States of the Union

NATIVE ROOTS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

JAMES WELCH

THE POWER of Indian oratory has long astonished non-Indians, some of whose own attempts at eloquence have seemed appropriately pale by comparison. Now, in a serendipitous spin of the colonial wheel, many talented Indians have turned from the spoken to the written word. They are producing a gutsy brand of poetry entirely worthy of the oral tradition from which it springs. Better still, much of it is sufficiently plain-spoken to be appreciated by readers on both sides of the ethnic fence.

If the new Indian poetry has been largely ignored by literary scholars and critics, it comes as no surprise to students of Indian literature, who have long marveled at the Indians' love affair with language. As Margot Astrov pointed out 30 years ago, in her anthology of *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, "the word" to Indians is "the reality above all tangible reality. It is the thought and the word that stand face to face with the conscience of the native, not the deed."

Astrov cited the explanation of Old Torlino, a Navajo medicine man, who said he always tried to tell the truth because the universe was watching: "the earth ... the heavens ... the dawn ... the evening twilight ... the blue sky...." "I am never out of sight," concluded Old Torlino. "Therefore I must tell the truth. I hold my word tight to my breast."

Nowadays Indians are holding their words tight to their breasts in unexpected ways. Their poetry is assertively bicultural. In language it blends casual Americanese with old-fashioned Indian formality; in content it confronts dilemmas of life style and loyalty that all Indians must face. The Abenaki poet Joseph Bruchac wryly sums up one such dilemma in a single line (that he says he overheard at a tribal ceremonial dance) addressed to the white majority: "Love America or give it back...."

In truth, what the poets want to get back may not be America so much as their own Indianness. For all its slangy slings and arrows, and for all its talk of cars, beer and postindustrial *angst*, Indian poetry bears a heavy load of tribal memories. Grandparents and their elderly surrogates are extolled and cherished with a frequency unfamiliar to the white reader; long-dead heroes like Sitting Bull and Geronimo make dramatic cameo appearances.

A major aim in such poems, one guesses, is to invoke a coherent Indian past to cope with an anomic Indian present. "We have walked away from history," complains Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a South Dakota Sioux poet, "/ and dallied with a repetition of things / to the end of the bar and booze...."

In "a circling remembrance," the Cheyenne poet Lance Henson faces east to "ask for something from the wind"

something bright and clean
to carry forward
and leave behind

On reservations, history can be a two-edged deprivation—as hard to make as it is to draw on.

The "Native American Renaissance" —to borrow the title of Kenneth Lincoln's recent work (University of California Press)—has been building for some time, sped along by a rising class of educated Indians. An essential bridge from spoken to written language was provided half a century ago by Black Elk, the remarkable Oglala Sioux prophet, and by his tireless interlocutor, the late John G. Neihardt.

"Always I felt it a sacred obligation to be true to the old man's meaning and manner of expression," Neihardt has written. "I am convinced there were times when we had more than ordinary means of communication." Whatever the means, Neihardt was able to translate Black Elk's visionary chronicle, uttered in Lakota, into the rolling rhythms of *Black Elk Speaks*. The book came out

in 1932, to the acclaim of practically no one. But 40 years later, according to Neihardt, it "exploded into surprising popularity," chiefly "as a result of Dick Cavett's television interview with the author...."

In Black Elk's wake came a new breed of Indian writers untroubled by any need of white go-betweens. N. Scott Momaday, the Oklahoma Kiowa who studied at Stanford University with the poet Yvor Winters, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his lyric novel, *House Made of Dawn*. In 1976 Harper & Row brought out first volumes of poetry by James Welch, a Blackfoot/Gros Ventre from Montana, and Simon J. Ortiz, an Acoma Pueblo from New Mexico.

Both books bear unmistakable marks of the reigning Indian sensibility—a tendency to be ironic and full of sharp edges. Much of the poetry deals with aspects of wealth (white) or poverty (red), neither of which wins the poet's approval. In "Harlem, Montana: Just off the Reservation," Welch tells of "the three young bucks who shot the grocery up, / locked themselves in and cried for days, we're rich, / help us, oh God, we're rich."

Patriotic holidays—white contrivances, of course—are seldom taken for granted by Indians lost in the celebration. In "The Significance of Veteran's Day" Simon Ortiz writes, "I happen to be a veteran / but you can't tell in how many ways / unless I tell you"—and he proceeds to do so in a characteristically Indian manner:

Caught now, in the midst of wars
against foreign disease,
missionaries,
canned food, Dick & Jane
textbooks, IBM cards,
Western philosophies, General
Electric,
I am talking about how we have
been able
to survive insignificance.

ONLY A few Indian poets have been lucky enough to find big-name publishers. Most have had to settle for not-so-mainstream literary reviews, like the *Blue Cloud Quarterly*, published by the Blue Cloud Abbey of Marvin, South Dakota. For a dozen years now, under the inventive editorship of Brother Benet Tvedten, the *BCQ* has devoted its pages exclusively to the work of Native American poets. If the Indian voice today has "been able to survive insignificance," a good deal of the credit goes to Brother Benet and his brilliant magazine.

The journal, to hear Brother Benet tell it, developed more or less by accident. One of his first duties when he arrived at the abbey in 1970 was to edit a fund-raising quarterly that consisted for the most part of photographs displaying the mission's good works. "I didn't know anything about putting out a publication," Brother Benet recalls, "but that didn't seem to matter. It was all pictures anyway."

When the photographer one day upped and departed for Europe, however, never to return, the young editor was suddenly faced with a scary surfeit of blank pages. He filled them, out of desperation, with the lyrics of Buffy St. Marie, the best known Indian performing artist of the period.

The response astonished Brother Benet. "Everybody started sending me their poetry," he says. "I was getting much more than I could possibly publish. Come to think of it, I still am." What Brother Benet had inadvertently discovered was a bonanza out there of Native American poets. All had a message; all awaited a suitable medium like the *Blue Cloud Quarterly.*

A year ago the *BCQ* put out a chapbook called "Wounds Beneath the Flesh," featuring the works of 15 Native American poets. A Preface correctly noted the poets' talent for "speaking vigorously and hopefully even out of seemingly unfavorable circumstances.... Their art is the voice of shared life." Black Elk would have appreciated the persistence of tribally shared life. It was something he had feared would vanish with the bison.

The Sioux of old looked upon the bison as a gift from the good spirit, and after the bison had disappeared Black Elk understood that "from the same good spirit we must find another strength." He dreamed of leading his nation in that search, but the vision finally turned sour. "The nation's hoop is broken and scattered," he mourned in Yeats-like measure. "There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."

Now Black Elk's heirs are groping for words, *English* words, that will mend the hoop and restore the center. Like poets the world over, they are keepers of the dream.

EAST OF SAN DIEGO

I tell the bus driver
but he doesn't hear,
"Keep to the hills
and avoid America
if you can.
I'm a fugitive
from bad, futureless dreams
in Southern California."

—Simon J. Ortiz

CHICAGO

is a mystery to me
for it does not extend
beyond the foodless corridors
of O'Hare Airport yet
does bring out
the foreigner in me
feeling her way
along the ground
touching ice and earth,
determining existence,
and mapping a path
from west to east
and back again.

All the many things
I've heard about Chicago
narrow into the frame
of this hour: yellow light
slanting across the smoke,
hands groping toward
what is hoped
is a real coffee pot,
lights whirling
and spinning the planes
to earth,
alien promises
served on toothpicks
in the cocktails,
Ojibwa songs
from behind the jukebox.

—Wendy Rose