

“For/From Lew”: The Ghost Visitations of Lew Welch and the Art of Zen Failure A Dialogue for Two Voices*

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[The following is a transcription of comments made by two academics in the lobby of a post-9/11 airport, where they sat waiting as their computers were searched. Suspicions were aroused when these two subjects—they claimed they were “scholars” who came to Germany to present long and uninteresting papers at the same academic conference—both objected simultaneously seizure of toiletry items in excess of 100ml. Lab tests confirm presence mouthwash, but halitosis tests were not administered. Our cameras recorded their conversation, which would be completely without interest but for a few brief references to the socialist-anarchist group known as “The International Workers of the World,” or “The Wobblies.” The main writer they discuss, a completely forgotten poet known as Lew Welch who is sometimes associated with the “San Francisco Renaissance,” apparently wrote a poem called “Wobbly Rock.” We suspect that references to wobbly matters were coded communication of some sort, since there is no other way to account for their efforts to keep in memory dead poets whose books didn’t sell well.]

Second Speaker: Your abstract said something about the San Francisco Renaissance. You’re not fooling anyone. San Francisco wasn’t even discovered until 1776, and Shakespeare never made it west of Chicago.¹ What did Lew do?

First Speaker: Well, he wrote the advertising slogan “Raid kills bugs dead,” which in *To Be the Poet* Maxine Hong Kingston counts as a “four word poem” (92) of the sort often found in the Chinese tradi-

*The poem “Old Bones” by Gary Snyder appears in his book *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and is reprinted with kind permission by the author. All rights reserved.

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tion, but that’s not his main claim to fame. The “San Francisco Renaissance” was launched in 1955 with the famous Six Gallery reading, which included poets such as Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Lew Welch. Ginsberg and Snyder went on to achieve fame as poets, but Welch disappeared in May of 1971 and is presumed to have committed suicide.

Second Speaker: Presumed?

First Speaker: No one really doubts it, but his body was never found.² He left a note and took his gun when he went into the mountains. As with Weldon Kees and Elvis, there were reported sightings.³ There seems to be a *type* of poet, one who disappears mysteriously and then reappears in works of the imagination and in the mind of devotees. A kind of literary apotheosis of Welch returns as a ghost in two Snyder poems. And he returns as a *model* for how to live, even though his life was, given his end, in large part a failure. It makes us wonder how deities and spirits in many world religions come into the forms that are passed down to us. We may often think that an apotheosis is a kind of ideal figure, one so perfect as to etch a permanent place in the human imagination. But this ... type ... of poet, if I’m right, gives us a different sort of model entirely. What if these figures that find their way into larger systems of memory did *not* conform to ideal patterns? What if these poets departed in ways that were especially wounding, so much so that *readers* hold them back in earthly imagination? The popular fantasy is that the ghost has unfinished business and so cannot leave, but perhaps we have unfinished business with the ghost.

Second Speaker: So you’ll talk about Welch’s writings, or writings about Welch?

First Speaker: Much more of the latter. One poem about Welch is from Snyder’s collection *Axe Handles*, a collection of poems about cultural continuity and tradition. The key image of the title poem “Axe Handles” is from Lu Chi’s fourth-century *Wen Fu*, or “Essay on

Literature,” which states that “In making the handle / Of an axe / By cutting wood with an axe / The model is indeed near at hand.” The poet goes on to say that Ezra “Pound was an axe,” that “Shih-hsiang Chen,” Snyder’s teacher who “Translated [the *Wen Fu*] and taught it years ago” was an axe, and also that “I am an axe / And my son a handle, soon / To be shaping again, model / And tool, craft of culture, / How we go on” (6).

Second Speaker: That sounds pretty general. How does Welch fit in, as a *specific* poet?

First Speaker: Immediately following “Axe Handles” is the poem entitled “For/From Lew.” As the title indicates, it’s at once an homage and a message. One critic called it a “dream vision” (Murphy 125). But the poem doesn’t claim to be a dream at all—it is quite literally a ghost story:

Lew Welch just turned up one day,
live as you and me. “Damn, Lew” I said,
“you didn’t shoot yourself after all.”
“Yes I did” he said,
and even then I felt the tingling down my back. (*Axe Handles* 7)

Snyder accepts that Welch really did kill himself, and this acceptance of death, of ultimate failure, becomes the turning point in the poem:

“Yes you did, too” I said—“I can feel it now.”
“Yeah” he said,
“There’s a basic fear between your world and
mine. I don’t know why.
What I came to say was,
teach the children about the cycles.
The life cycles. All the other cycles.
That’s what it’s all about, and it’s all forgot.” (7)

Welch returns as a shade, but he is also “live as you and me,” and he returns to speak with sad knowledge about the failure of people to understand cycles, as he himself must have failed in succumbing to despair.

Second Speaker: Was his poetry good ... I mean, was he a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’ as a writer?

First Speaker: In conventional terms I guess he was a failure. He didn’t become famous and win awards, but he wrote about half a dozen poems that have really mattered to quite a few people. The most important ones are “Ring of Bone,” “Wobbly Rock,” “Song of the Turkey Vulture,” and “The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings.” And one or two others. And—I’m not supposed to say this—my California friends will disown me—he wrote some terrible poems. Full of adolescent crudity and yuck-yuck laughing at his own superiority to blah blah conventional thinking.

Second Speaker: Ouch. I’m hearing ‘failure.’

First Speaker: Yes and no. He’s remembered for his best poems and also because of the way he fit into the fabric. His suicide, like that of Brautigan’s later, and like that of Salinger’s fictional character Seymour Glass, makes him into a paradox, a Zen failure. The failure, the one who personifies lostness, comes back to us in literature and memory as one who, in some ways at least, points the way for others, a kind of savior-ghost. Notice how writers—Welch, when he was alive, but also Snyder and Kingston—complain about the social marginality of writers, but they also redescribe marginality as the path to authenticity. By embracing one’s marginality one does not gain general social stature, but as a member-in-good-standing of the counter-culture, one certainly gains a reputation for exemplary authenticity. One should stop trying to zoom down the superhighway of American life and instead hop across it like an unnoticed jackrabbit—Snyder’s poem “Jackrabbit” expresses this idea as a kind of American *kōan*, a riddle of sorts. The jackrabbit in this poem is an important symbol—perhaps it’s a kind of Native American ‘totem animal’ that shows itself to the poet to offer a clue about how to live. The poet meditates on this animal, which he sees as it sits by the side of the road:

hop, stop.

Great ears shining,
 you know me
 a little. A lot more than I
 know you. (*Mountains and Rivers* 31)

This lowly rabbit—and you only get the rabbit as opposed to any direct statement about how to live—is a kind of wisdom figure. The rabbit has to avoid your car, whereas the driver doesn't have to pay any attention. The rabbit is what you must become if you don't want to conform to the mainstream idea of what you should be. The strange voice in the poem defers to the road-side rabbit.

Second Speaker: This rabbit poem doesn't mention Welch. How can we be sure "rabbit" and "poet" are connected? What makes your interpretation better than free association? I would like to believe I understand the point being made but, to be honest, I am not sure. Snyder's "Jackrabbit" doesn't help me, as there is no indication that the rabbit gets killed by the car. I keep trying to connect the suicide—the quintessential item I had thought in the point being made—to becoming a Zen failure. And then comes the jackrabbit, which certainly isn't lost, and if it's sitting on the side of the road it hasn't attempted suicide—

First Speaker: —OK OK ... it's an image, a 'deep image.' Let me back up. Snyder uses a Welch idea as an epigraph in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, one that matches the rabbit idea quite nicely. Give me a minute to find it. [*At this point the first speaker rustles paper before throwing hands up.*] It'll turn up. Anyway, the group of Zen Buddhists who live near the place from which Welch disappeared built a practice hall and named the hall (and their group) the "Ring of Bone Zendo," after Welch's "Ring of Bone." Snyder, Kingston, and others who honor Welch's memory, who, in a sense, bring him back to life by remembering his work, especially like his poem "Ring of Bone," which Welch's executor Donald Allen used for the title of Welch's collected poems. His poem, "Ring of Bone" ... where did I put that

poem [*Subject continues to rustle paper ineptly and then clumsily scatters his notes on the floor.*] Merde!

Second Speaker: [*Turns directly to observation camera and says the following*]: In a moment he’s going to want me to say “It sounds clean. It’s a clear stream. Very ‘open,’ very ‘California’ I guess. ” I’m a mere straight-man here—he’s making me say these lines. Some of them are very prissy and snotty—but it is just a persona. [*Second Speaker stares hard at First Speaker, who continues to rustle papers.*] I would rather, if I were writing my own lines, speak like ... Terry Gross! Do you know her? She’s on National Public Radio. [*Imitating Terry Gross’ highly sensitive American accent.*] “Hiiii, this is Terry Gross from Fresh Aair.”

First Speaker: Here it is. Tell me if you like it:

I saw myself
a ring of bone
in the clear stream
of all of it

and vowed
always to be open to it
that all of it
might flow through

and then heard
“ring of bone” where
ring is what a

bell does (*Ring of Bone 77*)

Second Speaker: It sounds clean. It’s a clear stream. Very ‘open.’ Very ‘California,’ one could say.

First Speaker: There’s the *memento mori* aspect, the seeing oneself as bones—but as a ring of bones. The circularity instead of the linearity. It’s not that you live, you die, full stop. I can see why Zen students like it especially, since one begins formal group meditations, called *sesshin* in Japanese, with formal vows to save all sentient beings—to

be open to all sentient beings and never turn your back on *anyone*. And a bell is used to mark the beginning and end of the sesshin. But the idea that *bones* can ring like a bell is really something. Memento mori imagery often arouses the disgust we feel at the sights and smells associated with death and mortification. Another poem from *Ring of Bone* plays on the idea of memento mori—it's entitled "Memo Satori" (17). "Alas poor Yorick" is great fun and all, but we are more often reminded about rot and decay and transience and other kinds of negativity. The ringing bell in the context of Zen practice often brings your mind back from its wandering, it unifies your parts—bones that hunger home.

Second Speaker: Bones hunger home? Explain that to me later. Anyway, are all Welch's poems like this one? Meditative, clean, clear?

First Speaker: Hardly. Most of the poems collected in *Ring of Bone* are much more ... conversational. William Carlos Williams was a strong influence on several of the Beat writers—Allen Ginsberg even shows up in Williams's *Paterson* as a character of sorts.⁴ Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen drove Williams to the airport after he read at Reed College, where those three met. You know the plum poem, "This is just to say / I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast" (Williams 1274).

Second Speaker: Yes, right. "Is it a poem or is it a remark, just a note taped to the fridge?" Not my cup of tea.

First Speaker: Understood—and this kind of poem gives many writers the feeling, a kind of license, that anything they think is poetry as long as there are line breaks after every word or three. But Williams's point is that poetry isn't just *like* everyday life. Rather, there is poetry *in* everyday life. Everyday life is "imagistic," such as when Williams finds the plums "so sweet / and so cold." Poets like Welch found much encouragement in Williams's work and were encouraged by Williams personally.⁵ The poetry celebrates a democratic open-

ness—Welch wanted to capture, as accurately as possible, “The din of a Tribe doing its business. You can’t control it, you can’t correct it, you can only listen to it and use it as it is” (Welch, *How I Work* 31).

Second Speaker: It sounds to me like a formula for mediocrity. Where’s the selection ... the *choice*?

First Speaker: He called this method “Letting American speak for itself,” which he admitted was “often ... a depressing job” (*Ring of Bone* 5). But he wasn’t just walking around with a tape recorder, and he was specifically collecting and supporting voices that organized themselves against a mediocre, conformist, unimaginative life. Sometimes this is just bohemian rant, but there is, in his democratic openness, a great potential for what the Russian Formalists called “defamiliarization.” And it is an anti-pretentious poetic, one that might have pleased the John Dewey who complained about the “museum conception of art”—art separated from everyday life and from utility, art that really functions to legitimate class privilege.⁶ Here’s another description of the “din”:

The sound we hear from our tribe is not much different from the thousand sparrows who used to sleep in a palm tree outside my window, once. The racket was unbelievable, but the birds were only arguing about who has the right to sleep, and where.

But I still have faith that if I do this right, accurately, the sound will emerge a “meaningless din of joy.” Because I know that the true sound of living things, a carrot or a tribe, is meaningless, joyful, and we, singing it, know this joy. (*Ring of Bone* 5)

Welch also returns as a mentor-spirit in Kingston’s novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.

Second Speaker: I know all about Kingston as she is America’s “most-taught living author,” though I haven’t read the fake book.⁷

First Speaker: —No, *fake book*. It’s a jazz term. The novel has a highly improvisational style, and the artist Wittman Ah Sing—a Chinese

name that echoes Walt Whitman—works with highly improvisational theater. Everyone in the audience is put into the play in Wittman's work.

Second Speaker: So Lew Welch was a wise fellow, a mentor to Maxine Hong Kingston?

First Speaker: Welch shows up about half-a-dozen times in Kingston's novel. Welch, or his literary alter-ego the Red Monk, says sardonic things that help put Wittman back on track. Here's one such passage from Kingston's novel in which Welch, enigmatically, appears:

Pea-coat collar up against the foggy dusk, which can break your heart—your true love has left, and you're lost, when you haven't even found her—he walked through ambiguities. Poems blow about that nobody has put into words. Old poems partly remembered sniff at your ears. Nah. Lew Welch warned that it isn't the moon that's sad, it's you. The moon is never sad, says the Red Monk. (*Tripmaster* 262)

Second Speaker: So the character is talking to himself or thinking to himself, deciding whether the poem is in the world or in the mind. And Lew Welch shows up to tell him that poems and moods are in you, not the world or the moon.

First Speaker: Yes. But it's the ghost of Lew Welch. The sadness that is not in the moon itself resonates, since Welch was a suicide. And the novel begins with Wittman Ah Sing contemplating suicide, something he reportedly does every day:

Maybe it comes from living in San Francisco, city of clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn—omen, o-o-omen, o dolorous omen, o dolours of omens—and not enough sun, but Wittman Ah Sing considered suicide every day. Entertained it. There slid beside his right eye a black gun. He looked side-eyed for it. Here it comes. He actually crooked his trigger finger and—bang!—his head breaks into pieces that fly apart into a scattered universe. Then blood, meat, disgusting brains, mind guts, but he would be dead already and not see the garbage. (3)

There is a performative dimension to the narrative, which slides between Wittman’s interior monologue and the narrator’s outside-Wittman’s-head commentary. The theatrical reference in this passage is anything but accidental:

Anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate. The wind or shock knocks you out before impact. Oh, long before impact. So far, two hundred and thirty-five people, while taking a walk alone on the bridge—a mere net between you and the grabby ocean—had heard a voice out of the windy sky—Laurence Olivier asking them something: “To be or not to be?” And they’d answered, “Not to be,” and climbed on top of the railing, fingers and toes roosting on the cinnabarine steel. (3-4)

Second Speaker: The “no name woman” in her first book *The Woman Warrior* is a suicide who—the narrator is unsure—may offer strength or may also tempt her to despair. Ghosts can’t be trusted. Hamlet has the same problem, yes?

First Speaker: The old poems blowing around that Wittman thinks about and the ambiguous ghosts—in many ways they are the same. Dead thoughts restored:

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living. (Auden 242)

The voice of the dead calls through these old poems and images. The voice can call us to life or tempt us to death. What’s interesting about Welch is the way the person who committed suicide becomes, in his literary rebirths, a figure of hope.

Second Speaker: Sounds confusing. Is this what is meant by “Zen failure?” Are you doing it now?

First Speaker: Not intentionally, but after Eugene Herrigal’s *Zen and the Art of Archery* and then Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, there have been a lot of jokey conjunctions: Zen and something you think it shouldn’t go with but it really does. It takes

two Zen Buddhists to change a light bulb, by the way: one to change it and one to not change it.

Second Speaker: You seem to be describing all literature. King Lear thinks he sees “the thing itself” when he looks at mad Tom, but Tom isn’t really Tom, he’s Edgar acting. Don Quixote had his windmills.

First Speaker: Or think of Don Quixote on his death-bed. He renounces everything we just read about as failure, but this failure is the book we just loved.

Second Speaker: You’re still not isolating a particular kind of story as well as I’d like.

First Speaker: Okay. We’re talking about a pattern, about a set of stories which describe and also call for a “reevaluation of values,” but the stories would all have us think, *contra* Nietzsche, that this reevaluation is not merely a shift in power. Fundamental to “Zen failure” is the idea that there exists a Will to Wisdom. But you might be completely wrong; you might look like a fool. Pirsig’s book is a good example. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is the story of a man who challenges conventional ways of thinking, but the unconventionality might really be madness, depression ... simple failure. J. D. Salinger’s character Seymour Glass is a Zen failure, in that he is presented in the novella “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters!” as a kind of Zen master or Buddha figure—but readers of the novella know that Seymour commits suicide. He shoots himself at the end of Salinger’s short story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” and it’s a bit disturbing to remember this wretched end when we see how he is idealized, at least in the mind of his brother Buddy, who narrates the novellas.

In the poems and stories I’m addressing, the Zen failure character doesn’t even come close to seeming like an ideal, perfect person, and yet the stories bring this character back from the dead. The literature not only brings the person back—it imagines the character as an embodiment of *perfection*.

Second Speaker: This approach—I think I’ve heard it called a “Zen aesthetic”—in which the ordinary world is perfect by itself and in which we create problems only by imagining things are not how they are supposed to be—it really annoys me. Wasabi ... or wobbly-sobby.

First Speaker: The ideal, which promotes a notion of beauty in which mistakes are central, is called *wabi-sabi*.

Second Speaker: Wabi-whatever! And what if *everyone* did that? There are people who go around describing cracks in the wall as if they were epic poetry. I remember “Happenings” in which we were supposed to wait patiently while a cake of ice melted on a Pasadena sidewalk.

First Speaker: Ezra Pound said that James Joyce’s “Araby” is “much better than a ‘story,’ it is a vivid waiting” (Pound 400).

Second Speaker: I wish I’d had a copy of *Dubliners* that day in Pasadena.

First Speaker: Once upon a time John Cage was sitting in a chair on a stage. Next to him was a telephone on a small table. He told the audience that Andy Warhol was going to call, and that he’d have the conversation with Warhol in front of the audience. Long silence. Everyone waited and waited. No call. Finally, Cage said, “Oh, I forgot to tell Andy the number.” I can’t remember who told me that story—it might be apocryphal.

Second Speaker: “Spots of time.” A *not-so-vivid* waiting. That trick might work once. Wouldn’t you rather read *King Lear*? When the bard says “failure,” he really means it. Give me Lear’s rages or Macbeth’s “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” over melting ice or forgetful Andy Warhol any day.

First Speaker: “Life’s but [...] a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more.”

Second Speaker: Now you're talking.

First Speaker: But don't you think the actor was delighted?

Second Speaker: *Great* role. *Es muy* juicy.

First Speaker: When Macbeth says "a poor player / That struts and frets," we shouldn't presume that this actor himself was a poor player. That would be like watching ice melt. But the beautifully realized failure is redemptive, and the fact that the Macbeth on the stage is an actor playing a role can have a meta-theatrical effect—we're all playing roles, and our moments of greatest failure and suffering are but the wanderings of a script from which we should look up.

Second Speaker: Are you putting something a little extra in your coffee? [*Makes "drinking sign" with thumb to lips, tilting hand up as if taking a swig.*] Anyway, I'm not a fictional character. Let's get that straight.

First Speaker: You're totally real! That's my favorite thing about you. But I'm saying that, like a good Zen story, the actor strutting and fretting is part of a kind of joke in which everything is at once real and delusory—

Second Speaker: —ah, the light bulb changers—

First Speaker: — since the pleasure of the text consists in confronting life's pain while, at the same time, seeing it as imaginary. Robert Alter has a quotation from Denis Donoghue in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* that nails it nicely: "[I]n general the symbol-using animal takes pleasure in using symbols: the passions may be terrible, but the syllables are a relief" (Alter 77).

Second Speaker: Literature ... transformation ... fortunate falls ... bad puns—this is beginning to sound like a *Connotations* conference.

First Speaker: Perpetual *comedia*. It's fortunate rebirth rather than fortunate fall. I'll get to that. But first I want to quote another bit, a

Second Speaker: That stanza becomes strange. Go for a hungry dream? Sheep and deer? Bones hunger home?

First Speaker: The poem can't make any sense if you refuse to believe that deer and dall sheep have no yearnings. The desert is a vale of suffering but it is also the foundation of joy. It appears arid and empty, but it is saturated with desire.⁹ The poet knows that desire is what holds bones together, both in a vital, living body and in our forensic understanding of bones—our mental apprehension of the world. Our poetry in which we take fragments and turn them into song. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

Second Speaker: What the Thunder Said. But Eliot's speaker is fishing with the arid plains *behind* him.

First Speaker: And Snyder's speaker is surveying arid plains, aware that they not only have been and will be but also *are* full of life. Deserts have rats and snakes and birds and plants. A desert can be seen as an ecological catastrophe—but it can also be seen as something brimming with life, with *desire*, as is shown in the poem. Without some sort of desire, there would be no shoring against ruins. But there's more to the poem:

Out there somewhere
a shrine for the old ones,
the dust of the old bones,
old songs and tales.

And then, after three four-line stanzas, Snyder caps it with two lines that contain a radical shift:

What we ate—who ate what—
how we all prevailed.

The radical shift is from "you" to "we." Not your desire, and not my desire but rather *our* desire. Our community and our interconnections. That's what *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, as a kind of ecological

epic, is about. It's the common song not of Italy or Albion but of the planet. Before and through human history—how we all prevailed.

Second Speaker: But I thought environmentalist writers were always talking about death and extinction. I know 'naturalist' writers pay closer attention than most to creatures and ecosystems, and, like Snyder would seem to want to talk to birds and other animals.¹⁰

First Speaker: Yes, *Silent Spring* and Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" warn about death as "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns." BUT Gore says about his film that "you can't kill the frog."

Second Speaker: Did he say such things often before his movie came out? Is this why Bush won the election? "Hello America: you mustn't kill a frog."

First Speaker: Bush didn't win the election, but never mind. Gore learned, in doing his 'slide-show,' the series of talks he gave about global warming, that his analogy about the frog in the bowl of water that dies when the water gets too warm *had* to change. A doomed frog destroys hope, but a saved frog ... well, it sounds sentimental, but Jeremiah has this rhetorical problem: if it's already too late, why should you the listener mend your ways? The doomed frog must be saved.

Second Speaker: I feel like I should imagine imaginary gardens with real frogs in them. Is Lew Welch the frog in your Beat garden?

First Speaker: He might like that, though he preferred turkey buzzards. Some people think that disappearing into the mountains the way he did was an offering of his body, as carrion, for the birds. In Tibet this is called "sky burial," and it is someone's job to cut the corpse into pieces so that the birds can do their job thoroughly. Anyway, this is not how writers like Kingston and Snyder have remembered—or 're-membered'—Welch. Just after Snyder's poetic

claim that “bones hunger home,” his next poem begins with an epigraph from Welch:

Only the very poor, or eccentric, can surround themselves with shapes of elegance (soon to be demolished) in which they are forced by poverty to move with leisurely grace. We remain alert so as not to get run down, but it turns out you only have to hop a few feet to one side and the whole huge machinery rolls by, not seeing you at all.

Lew Welch (Mountains and Rivers 11)

This epigraph leads into a poem titled “Night Highway 99” in which Snyder recounts various journeys up and down Highway 99, across his home-turf, the Pacific Northwest. Snyder is traveling by thumb and recounts the stories—joys and sorrows—of the “very poor” and “eccentric” people who found their ideals quite marginal within the context of conventional, middle-class America and who were certainly on the margins of the American literary landscape of the 1950s. Snyder, Welch, and the other Beats who go ‘on the road’ and who consider the possibilities of stepping away from the well-trodden paths are not unique in American literature; it is probably the lightness of Lew Welch’s touch that appeals to writers like Snyder and Kingston.¹¹

At one point Snyder works in a motto of the “Wobblies,” the radical labor movement that was being (already was?) demolished by anti-communist fervor and legal persecutions of this period: “a night of the long poem/ and the mined guitar / ‘Forming the new society / within the shell of the old’ / mess of tincan camps and littered roads” (13). Snyder was turned down for a visa the first few times he tried to go to Japan to study Zen Buddhism, and FBI agents asked questions of his friends and associates (Baker 27). To Old Left stalwarts, the so-called Beats were withdrawing from responsibility into an orientalist fantasy. But Snyder and Welch saw themselves as offering a kind of resistance. By refusing to be attached to the rewards of mainstream society, one could survive its attempts to starve out, well, anti-capitalists like Snyder and Welch.¹²

Second Speaker: They talked the talk, but did they walk the walk?

First Speaker: Kingston tells us in her appreciation that one of Welch’s hopes was “to organize to feed poets ‘so poets could have babies and fix their wives’ teeth and the other things we need.’ He planned a magazine to be called *Bread* that would discuss the economics of being a poet in America. Somebody still needs to carry out those plans” (*Hawai’i* 63). And she said he spoke exactly as he wrote. But no, he wasn’t a labor organizer and he didn’t leave behind institutions or influential writings that translated such sentiments into social movements.

Second Speaker: Well, you’ve said he wrote five or six really good poems, poems that astounded some readers and influenced a few other writers. Bless the WRITER—I won’t call him a failure! So I guess a “Zen failure” is a failure that succeeds—one to change the light bulb and one to declare darkness beautiful in its own right.

First Speaker: Here’s the best thing she says about him: “he had reached forty already; he had lines in his face, but though his eyes were red, they opened wide. He looked at you out of bright blue eyes, but at a part of you that isn’t your appearance or even your personality; he addressed that part of you that is like everybody. I would like to learn to look at people that way” (62).¹³

Second Speaker: You’re okay, but I’ve been looking at you for long enough—here they come with our computers.

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NOTES

¹Wikipedia: “The first recorded European discovery of San Francisco Bay was on November 4, 1769 when Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolà, unable to find the port of Monterey, California, moored his ship close to what is now Pacifica. Short on water and food, Portolà and an expeditionary crew of 63 men and 200 horses began an overland journey that took them to the summit of the 1200 foot high

Sweeney Ridge, where he sighted San Francisco Bay." It is true that Shakespeare never made it west of Chicago ("San Francisco Bay").

²Rod Phillips writes, partly in response to Albert Saijo's eulogy/fantasy in which Welch leaves human society behind without actually taking his life, "But such pleasant imaginings aside, the numerous references to suicide in Welch's letters, as well as his fragile emotional state at the time of his disappearance, can leave little doubt that the poet did take his own life" (Phillips, *Lew Welch* 45).

³John Yau briefly compares Welch and Weldon Kees in his essay on Kees and Frank O'Hara: "Kees was forty-one when he left his car on the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge. His body was never found; and he was never heard from again. Because he vanished into thin air, rumors and sightings persisted for years, but nothing concrete was ever proven" (Yau 11). Rod Phillips writes in *Lew Welch*, "Despite extensive searching, Welch's body was never found, leading some to speculate, hopefully, that the poet's last note signaled not a suicide, but a planned disappearance—a twentieth-century Huck Finn's plan to 'light out for the Territory'" (Phillips, *Lew Welch* 45). In his poem "Last Days of Lew Welch," Welch's friend Albert Saijo imagines a desperate Welch approaching suicide but then deciding to live; his identity as "Lew Welch," however, does not survive the confrontation with deep despair, and so he cannot answer the searchers who call his name, and he flees to a new life. I thank Robert Aitken Roshi for sending me scanned copies of the Saijo poem. According to Kingston, Welch's editor and executor Donald Allen concluded his editor's note to *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems, 1950-1971* with this comment: "O.K., Lew, I've done what you asked me to do. And, now, where are you?" (Kingston, *Hawai'i One Summer* 66). My edition of the poems ("Second printing, with revisions, 1979") does not contain this afterword.

⁴Welch's *Ring of Bone* is dedicated "To the memory of Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams," and the dedication page is itself a poem retelling the story of

that very poem
pasted in the florist's window

(as Whalen's *I wanted to bring you this Jap Iris* was)

carefully retyped and
put right out there on Divisadero St.

just because the florist thought it
pretty,

that it might remind of love,
that it might sell flowers (v).

Like Williams's poem "This is just to say," the Welch dedication is at once a useful object—an advertisement for flowers, just as Williams's poem was an apology to

his wife, a note on the fridge—and a shaped verbal artifact with allusions, historical references.

⁵In “Lew Welch: an Appreciation” Maxine Hong Kingston remembers the time she and her husband Earll visited Welch and his wife Magda. Though Kingston was unknown and Welch worked on the docks all day as a longshoreman’s clerk to support himself, he gave his time generously, giving encouragement as it had been given him: “He talked about being one of the young poets who had driven William Carlos Williams from the airport to Reed College. I love the way that car ride has become a part of literary history. Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and William Carlos Williams were the poets in the car. Today, Welch told us that he had felt Williams giving the power of poetry to him. The two of them had agreed on their dislike of T. S. Eliot. Then Lew Welch sang us “The Waste Land” to a jive beat, and it did not sound at all as if he disliked it” (Kingston, *Hawai’i One Summer* 63-64).

As in Gary Snyder’s poem “Axe Handles,” there is the idea that the poet-model shapes the attitudes and practices of the following generation, Williams to Welch, and then Welch to Kingston.

⁶In *Art as Experience* John Dewey writes, “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported” (*Later Works: 1925-1953*, 10: 9).

⁷It would be hard to know who is “most-taught,” but Kingston is a good candidate, as her books are included not only in American literature surveys but also in specialized courses in Women’s Studies, postmodernism, autobiography, Asian-American literature, and, more recently, Peace Studies. Gayle K. Sato claims Kingston as “most-taught” (112) in “Reconfiguring the ‘American Pacific’: Narrative Reenactments of Viet Nam in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*.” Sato notes that Sau-ling Wong made the same claim in her keynote talk for the Asian American Literature Association symposium address, “Maxine Hong Kingston in a Global Frame.” Wong’s address was presented in Kyoto, September 25, 2004.

⁸“Dem Bones”:

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
 Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
 Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
 I hear the word of the Lord.

To music written by James Weldon Johnson (see “Dem Bones” at *Wikipedia* and *Everything2*).

⁹As discussed in my article, “The Sexual Politics of Divine Femininity: Tārā in Transition in Gary Snyder’s Poetry.”

¹⁰For a discussion of Snyder’s dialogic approach to bird songs and what we can call the speech of the world, see my essay, “Snyder, Dōgen, and ‘The Canyon Wren.’” More than any other writer in English, Henry David Thoreau is thought of as a ‘nature writer.’ In this passage he allows for communication of a sort between humans and animals: “Just before night we saw a musquash (he did not say muskrat), the only one we saw in this voyage, swimming downward on the opposite side of the stream. The Indian, wishing to get one to eat, hushed us, saying, “Stop, me call ‘em”; and, sitting flat on the bank, he began to make a curious squeaking, wiry sound with his lips, exerting himself considerably. I was greatly surprised,—thought that I had at last got into the wilderness, and that he was a wild man indeed, to be talking to a musquash! I did not know which of the two was the strangest to me. He seemed suddenly to have quite forsaken humanity, and gone over to the musquash side. The musquash, however, as near as I could see, did not turn aside, though he may have hesitated a little, and the Indian said that he saw our fire; but it was evident that he was in the habit of calling the musquash to him, as he said. An acquaintance of mine who was hunting moose in those woods a month after this, tells me that his Indian in this way repeatedly called the musquash within reach of his paddle in the moonlight, and struck at them” (Thoreau 228). Thoreau’s freedom from anthropocentrism is a strong virtue for ‘green’ readers, but the way in which the Indian man is presented as a primitive form of humanity suggests a chain of being that extends from muskrat to Indian man to author. Thoreau is not an absolute anthropocentrist, but this passage reveals a kind of relative anthropocentrism. Note how the moose hunter, in comparing field notes with Thoreau, speaks about “his Indian.”

¹¹Consider the famous conclusion of “Wakefield” for a reflection on what it means to step out of the story-line expected by one’s community. Hawthorne’s story, a Kafkaesque extension of the theme Washington Irving treats in “Rip Van Winkle,” concludes with the narrator’s anxious observation as Wakefield prepares to leave home for twenty years, without having told anyone where he is about to go: “This happy event—supposing it to be such—could only have occurred at an unpremeditated moment. We will not follow our friend across the threshold. He has left us much food for thought, a portion of which shall lend its wisdom to a moral, and be shaped into a figure. Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe” (926). “We” stay on our side of the threshold and witness the home-leaver as he crosses over, whereas, in Welch’s imagining of this transition, “we” successfully side-step the dangerous machinery of the primary as opposed to the countercultural one: “*We remain alert so as not to*

get run down" and "only have to hop a few feet to one side and the whole huge machinery rolls by."

¹²While the 'on the road' excursions associated with Beat writers such as Kerouac can be construed as navel-gazing, and thus as an alternative to *political* resistance, the practices of the IWW or "Wobblies" in many ways foreshadow the attitudes of Beat authors such as Kerouac, Snyder, and Welch. Recalling that Kerouac begins *The Dharma Bums* by associating his early-1950s train-riding character Ray Smith with the hobos of a previous generation, this Wikipedia discussion of IWW tactics would seem to give Beat challenges to the idea that we must all be conventionally productive all the time a significant place within political (rather than merely cultural or personal) tradition: "Between 1915 and 1917, the IWW's Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO) organized hundreds of thousands of migratory farm workers throughout the midwest and western United States, often signing up and organizing members in the field, in railyards and in hobo jungles. During this time, the IWW became synonymous with the hobo; migratory farmworkers could scarcely afford any other means of transportation to get to the next jobsite. Railroad boxcars, called 'side door coaches' by the hobos, were frequently plastered with silent agitators from the IWW. Workers often won better working conditions by using direct action at the point of production, and striking 'on the job' (consciously and collectively slowing their work). As a result of Wobbly organizing, conditions for migratory farm workers improved enormously."

¹³I would like to thank Janice Rossen for helpful comments and Jane Wong for helping me organize a final draft, and to the participants in the 2007 *Connotations* Symposium, "Restored from Death," held in Tübingen, Germany. Most of all, I would like to thank the poet Eric Paul Shaffer with whom I studied at UC Davis some years ago. I wouldn't have any idea about Welch's work had it not been for Eric's reckless enthusiasm. Under the direction of Dave Robertson and Gary Snyder, Eric wrote the first PhD dissertation about Lew Welch, and no poet I can think of has carried on Welch's spirit across the decades since Welch's disappearance as Shaffer has. His work is, in a very important way, another one of Welch's magical returns from the dead.

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