

About Lew Welch*

ARAM SAROYAN

I'm very smart, and over-educated, and so on, but you know—and I can make all kinds of points about that kinda shit—but what I really would like to do is—wouldn't it be wonderful to write a song or a story that anybody would say at his hearth on any given evening just because he loved the way it went? And that's what I want to do. And I think that that is what poetry is about.

Lew Welch
in an interview with David Meltzer
July 17, 1969

In the spring of 1976, I visited the offices of KPFA, the listener-sponsored radio station in Berkeley, with Donald Allen, Lew Welch's literary executor, editor and publisher, who had been asked by the station to help put together a memorial program devoted to Welch to be aired in May, some five years after his disappearance.

While we were there, Eric Bauersfeld, the station's literary director, played a little of each of the half-a-dozen or so tapes of Welch that were in the station's archives, and there was one in particular that struck me. It was a tape of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Lew Welch discussing how they got by as poets, recorded at the station with a moderator in the spring of 1964 to promote a reading they were about to give together in San Francisco. We just heard a quick few minutes of the tape, but the idea of these three poets who had known each other since their days together at Reed College in the late 1940s

*Reference: For a related article see John Whalen-Bridge, "'For/From Lew': The Ghost Visitations of Lew Welch and the Art of Zen Failure. A Dialogue for Two Voices," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 92-115.

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all in the same discussion together, seemed almost too good to be true. I remember suggesting to Donald Allen on the spot that the broadcast, which had been titled "On Bread and Poetry," would make a good book.

A month or so later, while I was visiting Don, a Bolinas neighbor, he asked if I'd like the job of transcribing the tape for him; and during the next several days while engaged in this project, I felt that I began to get to know Welch. While I'd read his collected poems, *Ring of Bone*, and *How I Work as a Poet & Other Essays/Stories/Plays*, as well as the small volume *Trip Trap*, which he shares with Jack Kerouac and Albert Saijo, I had yet to really make up my mind about him. When I read these books during the summer of 1973, having recently finished a novel, I had wondered whether Welch had taken the all-out step of what I thought of just then as a real writer—the step, that is, of accepting one's personality for better or worse. Ironically, there was something about the unremitting craftsmanship of Welch's poems that made me suspect him; I wondered if he'd ever really ended his apprenticeship.

The recording, running a full hour, made me forget about all this almost immediately. "On Bread and Poetry," with its three interweaving voices—plus the moderator's intelligent and appropriately "square" questions—was as clear a presentation as I had ever experienced of what I think of as the living tradition in American poetry. The three poets are virtually interviewing each other, and their individual approaches and emphases are supported by a shared sense of poetry as important and integral to a healthy society:

Snyder: I find it very exciting to have some poems, a few poems which I can show to academic types, or say artistic and literary types around San Francisco, and they will say, "Yes, that's a poem." And I can also read it or show it to a logger or a seaman, and he will say, "That's great. Yeah, I like that."

Welch: Yes, that's one of my standards, too.

Whalen: And that's something that all of us have been able to do, incidentally. I mean a lot of friends of mine have come around and said, "I showed

something of yours to this bum," and so on, and the bum flipped. And it's great.

Welch: The cab drivers like my cab poems. They said, "Yeah, that's just the way it is. By gosh, you write like that, hunh? That's good."

As anyone familiar with their work knows, they were not advocating a superficial populism, but rather calling up an awareness of the deeper common ground we share: seaman and intellectual, taxi-driver and poet. And of the three voices, it was Welch's which most surprised and, despite some hesitation and wariness on my part, moved me. He was the least familiar of the three to me. I had long been an admirer of the work of both Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder, but it was Welch's voice that spoke most directly to me as a fellow human amidst the trials and uncertainties of my own life.

Answering a question from the moderator about how the poets related to the "bulk of the people that you pass on the street, and that you talk to, who don't dress like you, who probably don't think like you, and who probably don't know very much about what you're interested in," Welch said that he had stopped thinking in terms of "any hip-square division":

I really used to, and I think it was a great error on my part. I think it was not only inaccurate, but it was immoral. I mean if you start thinking of *we-them*, naturally you cause all kinds of hostilities to rise [...]. And that got badly confused sometime around fifty-eight or nine—there was just too much of this—of a senseless hostility going back and forth, coming from both sides, about *nothing*.

After I had transcribed the tape, I could no longer identify the craftsmanship of his poems with the tightness of an apprentice afraid to fail. Instead, it came to me how open and full of life his poems and prose were, while at the same time being consistently finely and carefully written. I realized that Welch's craft was not what I had first thought, but rather an implicit part of his generosity as a writer. He wrote so carefully so that everyone could understand him.

A few months later I embarked on a book about Welch because I was interested in how so clear a sense of both poetry and the poet's role, as he articulated it in "On Bread and Poetry," had evolved. The manuscript was written three decades ago while living with my wife and our three young children in Bolinas. When it was done, I immediately put it aside and undertook writing a "second draft," *Genesis Angels: The Saga of Lew Welch and the Beat Generation*, which bears little relation to it. The published book, that is, is an overview of the Beat Generation and its central figures, with Lew Welch the main protagonist, written novelistically in a Beat-inflected, Kerouac-style prose.

The first draft, on the other hand, is a study of the life and writing of one writer, Lew Welch, a lesser-known figure among his peers, whose own words dominate the narrative. In our day of exhaustive, minutiae-oriented biographies, this was, of course, a dicey approach. Why would one take it? I had a strong sense that Welch, for all his frailty and his life-long struggle with alcoholism, was as lucid a guide on his own journey *in medias res* as one could wish for. Then too, a point of intersection exists, I think, where the disinterested mind of the genuine artist meets the disinterested mind of the scientist—physicist, neurologist, or psychiatrist. At his best Welch had a capacity for both a laser-like verbal precision and a self-forgetting honesty one encounters rarely.

More specifically, the way he atomized the creative process seemed to dovetail with the discoveries of the new physics and suggest a common ground. Whether "creating" had to do with combinations of atoms and molecules or with a poem, at the bottom of both enterprises, it now seemed, was a mirror rather than matter, which led back to self-forgetting, or—perhaps another word for it—consciousness. And Welch, I think, explicates his own engagement as well as Gary Zukav narrates the peregrinations of subatomic particles in *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters*. Here, then, is an excerpt from the first draft that tries to track Welch's precise understanding of the process of poetic genesis:

* * *

The Whole Thing

During the late sixties, Lew Welch took on the role of Tribal Elder to the hippie culture centered in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. Anticipating the over-crowding that eventually led to the disintegration of the community, in the spring of 1967 Welch wrote a piece called "A Moving Target Is Hard to Hit," which was duplicated by The Communications Company using a Gestetner and distributed free to residents by the Diggers. A current top-forty hit, "If You're Going to San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)," seemed to be addressed to young people across the nation, if not the world. Welch wrote:

When 200,000 folks from places like lima ohio and cleveland and lompoc and visalia and amsterdam and london and moscow and lodz suddenly descend, as they will, on the haight-ashbury, the scene will be burnt down. Some will stay and fight. Some will prefer to leave. My brief remarks are for those who have a way or ways similar to mine: *disperse*. ("A Moving Target is Hard to Hit" 6)

The piece ends:

[F]or those who have this kind of way, not out of cowardice, but as WAY [...] sitting in the haight-ashbury in all that heat and the terrible crowd you cannot help anyway (maybe), is simple insanity.

Disperse. Gather into smaller tribes. Use the beautiful land your state and national governments have already set up for you, free. If you want to.

Most Indians are nomads. The haight-ashbury is not where it's at—it's in your head and hands. Take it anywhere. ("A Moving Target is Hard to Hit" 7)

That summer, the fabled Summer of Love, Welch wrote an August 9th letter to Gary Snyder, again in Japan, in which he reports on the explosive American scene:

Well the revolution is finally happening. Detroit and 40 other cities blew up in July—the 1967 total is 70 cities and towns. Marin City, my home town, blew up a weekend ago so bad we thought it prudent to evacuate ourselves [...] It's not so much a racial revolution as a revolution of the poor. Detroit looting was integrated—spade cats helping white cats into the high window.

Not so much about colored skin as about colored TV. TV sets scattered all over Detroit by folks who found them too heavy to get home in all that rifle fire.

[I]t's pretty scary living in violence, I really don't want Jeff [his partner Magda Cregg's son] to get hurt, or Magda, but here is where we live and we just get used to rifle fire (every night for more than two months [...]). (*I Remain 2*: 144)

About Haight-Ashbury he wrote:

[T]he Meth Freak hippy pushers have got so big the Mafia is moving in and pushers in the Hashbury are getting murdered. Three at least. *And* the acid is untakeable because it may be STP (an Army drug developed to pacify or wipe out the enemy, the trip goes on for 72 hours and 4 of my friends, some of them very strong, are now in loony bins), not to mention the bad shit LSD with Meth in it. Gary, people, good ones, are blowing their minds irreversibly. Like, gone. Away.

Of course there are also the beautiful things. Like George Harrison and his wife appeared in the Hashbury and it was 2 hours before they were recognized. Then George led a huge meaningless parade singing and banging his guitar. He is stone serious about his teacher Ravi Shankar, who, naturally, does not condone drugs. George had purple glasses, in the shape of a heart. His wife is very wild looking. [...] pretty, granny glasses, et al.

In this tumultuous period, Welch seemed to discern a kind of urban apocalypse, a chaotic, disintegrating "last stand" of America's urban-industrial era. He wrote a piece called "Final City/Tap City" for the June 28-July 11, 1968 issue of the *San Francisco Oracle* in which he foresaw an end to the cities:

We face great holocausts, terrible catastrophies [sic], all American cities burned from within, and without.

However, our beautiful Planet will germinate—underneath this thin skin of City, Green will come on to crack our sidewalks! Stinking air will blow away at last! The bays flow clean! ("Final City/Tap City" 20)

In the face of the impending disaster he envisions, Welch's love for nature, his enduring faith in the planet itself, informs and modulates virtually all of his later writing with an increasing emphasis. This dimension of his work and thought during the sixties sets it apart from the revolutionary pronouncements so endemic to the period.

When Paul Krassner asked to reprint "Final City/ Tap City" in *The Realist*,¹ Welch revised it and added a section in which he focuses and elaborates on a cultural chasm that goes beyond "the generation gap" given play in the national media:

I always admired Arthur Koestler, and always was enraged by him. I knew him to be smart, well read, and almost pathologically honest. Also, he cared a lot about the things I wanted to know. None of this changed the fact that I knew Koestler was wrong. "Wrong" is a very good word. Very few educated people still know how to use it.

Just 2 weeks ago I found Koestler giving himself away to my sense of his wrongness. He says, in *Yogi & the Commissar*, that we are a "vulnerable animal, living on a hostile planet."

Clearly this man has never looked at his own two hands. Has never known the miracle of his human eyes. Does not know he is the only animal which can out-climb a mountain goat (as the northwest Indians do, chinning themselves on quarter-inch ledges in the rock, till they drive the goat to where the goat must fall). Can do that, and also swim. Can run with the halter in his hand until the horse drops dead. Can curl up into a ball, as the fox does, let the snow cover him, for warmth, and make it through a blizzard on Mt. Shasta. As John Muir did.

Koestler doesn't know the skin he stands in, the meat he is, and he doesn't know the ground he's standing on. What, possibly, can he tell us about anything else? [...]

Koestler knows he's wrong, he's always cringing about it. He is the scape-goat, here, not because he's the worst, but because he's among the best of those who make articulate the European Mind we must (at pain of death) reject.

Camus and Sartre make the same errors, but have no humbleness.

("Final City/ Tap City" 17-18)

The sense that direct experience of the world is the necessary basis of sound thinking or writing goes back to Welch's piece "Poems and Remarks" (*I Remain* 1:27-40), which he prepared for William Carlos Williams's visit to Reed College in 1950. There the young poet espoused the Chinese ladder, as opposed to Plato's ladder, as a model for his own development. Rather than seeking the idealized, perfected Platonic forms, the Chinese model proposed the mature stage of *Sh'n-Yee* in which an artist achieved an integration of technique and subject matter taken directly from life.

Speaking in broad terms, this distinction sometimes seems to lie at the heart of the difference between what might be characterized as the East and West coast styles in American art. On the East Coast, where what Welch calls the “European Mind” is traditionally more dominant, the Platonic ideal of perfected form seems to hold sway. In poetry, the work of Wallace Stevens or John Ashbery might be regarded as prototypes.

On the West Coast, where the Asian influence is stronger, the Chinese emphasis on experience as the source and subject of art has created another standard. The poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder might be regarded as embodiments of this Western archetype.

Welch’s emphasis on making his work accessible to the general public, recalling the example of the Tang Dynasty poet Po Chu-I, is among his most important contributions to the tradition. In addition to speaking to the counter-culture, he addressed the public at large in two reviews for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in which he discussed the work of two of his peers, Richard Brautigan and Philip Whalen.²

In his review of Whalen’s collected poetry, *On Bear’s Head*, printed in June 1969, he wrote of his experience when he circulated a Whalen poem “Further Notice” among his fellow workers at Montgomery Ward. The poem goes:

I can’t live in this world
And I refuse to kill myself
Or let you kill me

The dill plant lives, the airplane
My alarm clock, this ink
I won’t go away

I shall be myself—
Free, a genius, an embarrassment
Like the Indian, the buffalo

Like Yellowstone National Park. (*On Bear’s Head* 45-46)

Welch recalled:

This poem, dated "Mt. Tamalpais 1970," clearly encapsulates Welch's poetics. The first part presents his vision of the state of consciousness he identifies as the source of poetry: "the moment" in which the mind is "JOINING with whatever-is-out-there," as he wrote to Donald Allen in 1960 (*I Remain* 1: 207). This is the moment spoken of in Buddhist literature in which there is no separation between the observer and what-is-observed, the essentially wordless and eternal "moment" that occurs in forgetting oneself (*Ring of Bone* v).

The second part of the poem, beginning "AND AT THE SAME TIME," presents Welch's vision of the proactive function of poetry in society at large. The poem by Whalen "pasted in the florist window [...] that it might remind of love, / that it might sell flowers" has a "useful" place in the social scheme of things. Born out of an essentially timeless experience of communion between the poet and the world, the poem has a civic function in the time and place of its making, tangling itself in Samsara, the worldly sphere. Near the end of the interview with Meltzer, Welch says:

The poem is not the vision. The vision is the source of the poem. The poem is the chops, but the real chops are being able to go across that river and come back with something that is readable.

* * *

Lew's a healthy thing. He is a healthy thing. And it doesn't even matter if you burn yourself out, and drink too much, and commit suicide. People do that anyway. Cat-skinners do that. Advertising executives do that. That's part of some of the hazards you run in life. And the hazards you run in, so to speak, the psychological impurities that are in the material that have to burn out sooner or later.

Gary Snyder
in an interview with the author
March 1977

University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

NOTES

¹Lew Welch, "The Digger Papers," *The Realist*, August 1968. Repr. in *How I Work as a Poet* as "Final City/ Tap City," 14-21.

²Lew Welch, *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 15, 1968 (review of Richard Brautigan) and *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 22, 1969 (review of Philip Whalen). Both repr. in *How I Work as a Poet* 22-28.

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