Indian Culture and Values
in
McGrath's LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND

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At least one critic has described Parts I and II of Tom McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* as "the best long poem in America since *Leaves of Grass.*" After the appearance of the "Christmas Section" of Part III in the early 1980's, Diane Wakoski said it is definitely in the tradition of Whitman, and "could become the greatest poem out of the heart of the American midwest." Comparing McGrath to Whitman is helpful; and I want to mention several connections: after all, both wrote critiques of their respective centuries using open poetic forms for which there was no model at the time—Whitman beginning in 1855, McGrath in 1955.

But more important is how McGrath is different from his predecessor, and as a way of commenting on this I want to focus on the use by McGrath of three aspects of Indian culture. One of these is an event, the Battle of Wounded Knee (1890), which is really the end of Whitman's life and the beginning of McGrath's vision. Second, a personality, Crazy Horse, too far West for Whitman, but a man from whom McGrath draws much of his inspiration. And finally, a type of dance, the Hopi kachina, foreign to Whitman, but which underpins the structure and rhythms of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.

Let me take first a few similarities. Like "Song of Myself," McGrath's poem is pseudo-biographical. Whitman's poem, you recall, went through ten editions between 1855 and his death in 1891. If he includes such things as his boy-
hood on Long Island, details of his days as a newspaper reporter in Manhattan, and experiences during the Civil War, McGrath begins Part I of *Letter* as a boy on a farm in North Dakota in the 1920's, moves through college life in Grand Forks and Louisanna in the 30's, and includes violent episodes from his military duty during World War II. As with Whitman, McGrath's poem is incomplete; he once said the one thing he wanted to do was keep working on *Letter*, and it now appears that Parts III and IV are ready for publication. At any rate—though one is Eastern, the other Western—both poets use their experiences to comment on events of their centuries in a larger-than-personal sense: they really interpret through their own lives the forever growing consciousness of a nation.

Both poets are also healers—medicine men, if you will. Using the thinking of Eliade, Cleanth Brooks points out that Whitman's poem begins in a trance wherein he becomes aware of his role as shaman; he then evokes animals as a gesture oneness with nature, and finally proceeds through differing musical forms, such as the drum, to beat out his story. McGrath also has an epiphany, but his comes not through a sexual relationship—though, like Whitman, he has these, but work on a farming rig (pp. 18-9). Stern says this is the beginning of his political-economic view of America. The "secret language" of animals also becomes part of the texture of *Letter* (p. 2), unveiling McGrath's animated view of the universe. So, too, the crickets, frogs, and a
hawk help the poet sing—in his case the "formal calls of a round-dance" (p. 22), the kachina peculiar to McGrath.

The fact that these poets want something new for America also binds them together. Whitman's life parallels the industrial revolution and settlement of the whole continent. As a Romantic he celebrates America's geographic and social growth, calling for a democracy where city and country, North And South, male and female, upper class and lower—indeed President and prostitute—will be truly one. McGrath is also interested in togetherness, solidarity, though his community (or commune) is rooted in work, which he sees as the antithesis of industrial wealth. "Love and hunger, he says, are "my whole story" (p. 31). Holscher outlines McGrath's own work experiences as they are related to brotherhood and then expressed in a language of "radical consciousness." 7 McGrath, of course, standing a century away from Whitman, has witnessed the long term effects of industry on cities, classes, and races; and unlike Whitman he is often angry.

This brings us to the differences between Whitman and McGrath—differences rooted in the West and the Indian. The first revolves around what might be termed McGrath's equivalent of original sin, what he calls "the wound." In beginning Part I McGrath makes a journey back to North Dakota, which then becomes the locus of his poem: Dakota, he says, is everywhere, "a condition" (p.103). If Whitman starts with the city, McGrath says that, for the Midwestern poet, the
prairie, with its revolutionary past, may be a kind of gift to the city, and the reason is that it was on that prairie that this all-important wound took place. Many times in Letter he speaks of his journey "toward" or "around" that wound, which in turn he describes as "endless" and "enduring" (pp. 1, 87). What this wound involves is hinted at early in Part I when the boy poet walks by "Indian graves" or "boneyards" (pp. 9, 44), and later as the poet explains different events by analogy to Indians--"Confederations of Sioux," for instance, or "Custer's massacre" (pp. 7, 9).

Later, in Part II, the author reaches back into the past (the 19th Century) and becomes explicit about the origin of that wound in relation to the Indians:

And my father, a boy at Fort Ranson, saw them each spring and fall--Teepees strong on the fallow field where he herded cattle. Made friends and swapped ponies with a boy his own age--And in the last Indian scare spent a week in the old fort; All the soddies abandoned, then. Wounded Knee--

The last fight--must have been at that time. And now
All: finished.
South Dakota has stolen the holy Bones of Sitting Bull to make a tourist attraction!
And then he philosophizes, making Wounded Knee "the wound."

From the Indians we learned a toughness and a strength; and we gained A freedom: by taking theirs: but a real freedom: born From the wild and open land our grandfathers heroically stole. But we took a wound at Indian hands: a part of our soul scabbed over We learned the pious and patriotic art of extermination... (p. 190)

The language here is political and caustic; not the best poetry, it is still a deeply felt reaction to the white man's treatment of Native Americans. In an article on Letter Mc-
Grath says the East has "paved over" America's wounds; in the West it is the duty of art to "keep them open".  

If McGrath's father is a key to history, so is his "dancing grandfather" (p. 11), who must have shared a deeper knowledge of the Indian world with the boy. In a poem "Buffalo Coat," McGrath describes that grandfather's coat, which ironically keeps him warm, but also embodies the "lost heat" of Indian ways. In Letter some of McGrath's best lines are reflections upon that loss—a loss that reverses the meaning of the progress celebrated by Whitman. 

The tracks of a million buffalo are lost in the night of the past Lit only by the flare of a covered wagon a harp of flesh Is silenced the book of feathers and moonlight is closed forever On exhausted roads spun out of acetylene lamps of the dead Overlands the transcontinental locomotive is anchored in concrete Next to the war memorial under the emblems of progress A vision of April light is darkened by absent eagles. . . (p. 200) 

Here McGrath mourns the Indian past and "a future that never arrived" (p. 206). This is the wound that as a poet he carries out from Dakota to 20th Century America at large. 

The growing America Whitman celebrated, therefore, has for McGrath backfired in the prairies of the Midwest. Nor did the "progress" stop with the Indians: 

And the people? "First they broke land that should not ha' been broke and they died
Broke. Most of 'em. And after the tractor ate the horse—
It ate them. And now, a few lean years,
And the banks will have it again. Most of it. . . (p. 197) 

McGrath refers here to the farm foreclosures of the early
20th Century; the same capitalistic forces that exterminated the Indian did the same to the farmer. Wakoski says McGrath's radical spirit is akin to that of the early Non Partisan Leaguers who fought the interests of big business, bankers, and politicians in the plains of Dakota,\textsuperscript{11} but more on that spirit later.

McGrath, of course, does not separate himself from the white movement West. Early in \textit{Letter}, together with his own poetic journeys, he speaks of a journey westward of the horsemen, whom he calls "hunters of the hornless deer," which become "ancestral baggage" (p.~5) The exact meaning of "hornless deer," in not clear, but we know what the white hunters did to the deer and the buffalo. In an important book for McGrath, \textit{The Man Who Killed the Deer}, (1942), Waters details the irony of an Indian's inditement for killing a deer, when he is the one who reverences this animal, indeed the whole universe.\textsuperscript{12} It is also ironic that, if Whitman had a sense of the aliveness of the world—something he saw in Brooklyn as in Paumonak, it is part of McGrath's message that it is this same sacred perspective that America's progress westward has decimated.

Let's turn now to the second difference. If the narrator of \textit{Letter} is less optimistic than Whitman about America, so is his tone, generally speaking, different. It might be said that the spirit of Crazy Horse determines much of that tone. As you know, Crazy Horse's resistance to white proposals and treaties set him apart from his contemporaries like Red Cloud.\textsuperscript{13}
Well, in the context of this century, McGrath is just as adamant. In a 1972 poem "News from Crazy Horse," where the poet details the devastating effects of "capitalism," he says:

--I guess all I'm trying to say is I saw Crazy Horse die for a split level swimming pool in a tree-house owned by a Pawnee-Warner Brothers psychiatrist about three hundred feet above--

McGrath in warrior fashion constantly arranges our affluence which he says creates a "false consciousness," so that even the workers themselves--McGrath's bulwark against the illusions of industry--become "fully transistorized. . .Lost" (p. 124).

Of course, McGrath's fury is expressed in different ways. In the the opening lines of Part II he waits for "a breeze", a "wind" that is constant abrasive

North Dakota
is everywhere.
This town where Theseus sleeps on the hill
Dead like Crazy Horse.
This poverty.
This dialectic of money
Dakota is everywhere.
A condition. (p. 103)

Notice that the image here is one of a "dead Dakota," while the rhythms suggest a kind of gentle prairie breeze, creating a reflective mood. But what the poet would have us reflect on is that this poem itself (a wind) is constant and abrasive as it attempts to jar America "free of that order" that holds it "A nation in chains/ Called freedom" (p. 148). He would even raise Crazy Horse from the dead:

All things are doorways: all things are passing
And opening into each other always. . .
our house door equally
On Crazy Horse and the Cadillac. . .(p. 204)
Here the faster tempo creates an urgency to choose. In short, while remaining firm, the poet modulates his style as an invitation to change—either/or, resistance or compliance.

In the 1960's McGrath helped edit an anthology of poetry entitled *Crazy Horse*. It's "manifesto" calls for

...a poetry grand, armored, baudy, seditious of death; of a violent elegance; as of clouds full of diamonds and lightening...of love, rage, generosity, failure. truth.

We, the Irregulars of Crazy Horse, Ghost Dancers of the existential Solidarity, now summon into being the hosts of the new resistance. . . .

That same spirit comes through *Letter* when he calls for a poetic "Revolution":

Myself there to make a winter count and to mine my bread. And others like me: mavericks in lonesome canyons, singing

Into the desert... Bone-laced shinning silence faced us... --But sang there! "Making a little coffee against the cold"--

...gathering the Crazy Horse Resistance... (p. 117)

Indeed, for McGrath, poetry is political, "a weapon."19

For many people, though, McGrath is too harsh, vulgar, irreverent, as when he makes this religious comment:

A Church is stumbling into an empty future, lofting A headless and rotting Christ on the cracked spool of a cross Unspinning god at a loss in the psalm of the man-eating wind. (p. 199)

What's lost here spiritually speaking, or course, is the Indian's sense of awe that comes from contact with nature; perhaps Bill Dee, an old Dakota idol of McGrath's, says it best when fishing in the Sheyenne:

"Them honyocks around here just too lazy to fish. They druther Buy them damn froze fish in them plastic bags. (p. 199)
The satiric contrasting of cultures here is subtle, but poignant. Critics often comment on McGrath's peculiar language, calling it "un-American," "self-educated, longing for a literacy beyond farmers," even a kind of "blarney." But whatever it is, the language and shifting tones are part of McGrath's Crazy Horse spirit. In Part II of "The Christmas Section" --and here the language becomes even more abstract, surrealistic, absurd, bizarre-- McGrath says:

...anger sustains me--it is better than hope-- it is not better than Love... but it will keep warm in the cold of the wrong world And it was the wrong world we rode through then and ride through now—

(p. 128)

Whitman might have been scandalized by McGrath's attitude and corresponding language, but Whitman never knew Crazy Horse.

The third way McGrath departs from Whitman is in the musical structure of his poem. Letter is basically a kachina--not the soldiers' drums, but an Indian dance. For this connection, however, McGrath looks not to the Ogalala Sioux (as with Wounded Knee or Crazy Horse), but the Hopi Indians of the Southwest. The Sioux were nomadic and war-like--and this posture is important for McGrath. But for his final say, so to speak, he goes to "Hopi," which means "peace." They are a sedentary tribe, an agriculture corn-growing group who lived not in teepees but rock-like kivas. O'Kane points out that their view of life is the opposite of American thinking; not interested in competition and progress, they promote a harmony with the natural world.
look not to technology, but to their ancient myth of creation and re-creation. A new world--called Saquasohuh--will emerge from the dark womb of the earth (the kiva), and it is the kachina dancer who brings on this world renewal.\textsuperscript{23}

Consider, for instance, this passage:

Wait for the Angel.

\textbf{S A Q U A S O H U H:} the blue star

Far off, but coming.

\textbf{Invisible yet.} Announcing the Fifth World

\textit{(the Hopi prophecy)}

world we shall enter soon:

When the Blue Star kachina, its manifested spirit, Shall dance the \textit{kisonvi} for the first time. \textbf{In still light}

Wait.

"But it's cold here!"

\textbf{Hush.}

I'll take you as far as the river;

But no one may dream home the Revolution today though we offer

Our daily blood, nor form from the hurt black need

The all-color red world of the poor, nor in the soviet

Of students transform this might; nor alcohol compound

Manifestos; nor pot set straight a sleepy rifle's dream

Still we must try.

\textbf{S A Q U A S O H U H.} Far off: the blue Star.

The Fifth World. Coming.

\textbf{Now, try:}

Necessary, first, the Blue Star kachina to dance the \textit{kisonvi}; Necessary that the \textit{kapani} at the crown of the head must be Kept open always.

\textbf{Loosen your wigs.}

I go to the far Country to the sacred butte and the empty land

\textit{I'll make}

The kachina... (pp. 131-132)

The uneven rhythms here are those of a dance, and the tempo and sounds vary from the soft and slow "wait" and "hush" to the louder and fuller immediacy of "SAQUASOHUH." Nor can one
miss the "red" and "black" colors, which are as much a part of the painted ceremony as they are of the political theme.

Thematically, the Saquasohuh is the fifth or new world. The "blue star" signals this yet invisible world. "Kisvoni" is the platform outside and above the kiva where the dance takes place. "Kapani" is the head—-one of the five regions of the body for the Hopi—where the news strikes a man; it is topmost; hence the phrase "Loosen your wigs." You'll notice too in this section the importance of the angel. Whitman's city has been lost—"Los Angelized." Now the new angel is called upon by the kachina dancer, which in this case is the poet, who says "I'll take you to the river." McGrath sees his poem as a kachina and invites us all to help make it, indeed to "change the world" (p. 106). This is not to say McGrath is Hopi, anymore than he is a communist or a pagan or whatever. Duss points outs he's all of these things, and Christian too, depending on the context. In fact, McGrath has them all in this passage—the pagan myth, the revolution, even the Christian prayer "our daily blood." It is a total thing in which we are all invited to participate.

But in a larger sense, the entire poem is a kachina. When McGrath makes that journey back to Dakota in Part I—and Part II and III go back and circle the same themes—it is a journey to the "dark interior," as though going into a kiva. The many journeys, whether to or from Dakota, are laced with such terms as "nightsong," "stone" or "granite," "blue" or "blazing" star. But there is also that coming
out of the kiva through the "night of rock" toward the "commune of light." The poet constantly refers to the "wind" or "breeze," "sunrise on the rock," "resurrection," "Easter." It is interesting that the kachina ties the entire Letter together. The journey to the "dark dominion" of Dakota is "around a wound" (Wounded Knee), which keeps "turning, turning" in Yeatsian fashion, but the journey also embodies the spirit of Crazy Horse inventing again the commune and the round Song gather the Crazy Horse Resistance (p. 117).

Still, the music is primary—in McGrath's words: "a new jazz, a blues for a Fourth World"²⁵ (that's us) as the poet takes you and me "over the river" and helps "slip your foot out of the stone."
Footnotes

1 James Bertolino, Intro. to "McGrath on McGrath," 
*Epoch*, 22 (1973), 207.

2 Diane Wakoski, "Pasages Toward the Dark: Thomas 

3 William Childress, "Thomas McGrath," *Poetry Now*, 
Vol. 2, No. 4, 38.

4 "Walt Whitman," in American Literature: the Makers 
and the Making, Vol II, Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis and 
Robert Penn Warren, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 

5 Thomas McGrath, Letter to an Imaginary Friend, 
numbers are taken from this text.

6 Frederick C. Stern, "'The Delegate for Poetry,' 
McGrath as communist Poet," in *Where the West Begins*. 
Arthur R. Huseboe and William Geyer, eds. (Sioux Falls: 

7 Rory Holscher, "Receiving Tom McGrath's Letter," 
*Moon and Lion Tales*, 4 (January 1976), 36.

8 Thomas McGrath, "McGrath on McGrath," *Epoch*, 22 
(1973), 219.

9 McGrath, p. 217.

10 Thomas McGrath, *The Movie at the End of the World*, 

11 Wakoski, p. 18.

12 Frank Waters, *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, (Chicago: 
Swallow Press, 1942).

13 Mari Sandoz, *Crazy Horse* (Lincoln: Neb. Univ. Press, 
1942). Perhaps no author has rendered more effectively 
the gradual growth of Crazy Horse's posture toward the 
Whites as they took over the land and world of the Sioux.


15 William Childress, "Thomas McGrath," *Poetry Now*, 
Vol. 2, No. 4, 38. Here McGrath contrasts work and riches, 
saying work is the source of art, while affluence brings 
only phoniness.
16 Holscher, pp. 36-9. This critic shows how McGrath's resistance takes on various styles, even—in this case—dreamtalk, when the workers have succumbed to the illusions industry, and about which he reflects at a distance from the immediate experience, but which the poet has now internalized and transformed.

17 Thomas McGrath, Letter to an Imaginary Friend, p. 102 McGrath quotes Claude Levi-Straus, who says that the only hope of salvation lies in the "absurd and despairing attempt to get free of that order."


20 Wacoski, p. 18.


25 Thomas McGrath, "Christmas Section," Passages Toward the Dark, p. 98.