 2-3.

[11]Winter, p. 128.

[12]Winter, p. 129.

[13]Winter, p. 169.

[14]Winter, p. 75-81.

[15]Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 138.

[16]Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1972), p. 108.

[17]Susanne Langer, Reflection on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics and Philosophers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 36-37.

[18]Winter, p. 31.

[19]Winter, p. 39.

[20]Winter, p. 53.

[21]Winter, pp. 56-57.

[22]Winter, p. 91.

[23]Winter, p. 97.

[24]Winter, p. 117.

[25]Winter, p. 169.

[26]Charles R. Larson, American Indian Fiction (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), p. 146.

[27]Charles R. Larson, American Indian Fiction (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), p. 147.

[28]Mick McAllister, "The Color of Meat, The Color of Bone." Denver Quarterly, 14, No. 4 (Winter, 1980) pp. 10-18.

CONCLUSIONS

James Welch's combining of poetry and prose has given him a unique language with which to record his impression of life. In addition, Welch has an excellent sense of reality that gives life to his writing. His rendition of lonely rural Montana is valid for much of interior America, and he is a master at tracing the implications of life in similar situations for all people who live with distance and harshness.

One of the qualities I respect most about Riding the Earthboy 40, Winter in the Blood, and The Death of Jim Loney is that they communicate movingly about a dark situation without apologizing, or lapsing into what James Welch has termed "an easy romanticism." The writing has a gritty, hard quality tempered by the use of a sophisticated, ready humor that pops up to entertain as well as teach. In his essay "The Art of Fiction," Henry James said "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression."

James Welch's reality is intrinsically intense, but it is made more so by his unique perception as well as his poetic way of writing about it. The closeness of the relationship between life and the way James Welch writes about it makes his work valid as history and also gives it more artistic value.

Welch's technique of using literature as a spiritual history can serve as a guideline. A literary artist's discoveries can become our own--in a sense they can become ROOTS for small town and rural dwellers. Combine this with skillful craftsmanship that artfully describes the rural environment and that closely defines its people, and the result is highly readable writing that contains a variety of recognizable human experiences.

James Welch is now working on his third novel, a historical story of a small band of Blackfeet set in the 1870's. The story takes place during the winter before the band is taken to a reservation, and recounts how the people prepare for this bitter break in their lives. The author has said that he has spent many hours researching this book, suggesting that historical sources will be utilized along with his personal experiences. Those bits of Montana Indian history that exist combined with James Welch's novelistic abilities should produce yet another memorable creative work.

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